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## Beyond postcolonial: expression of self and exploration of the infinite in the writing of Jorge Luis Borges

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BEYOND POSTCOLONIAL: EXPRESSION OF SELF AND EXPLORATION OF  
THE INFINITE IN THE WRITING OF JORGE LUIS BORGES

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A Thesis

Presented To

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Master of Arts

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By

Denise G. Stripes

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## Abstract

Studies of postcolonial literature often focus on works that pertain to the East such as African or Indian nations. Written works such as *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, and film such as Bollywood or Nollywood offer perspective for students of English Literature on the struggle of Eastern writers and filmmakers for acceptance into the canon. Some critics, such as Edna Aizenberg, have addressed the question of whether postcolonialism should include Latin American writers. In this work, I contend that Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges does have a place in postcolonial studies, although I assert that he takes postcolonialism to a new level – beyond the politically charged works of most postcolonial writers. This essay explores the effects that Borges' life has had on his works, as well as his ability to convey the essence of his homeland with a style that combines the tropes of the center with those of Latin America, and in so doing, shows how Borges has transcended the barriers of the European canon for Latin American writers.

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## Introduction: Borges, Modernism, Postmodernism, and Postcolonial Theory

The works of Jorge Luis Borges send his readers to a world where more questions exist than answers. Critic and Spanish Professor at the University of California Irvine, Seymour Menton calls Borges “the high priest of *el cosmopolitismo*” (Menton 303, my translation). *El cosmopolitismo* is a Latin American movement of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century that has many of the same elements as modernism and postmodernism. Throughout this essay I use the Spanish word for this movement because English literary criticism boasts a movement named with the corresponding English word—Cosmopolitanism—but the two theories are notably different. While the Latin American movement is similar to modernism and postmodernism, Borges’ purposes differ from those of the authors associated with these Western movements. According to Menton, the *cosmopolitistas* are more concerned with the individual, urban life, and fantasy (Menton 303, my translation). Borges puts into practice all of the elements of *cosmopolitismo*—not in order to expose political or social problems, but to explore the workings of the human mind. Because of the tools he employs—surrealism, cubism, existentialism, and magical realism—his works both fascinate and stymie his readers with his marvelously intricate images and scenes. Borges’ fantasy differs from that of his contemporary, J.R.R. Tolkien, in that his works are centered in the primary—the real—world rather than in a made-up world, but yet they are laced with paradox to the point that it is difficult to discern dreams from reality. Images of gardens and libraries are transformed by Borges’ application of such tropes as labyrinths, time, mirrors, and the “double”. More complicated is Borges’ trope of *the fractal*, in which he encompasses and transcends all of the others, simultaneously embodying and illustrating the barrier between the physical and the metaphysical,

illuminating the complex structures of the human mind as it grapples with the limitations of space and time that keep us from touching the eternal.

In character, Borges' work echoes European modernism as it evolves to postmodernism. Considering the traits of each—Modernism presents truth as relative and the self as divided or fragmented, while postmodernism asserts that there is no truth, and that the self is socially constructed—Borges posits the self as divided or fragmented—he asserts, “There is no whole self” (Borges “Nothingness” 7)—in the face of a truth that is, at best, elusive and questionable, and at worst, non-existent. In his book *On Writing*, Borges critiques the work of several European authors, such as T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf. Editor Suzanne Jill Levine remarks in her introduction to this work that it offers not only Borges' thoughts “on what writers do and what writers are—their processes, their concerns, their methods and influences, their predilections and aversions, obsessions and quirks,” but it also offers the reader the occasion “to discern in his observances Borges' own attributes as a writer” (ix). In Borges' reflection on Woolf, he points out the characteristic subject matter of her work: that “there is no plot, in the narrative sense of the word; the subject is man's character, studied not in the man himself, but indirectly in the objects around him” (96). While Borges does not write exactly like Woolf, these characteristics are prevalent in his stories, in particular how he uses setting to illustrate the workings of the human mind. Concerning Eliot's writing, Borges contemplates the “erudite obscurity” of *The Waste Land*, that “disconcerted (and still disconcerts) the critics” (97), a feature echoed in Borges' prose that perplexes his readers, illustrating by example the effects of modernity on the individual.

Modernist and postmodernist authors are often associated with postcolonial theory, as the fall of the English Empire coincided with modernity in the form of new philosophies, industrialization, and the Great War. The effects of imperialism also mirror those of modernity; thus, each of these movements reflects deracination of both the individual and the culture—what Homi Bhabha calls “unhomeliness”—as well as isolation and the search for vindication or justification.

The emerging postcolonial movement in literature originally focused on the East/West binary, as evidenced in Edward Said’s concept of “Orientalism,” which excluded Latin American writers even though they were colonized and marginalized people as well. Borges is one of the first—if not *the* first—of the Latin American writers to be associated with postcolonialism. Edna Aizenberg, in her 1992 article, “Borges, Postcolonial Precursor,” asserts that he “turn[ed] Western tradition against itself by appropriating the right to write back to the ‘center’” long before Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin penned *The Empire Writes Back* (para 10). To be clear, Borges was never a marginalized person as an Argentine; he was a member of privileged society. He was, however, marginalized as an Argentine writer, because he wrote in Spanish, and the Western literary canon fell under the auspices of Europe—specifically, English-speaking Europe—thus, the ‘center’ to which he writes back is that of those who hold the power to set the literary canon. As Ashcroft *et alia* tell us, “[o]ne of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. [...] Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and reality become established” (7). As an Argentine writer who has reached canonical status, Borges stands out among Latin



American authors, and he paved the way into the canon of the center for other Latin American writers such as Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez. His unique life situations, which correspond with many of the themes in postcolonial theory, have caused him to write differently than most Latin American authors, and, together with his own unique style, allowed him an agency in the European canon that had been denied to other Latin American writers.

## Orientalism and Marginalized Western Nations: A Synthesis of Views

Edward Said describes “Orientalism” in terms of the Occident’s authorized perceptions of the colonized and post-colonized countries that have nothing to do with the reality of those countries; he asserts that “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). He further states that “Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient” (6). This statement of Said’s moves the concept of Orientalism to a broader context; if Orientalism is more a statement of power and control, then the concepts can apply to any nation that Europe has colonized or marginalized. English-speaking Europe controls the literary canon, leaving the marginalized writers of the Eastern nations as well as those of Latin America without a voice in literature. Homi K. Bhabha, in his essay “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern,” asserts that “the postcolonial perspective [...] attempts to revise those nationalist or ‘nativist’ pedagogies that set up the relation of Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition” (248). If one considers Bhabha’s “Third World”/ “First World” binary as a parallel to Said’s “Orient”/ “Occident” binary, then postcolonial theory can and should be applied to Latin American writers as well as to Eastern writers such as Said and Chinua Achebe. In Jorge Luis Borges, the cultures of the literary “Third World” of Latin America and the literary “First World” of Europe collide to form a hybrid writer who is able to express the essence of Argentina in the context of European Modernist ideas.

Edna Aizenberg's assertion that Borges is a postcolonial *precursor*, then, shows a limited understanding of how postcolonial theory may be applied to Borges, because the term "postcolonial" can apply to any writer who illuminates the effects of colonization not only on the marginalized peoples, but also on the center. Written in 1992, Aizenberg's article is not to be ignored, however, because while Borges is more than a precursor, Aizenberg opens the discussion of postcolonialism to Latin American writers by posing the question of whether Latin American texts can fit into the classification of postmodern because, as she asserts, "typically, these [texts] are subsumed into Euro-US concerns" (para 1), and answers this question in the affirmative with Jorge Luis Borges as her example. Aizenberg paves the way for later critics such as Carlos Rincón and Nataly Tcherepashenets, both of whom address postcolonialism in Borges' work.

Rincón, in his article "Posmodernismo, Poscolonialismo y los Nexos Cartograficos del Realismo Mágico" [Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and the Cartographical Connections of Magical Realism], claims that the map is an eponymous device in the works of Borges and that this magical realism gives the marginalized peoples a new voice with a contra-discursive energy that surpasses frontiers between races or genders—the Spanish word he uses could mean either. The use of the map is important because the map is made by those in power of the institution. Tcherepashenets, in *Place and Displacement in the Narrative World of Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar* (2009), does not directly mention postcolonialism, but her discussion of Borges' use of space corresponds with what Rincón claims about the map metaphor in that the shape and confines of space in Borges' work show limitations that bind humans to space and time, and bar them from touching eternity.

Like Rincón, Rex Butler, author of the article “Everything and Nothing: On Jorge Luis Borges’s *Kafka and His Precursors*” (2010), discusses Borges in the light of postcolonial theory. He considers the literary manifesto of Borges’ essay about Kafka, and the impact of the Czech writer on Borges’ works. Butler offers a postcolonial perspective in his claim that Borges identifies with Kafka “as a fellow ‘writer on the edge’: at the borders of a great colonial power, at the end of a powerful cultural tradition,” and also examines how Borges looks to Kafka as “an example of how to respond to this liminal situation” on the margins of the literary canon (136). Thomas Ogden joins Rincón and Butler in applying the postcolonial to Borges’ work, centering on the concept of deracination, or what Homi Bhabha would term “unhomeliness.” Ogden touches on the physical deracination that Borges experienced in his family’s move to Switzerland, to include his time in school in Geneva where he was obliged to “study all the different subjects in French, a language I also had to learn” (qtd in Ogden 374).

Tcherepashenets touches on the concept of eternity, which relates to critics Stephen Bold, Annette U. Flynn, and José Luis Najenson, who discuss metaphysical matters in the work of Borges. These critics enter the discussion without directly mentioning postcolonialism, and yet still examine concepts in his creations that can be related to postcolonial theory. Bold, for example, in his article “Borges, Inventor of the *Penées: Or La Busca de Pascal*” (2005), gives insight into how Pascal’s influence appears in Borges’ trope of the labyrinth. Bold claims that “Mirrors [...] are strategically situated in the maze: they end up concealing rather than revealing. The labyrinth is, for Borges’ fictions, the ‘original’ site of inspiration.” Bold further asserts that “[t]his metaphor of hermetic angst is itself mirrored by the mystical hermeneutics of the

Kabbalah” (118). Borges’ interest in Kabbalah and the Jewish faith complicate his deracination by adding faith to the equation, and his interest in Pascal gives possible insight into his views on God. Born in a predominately Catholic family, Borges’ agnosticism adds this layer of religious deracination to those of place and language. Bold is of the opinion that Borges is disappointed that he cannot transcend his own solitude so that he may “participate in the infinite” (117), an opinion that corresponds with Tcherepashenets’ concept of the limitations of time and space.

Along the same lines as Tcherepashenets and Bold, Annette U. Flynn, in her book *The Quest for God in the Work of Borges*, discusses Borges’ expressions concerning time and infinity, as well as the gap between self and divinity. The disparity between Borges’ agnosticism, his mystic studies, and his representation of God in his fiction and poetry calls for exploration into the deracination from his Roman Catholic heritage and the effects that this departure had on his quest for answers to infinite questions. Flynn writes, “divine attributes are sacred by their very nature and as such belong to God, Borges intuits this and explores what happens when humans exercise or seek to attain these attributes: it leads to conflict and frustration” (6). In this quote, Flynn, like Bold and Tcherepashenets, addresses the gap that separates the finite from the infinite, and that thereby hinders humanity’s ability to participate in the infinite. Flynn equates this gap with the concept of the “elect,” or those who are enlightened and able to attain knowledge of God and to be saved. She asserts, “the theme of the elect runs through Borges’ work, even though neither he himself (as evidenced through his essays) nor the characters (in his stories) seem to be among them” (17), an idea that corresponds with Bold’s assertion of Borges’ disappointment that he cannot be part of the infinite. While Flynn explores the

idea that Borges is searching for God, Najenson, in “Las siervas de la literatura”: *Filosofía y teología en Borges*,” denies this idea, saying that Borges considered philosophy and theology only in the interest of their literary value; and that he views them as human constructs and thus relegates them to the realm of the fantastic (75).

A consensus of these theorists and critics lends credence to the application of postcolonial theory to the work of Borges. In the pages that follow, I will explore the postcolonial concepts of deracination and hybridity in the work of Borges, as well as Said’s *Orientalism* in connection with Latin American writers in general and Borges in particular. I will discuss these concepts in light of the metaphors that Borges employs, to include labyrinths, mirrors, maps, books, and fractals as they apply to his treatment of time, space, and human consciousness as well as his employment of the double. I will also consider the metaphysical in his work, applying postcolonial theory in the proposal that Borges’ agnosticism is a liminal space—since he does not deny God or the infinite, nor does he wholly believe—in which he can explore our limits in time and space and our search for the infinite. First, however, I will give context to the postcolonial nature of Borges’ work with some pertinent history from his autobiography.

### Born in the Liminal Spaces: The Legacy of Cultural and Literary Hybridity

In order to understand more usefully the application of postmodernism and postcolonialism in the work of Borges, it is necessary to know a little about his life. Borges was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1899, the son of Jorge Borges and Leonor Acevedo de Borges. He grew up in an upper-class family, and his life was very tranquil. Between 1914 and 1921, Borges and his family moved to Europe; during World War I they lived in Geneva, Switzerland. Menton asserts that Cosmopolitan authors live in large metropolitan cities and are familiar with many parts of the world (Menton 303, my translation); thus, the time that Borges spent in Europe and the United States, together with his upbringing in Buenos Aires, has contributed to his cosmopolitan view of the world. In most of his written works, Borges has avoided political ideologies, and he considered those works that were influenced by political movements inferior to his other works. As is common among *cosmopolitistas*, Borges' interest lay more in the esthetic, in psychology and philosophy (Menton 303, my translation), and this interest is reflected in his works. In the shadow of two world wars and the beginning of the Cold War, existentialism dominated as the school of thought among many intellectuals throughout the world. Across the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, thinkers such as Søren Kierkegård, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean Paul Sartre emphasized the individual and the idea of liberty—along with the consequences of that liberty. Confronted with life in the absence of any belief in a God who would guide human beings, existentialist writers insisted that the individual had to deal with this frightening liberty as an orphaned being, abandoned by his creator and protector. In his turn, Borges focused his works on the effects of existentialism on the individual.

Borges' native languages were Spanish and English and his earliest childhood reading experiences focused on European and American works in English; in fact, the first book he read was *Huckleberry Finn* (209). Borges's father was a scholar, and as the young Borges was a sickly child, he assumed that it was his destiny to continue his father's work. In "An Autobiographical Essay," he tells his readers, "If I were asked to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father's library. In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library" (209). The library, filled with European literature in English, as well as the literature of Argentina in Spanish, represents a liminal space – a bridge between the European literary center and the marginalized literature of Latin America, containing both, but dominated by neither. Borges was intellectually born in this liminal space, just as his blended family formed a liminal space between European and Argentine cultures.

Because he spent his formative years in these liminal spaces, Borges was what Homi Bhabha would call a hybrid, taking on aspects of the European and the Argentine culture. He was of the privileged class in Buenos Aires, and his family on both his mother's and his father's side represented a military presence in which the sickly Borges was ashamed that he could not participate. His paternal grandfather was "Commander-in-Chief of the northern and western frontiers of the province of Buenos Aires" (205), and his maternal grandfather was Colonel Isidoro Suárez, "who [...] led a famous charge of Peruvian and Colombian cavalry, which turned the tide of the battle of Junín, in Peru," the penultimate battle of the War of Independence in South America (208). Suárez was related to Juan Manuel de Rosas, dictator of Argentina from 1835-52, though he chose exile rather than to live under the tyrant (208).



In the young Borges' early years, both Spanish and English were used in his home; thus, he became fluent in both early on. He tells us, "[m]y father's English came from the fact that his mother, Frances Haslam, was born in Staffordshire of Northumbrian stock" (204). He describes his grandmother as "a respectable English lady" (205), and "a great reader" (206). Frances Haslam passed her love of reading to both her son and grandson. Borges' father "worked as a lawyer [...] and also a teacher of psychology at the Normal School for Modern Languages, where he gave his course in English" (204). Although Borges considered Spanish an everyday language, since he learned to read with the European classics in his father's library, he considered English to be a superior literary language. Even *Don Quixote* he read in English, and he says "When later I read *Don Quixote* in the original, it sounded like a bad translation to me" (209). His father also taught him the history of Argentina, and the young Borges read poetry and prose of his homeland in Spanish, to include *gauchesco* works such as *Martín Fierro*, which his mother tried unsuccessfully to ban him from reading, "since that was a book fit only for hoodlums and schoolboys and, besides, was not about real gauchos at all" (210). His mother, Leonore Acevedo de Borges, learned English from his father, and she read mostly in English. After her husband's death, "finding that she was unable to keep her mind on the printed page, she tried her hand at translating William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy* in order to compel herself to concentrate." This work was published, and she translated several other works, some of which were credited to her son (207). Borges began writing at the age of six or seven, and his first literary projects consisted of translations of European works by such authors as Oscar Wilde. He translated "The

Happy Prince” into Spanish, and the work was published, though most assumed it was his father’s since the young Borges signed his name as merely “Jorge Borges” (211).

Borges loved Argentina, and especially his home city of Buenos Aires, but his canonical writings do not necessarily reflect the local color of Buenos Aires to someone who is not from Buenos Aires, so his calling as a voice for the marginalized Latin American writers is not always obvious. In his most famous works he did not use Argentine expressions or colloquialisms; indeed, he speaks of his use of Spanish with some disdain; on languages, he says, “I still think of German as being a beautiful language—perhaps more beautiful than the literature it has produced. French, rather paradoxically, has a fine literature despite its fondness for schools and movements but the language itself is, I think, rather ugly. [...] In fact, I even think of Spanish as being the better of the two languages, though Spanish words are far too long and cumbersome. As an Argentine writer, I have to cope with Spanish, and so am only too aware of its shortcomings” (217). He wrote his later works in Spanish devoid of the local expressions of the people of the pampas because he found that his earlier works such as “The Dead Man,” in which he wrote of a local character, fell short of his ideal for literature. His preference for the English and German, however, does not indicate an abrogation of his homeland in his writing; rather, he expresses Argentina in a unique way. Borges confesses in his lecture, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition”:

For many years, in books now fortunately forgotten, I tried to compose the flavor, the essence, of the outskirts of Buenos Aires; naturally I abounded in local words such as *cuchilleros*, *milonga*, *tapia*, and others, and in such manner I wrote those forgettable and forgotten books; then, about a year

ago, I wrote a story called “Death and the Compass,” which is a kind of nightmare, a nightmare in which elements of Buenos Aires appear, deformed by the horror of the nightmare; and in that story, when I think of the Paseo Colón, I call it Rue de Toulon; when I think of the *quintas* of Adrogué, I call them Triste-le-Roy; after the story was published, my friends told me that at last they had found the flavor of the outskirts of Buenos Aires in my writing. (424)

At first glance, the words “forgettable and forgotten” above lend credence to a belief that Borges, like T.S. Eliot and Henry James, tried to sound “more European than the Europeans,” as Aschcroft *et alia* describe the expatriated Americans in *The Empire Writes Back* (4). While some truth may be found in this belief, Borges as a postcolonial writer goes much deeper. Even though he lived for several years in Europe and loved it, Borges never became a citizen of a European country, as did Eliot and James; his home was his beloved Buenos Aires.

Borges’ hybridity allowed him to adapt his writings to suit a wider audience; rather than being limited to Latin American readers, his themes were well received in translation to English, because they resonated with the Eurocentric mindset in their similarity to European modernists and postmodernists. In the above passage, however, his “unhomeliness” evidences itself in the fact that he had to use European locations (*Rue de Toulon, Triste-le-Roy*) to effectively convey the flavor of Buenos Aires. Not only is Borges himself “unhomed”; his text is as well. If we add to the sense of unhomeliness in “Death and the Compass” the quality of deracination found in the characters of all of his stories, we find in Jorge Luis Borges, not merely a precursor to postcolonialism, but the

essence of the postcolonial writer. Borges overturns the process of the Orientalism that calls for Latin American characters to conform to the center's authorized picture of the gaucho on the pampas. He asserts in his lecture that the *gauchesco* poetry such as *Martín Fierro* does not represent the literary tradition of the Argentine gauchos, as the center instinctively pictures them "and presents itself without benefit of any rationale" (420). Rather, he tells us that the *gauchesco* poetry differs significantly from the poetry of the *payadores*—the "rural improvisational singers" associated with the real gauchos—pointing out that the *gauchescos* employed an eleven-syllable line that was barred to the *payadores* (421). The local color in the *gauchesco* poetry is an affectation, according to Borges, which, in essence, amounts to the privileged Argentine poets orientalizing the true gauchos. Borges recognized his imitation of this affectation in his early writing, and changed his style to reflect his own position, producing writing that he found much more to his liking. His command of several European languages and of European literature, along with his roots in Buenos Aires, allows him to make a hybrid type of literature that originates, like its creator, in a liminal space. Borges combines the high Spanish of Argentina's colonizers with the style and the tropes of the modernism/postmodernism of the European early twentieth-century writers, as well as the magical realism of Latin America, to create literature that gives power and agency to the Latin American writer.

### Circular Time, Labyrinths, Mirrors, and Fractals

The style and tropes that Borges applied to his fictions reflect the existentialism of the new philosophers that resulted from the conditions of modernity, as well as putting his own spin on the nonlinear treatment of time inherent in the modernist and postmodernist writers of Europe. Homi K. Bhabha, in the chapter of *The Location of Culture* entitled “Dissemination,” speaks of the writing of a nation as a temporal process, and while Borges’ writing centers on the individual rather than the nation, Bhabha intimates that the story of a nation is inherent in the story of the individual, saying that “the shadow of the nation falls on the condition of exile” (202). Since deracination and isolation play heavily in Borges’ writing, and both are conditions of exile, the temporal process to which Bhabha refers applies to Borges’ narratives. Bhabha also touches on the subject of the “double” in narratives, discussing the double in the context of time. He relates Mikhail Bakhtin’s treatment of time and space as fixed:

From the beginning, Bakhtin writes, the Realist and Romantic conceptions of time coexist in Goethe’s work, but the ghostly [...], the terrifying [...], and the unaccountable [...] are consistently surmounted by the structuring process of the visualization of time: ‘the necessity of the past and the necessity of its place in a line of continuous development...finally the aspect of the past being linked to the necessary future’. National time becomes concrete and visible in the chronotype of the local, particular, graphic, from beginning to end, The narrative structure of this *historical* surmounting of the ‘ghostly’ or the ‘double’ is seen in the intensification of narrative synchrony as a graphically visible position in space.” (205)

Bhabha disagrees with Bakhtin, however, suggesting that “The ‘double’ is the figure most frequently associated with this uncanny process of ‘the doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self’. Such ‘double-time’ cannot be so simply represented as visible or flexible in ‘unmediated contemplation’; nor can we accept Bakhtin’s repeated attempt to read the national space as achieved only in the *fullness of time*” (205). Bhabha’s denial of the idea that narrative time must be fixed leads to the conclusion that non-linear time better illustrates the division of self.

Borges writes time in a circular manner, as does Virginia Woolf, but his circular time differs from hers. While Woolf writes circular time to relate events that happen at the same time but in different locations—as in *Mrs. Dalloway*—in order to illustrate the double as a connection between fragmented individuals, rather than a reflection of the “other” in the divided self, Borges writes circular time to relate the repetitive or cyclical nature of time. In his essay “Circular Time,” he alludes to Nietzsche’s concept of “the Eternal Return,” and describes three forms it takes. The first he attributes to Plato’s *Timaeus*: “if the planetary periods are cyclical, so must be the history of the universe; at the end of each Platonic year, the same individuals will be born again and will live out the same destinies” (225), an astrological approach, according to Borges. Nietzsche, on the other hand gives an algebraic form to the concept: “a quantity of  $n$  objects [...] is incapable of an infinite number of variations,” indicating that those reborn do not vary, but are the exact same people. The third form comes from Blanqui, and Borges describes it as “the most well-reasoned and complex” of the three: Blanqui supposes matter to be finite, and thus, “it must happen, in an eternal duration, that every possible order or position must be tried an infinite number of times” (226). This third doctrine resonates in

Borges' stories, from the infinite galleries of books in "The Library of Babel" that seem the same but vary if even by one character from gallery to gallery, to the "pullulation" experienced by Yu T'sun in "The Garden of Forking Paths."

In order to illustrate his concept of divided humans, and their perception of their position in the universe, Borges used the image of the fractal. According to Linda Marcos Dayan, author of the article "Borges: cosmovisión fractal," fractals are defined as "geometric forms that contain a figure of themselves in each of their parts, and in the parts of their parts and so on infinitely" (Dayan 58, my translation). Borges included the tropes of time, labyrinths, mirrors, and the double in his concept of the fractal image. Dayan asserts that in fractals, "each of the parts is the same as the whole, repeating the same pattern in each level of the scale and the multiplication of the parts amplifies the perimeter of the fractal, generating, if we stretch it out, a straight line of infinite longitude" (Dayan 59, my translation). Borges uses fractal images in many of his stories and poems but here we will focus on three of his short stories: "The Garden of Forking Paths," "The Library of Babel," and "The Circular Ruins," all of which were published in 1941, in the volume, *The Garden of Forking Paths*. In these three stories, Borges presents the universe in three different contexts: time, space, and levels of human consciousness. He also applies magical realism to the written word, giving agency to books so that they play a part in fooling or confounding the people. In each story, he uses the concept of the fractal to reveal all of the possibilities that exist in time, space, and the human mind, and in so doing, he illustrates the role of the concept of individual liberty that is so terrifying in the existential mindset.

“The Garden of Forking Paths” presents a simple illustration of this concept of the fractal, in conjunction with the labyrinth and time, in the directions that the child gives to Yu Tsun when Yu is looking for the house of the doctor, Stephen Albert: “The house is a far way, but you’ll not get lost if you follow that road there to the left, and turn left at every crossing.” Yu Tsun remembered that “that was the common way of discovering the central lawn of a certain type of maze” (Borges 122). If one were to walk along the perimeter of a fractal, beginning inside the fractal and never exiting it, each passage from one section to another would entail a turn in the same direction. Because each part of the fractal opens into an equal part *ad infinitum*, a person who walked the perimeter in a clockwise pattern would always turn to the left. Not only that, but that person would progress deeper and deeper into the fractal *ad infinitum*, always entering the next part, but never exiting the fractal. The effect of the fractal image on the character and on the reader is a feeling of being completely lost.

If it is possible to imagine each part of a fractal as if it were a period of time, it is also possible to imagine the illustration of time that Stephen Albert describes when he explains the book of Yu Tsun’s ancestor, Ts’ui Pên. Continuing along the perimeter, one can picture the example that Albert gives of the night in the middle of the 1001 nights, in which “the queen Scheherazade (through some magical distractedness on the part of the copyist) begins to retell, verbatim, the story of the 1001 Nights, with the risk of returning once again to the night on which she is telling it—and so on *ad infinitum*.” Possibilities exist, in the majority of works, for different outcomes, and the protagonist chooses one; thus one assumes that the other possible outcomes do not happen. Albert says, however, “In Ts’ui Pên’s novel, *all* the outcomes in fact occur; each is the starting point for further



bifurcations” (125). In this sense, each fork is another part of the fractal. In the labyrinth, made of words, each part gives a different aspect of the outcome, but all end with the same words—for example, each outcome that happens with the army in the novel ends with the words, “Thus the heroes fought, their admirable hearts calm, their swords violent, they themselves resigned to killing and to dying” (126). An example of surrealism is presented in this labyrinth of time, to illustrate the horror that liberty holds for the existential human. Yu Tsun, in a moment when he must make a moral choice, feels the terror in the “invisible, intangible pullulation—not that of the divergent, parallel, and finally coalescing armies, but an agitation more inaccessible, more inward than that” (126)—an inward swarming feeling that Yu cannot identify. Morality, whether absent or relative, does not offer a guide for what he must do; thus, human beings must decide for themselves and hope that each choice is the best.

In “The Library of Babel,” Borges illustrates the fractal as a labyrinth of space as he describes the interior makings of the library:

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries. In the center of each gallery is a ventilation shaft, bounded by a low railing. From any hexagon one can see the floors above and below—one after another, endlessly. The arrangement of the galleries is always the same: Twenty bookshelves, five to each side, line four of the hexagon’s six sides. [...] One of the hexagon’s free sides opens onto a narrow sort of vestibule, which in turn opens onto another gallery, identical to the first—identical in fact to all.

[...] Through this space, too, there passes a spiral staircase, which winds upward and downward into the remotest distance. (112)

Thus, Borges presents a Library that is a metaphor for the universe. He introduces the trope of the mirror, situated in each vestibule, in order to create doubt as to whether the universe really is infinite—“if it were, what need would there be for that illusory replication?” Rather the narrator claims, “I prefer to dream that burnished surfaces are a figuration and promise of the infinite” (112).

In this story, Borges confronts Nietzsche’s proclamation that God is dead, but he does not offer the reader a definitive answer to the proclamation; rather, he presents two sides of the debate and leaves readers to decide for themselves—an unsurprising style, as Borges was agnostic. The narrator tells the reader that “Mystics claim that their ecstasies reveal to them a circular chamber containing an enormous circular book with a continuous spine that goes completely around the walls. But their testimony is suspect, their words obscure. That cyclical book is God” (113). In this environment in which the existence of God is doubted, we must navigate the Library (the universe) that “*is a sphere whose exact center is any hexagon and whose circumference is unattainable.*” At the same time, the narrator contends that the library, that exists eternally, “can only be the handiwork of a god.” On the other hand, the narrator claims that “Man, the imperfect librarian, may be the work of chance or of malevolent demiurges” (113). So, with two perspectives concerning the existence of God and the infinity of the universe, the readers, like the pilgrims in the story, must choose for themselves which is correct. Mirrors add to the feeling of confusion, because no one can discern if the gallery (or any person, for that matter) that he or she sees is real or just a reflection. This confusion and its source

form an illustration of the existentialism of Borges, who has said, “I am alone, and there is no one in the mirror” (Proverbia 2, my translation). This multiplicity of perspective is an example of the quintessentially Modernist perspective of cubism, and a picture of the predicament of the existential being.

The word figures into the fractal as part of the books that are infinite in number and similar in form. In spite of this similarity of form, the nature of virtually all books is formless and chaotic (113). Of the books, “This much is known: For every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency” (114). Like the levels of time in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” each part of this spatial fractal is the same as every other, and at the same time, different. In “The Library of Babel,” each one of the galleries is the double of all the others. Borges was influenced by the works of Robert Louis Stevenson (Bell-Villada 23), and in his use of this trope of the double, one can see the similarity. Stevenson used the doubles of human beings, and also of spaces. In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, not only do we see the double of the good doctor and his evil alter-ego; we also see the double in the house of the doctor and that of Hyde. Separated by a garden (Stevenson 25), these two places are in different neighborhoods—the doctor’s house is in an upper-class neighborhood and is tranquil and orderly. Hyde’s house is in a lower-class neighborhood, and even though it is luxurious, it is in disorder because it has been ransacked (16). In Borges’ library, the books in some galleries make sense, but the majority of the books are indecipherable.

The similarity of the use of the double in Stevenson’s novel and Borges’ stories exists in the example of the differentiation between order and disorder as well as in the

human doubles. In “The Garden of Forking Paths,” the human doubles Yu Tsun and Richard Madden are not as intimate as Jekyll and Hyde, but in these two characters, Borges shows that which Gene H. Bell-Villada calls his well-known obsession with people who are “others” (Bell-Villada 77). Madden, the pursuer, and Yu Tsun, the pursued, both have missions that make them adversaries and at the same time that Yu Tsun hates Madden, he also identifies with him. This identification adds to his sense of disconcertion. At times we see the trope of the double in just one person, and this is true in Yu Tsun. Albert tells him that “Once in a while, the paths of that labyrinth converge: for example, you come to this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another my friend” (Borges 125). Thus, Yu Tsun is not only confused over his mission and his choice; he is confused about who he is.

By the differentiation between order and chaos, and in other ways, the written word acts in these two works as an agent of confusion. In “The Garden of Forking Paths,” Ts’ui Pên’s book, acting as a character in the story, “*creates* [...] ‘several futures,’ several *times*, which themselves proliferate and fork”—the word becomes a fractal of time (125). “The Library of Babel” is a complete library, and the books contain the Vindication of each human being. In search of this Vindication, thousands of individuals abandon their native hexagons. The books, however, have the capacity to fool the pilgrims who “squabbled in the narrow corridors, muttered dark imprecations, strangled one another on the divine staircases, threw deceiving volumes down ventilation shafts, were themselves hurled to their deaths by men of distant regions. Others went insane” because of their vain quests to find a Vindication that they most likely will never

find (115). Borges applies magical realism to give the written word the capacity to confuse and fool the people.

The human being passes his life in search of the truth but, according to Carter Wheelock in his book, *The Mythmaker*, the fictions of Borges tell us that humans might possibly have the truth, and can believe what they have, but they never can know that they have it (3). Wheelock continues, saying that Borges' stories suggest other ways of telling the parts of the universe, other ontologies that we have forgotten or that we have not yet made (5). The existentialism of Borges is spurred by his effort to find the truth, and it is also the result of *not* finding it. Sartre and Nietzsche both rejected the possibility of a God that guides us, and Kierkegård, although he did not reject the notion of the existence of God, considered God an objective truth. In the estimation of Kierkegård, objective truths did not pertain to the real world; thus, according to him, God cannot guide us. These conclusions made these three great defenders of existentialism believe that human beings are alone in a horrific liberty, in which they will never know if that which they do is right or not, and so they are trapped in his liberty. They journey deeper into this enormous fractal called the universe and eventually they can no longer tell even whether they are inside or outside the fractal.

In "The Garden of Forking Paths," Yu Tsun must choose at the end to kill Stephen Albert, with whom he feels an affinity. This man has shown Yu his antecedent's book, and has explained the significance of the labyrinth of words. Here, Borges applies the trope of the double: these two men reflect one another in that both are lost in a labyrinth of time. Albert tells Yu,

your ancestor did not believe in a uniform and absolute time; he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains *all* possibilities. In most of those times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others, I do and you do not; in others still, we both do. In this one [...] you have come to my home; in another, when you come through my garden you find me dead; in another, I say these same words, but I am an error, a ghost. (127)

In all of these infinite possibilities, Yu has arrived in the one wherein, as Albert says, Albert is his enemy, and Yu kills him in order to send a coded message to his allies. Before he does this, however, he senses in the fractal of time all of the possible versions of himself and Albert, and gives us the origin of the pullulation he felt—in a “gossamer nightmare,” Albert “sensed that the dew-drenched garden that surrounded the house was saturated, infinitely, with invisible persons. Those persons were Albert and myself—secret, busily at work, multiform—in other dimensions of time” (127). Borges takes the ghostly, the terrifying, and the unaccountable that Bakhtin claims can only be surmountable in fixed time, applying them to Bhabha’s concept of the double as the divided self, giving his readers an illustration of Nietzsche’s Eternal Return—different variations of the same people reborn in cycles—but all saturating the same space, even though only one cycle is visibly present. Yu can feel them, but he cannot see them. Each cycle represents a “gallery” of time in the fractal. This fractal of time mirrors the fractal of space in “The Library of Babel,” wherein one might hear others through the walls of

the galleries, but would not be able to see or reach them, and both of these reflect the existentialist predicament—one is alone in the universe.

In addition to the fractals of space and time, Borges creates one other type of fractal—that of levels of human consciousness. In “The Circular Ruins,” the reader encounters, literally, a dream within a dream. The protagonist of the story is a man who is charged with the task of dreaming a man and imposing that dream man into reality so that only he and his god, Fire, would know that the man is really a phantasm. Even the dream-man would be unaware of his lack of existence (99). Because his character has no sense of his own origin, Borges creates a scenario in which the readers have no sense that the protagonist is just another layer of consciousness—he himself is a dream-man, other than some vague foreshadowing in which the man senses that “all this had happened before” (99). In a burned-out circular ruin that had served as a place of sacrifice, the man sleeps and crafts a youth, educates him about reality, and after magically wiping his memory of being educated, sends him to a similar ruin. Thus, the dream-man, like his creator, is deracinated; reality is all he knows, and he has no sense of his dream origin. From that point of separation from his creation, the older man no longer dreamt, and “his perceptions of the universe’s sounds and shapes were somewhat pale: the absent son was nourished by those diminutions of his soul” (100). The man needs his son in order that he may seem real to himself, a trope that reflects Samuel Beckett’s trope of the pseudo-couple, who need one another to self-actuate. When the protagonist later hears from two travelers that a man in a ruin downstream could walk through fire and not be burned, “he feared that his son would meditate upon his unnatural privilege and somehow discover that he was a mere simulacrum” and would suffer humiliation and

vertigo (100). The crux of the story is when the old man realizes that he, too, is the product of a dream. Borges illustrates his fractal of human consciousness in that each layer of consciousness reflects the one before it—a man who can walk through fire and who physically resembles the one who created him, a circular ruin, a god to whom the man sacrifices. The readers are left to question how many layers exist, how many dreamers who are themselves the product of a dream. Perhaps, ultimately, the readers will question even their own existence. The story reflects a postmodern and postcolonial idea in which a person needs the “other” in order to validate his own existence; thus, the man does not realize that he is also a simulacrum until he is separated from his creation.

Borges’ work does indeed reflect the influence of the modernist and postmodernist writers whom he read and his stories take the tropes of these movements deeper than the modernists and postmodernists did. While the readers see the same sense of fragmentation, isolation, and deracination that were common tropes of these two movements, as well as a non-linear treatment of time such as one sees in the work of Virginia Woolf and others of her era, Borges adds layers of time, space, and consciousness that take his work into another dimension. Modernists and postmodernists avoided any form of fantasy; their works reflected, even with seemingly surreal aspects such as a non-chronological treatment of time, the real, three-dimensional world. Borges adds layers of dimension to the real world—his is not a secondary world as one finds in the works of Tolkien. These layers of dimension contain infinite possibilities that reflect the terror of choice in the existentialist mind. We make a choice and all other possibilities end at that moment, but in Borges’s reality, they still exist, like the phantasmal characters that surround Yu Tsun and cause his mysterious pullulation. They



exist in reality, but on a different plane in time, space, or consciousness, or even within a character as a double of the self.

In the existence of these other planes, Borges crafts a paradox that illustrates the plight of the existentialist. While he is alone, the existentialist is surrounded by others, even within himself. Borges describes his own inner conflict in a piece titled “Borges and I.” He says, “I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can spin out his literature, and that literature is my justification.” Two separate entities collide within the same person, and yet they are the same person. Borges concludes, “I am not sure which of us it is that’s writing this page” (324). While modernists and postmodernists struggle with imposed identity, Borges adds to that a struggle with inner paradox.

One can see similar patterns in the works of European modernists; Proust, for example, uses fractal imagery in his work *A la recherche du temps perdu*, but his fractals are based completely in the mind, on layers of memory. The real world is not affected, but rather, the characters’ impression of it. Borges’s fractals offer layers of time, space, and consciousness on different planes that reflect and affect the real world. According to Bell-Villada, “Realism, in Borges’s view, mistakenly attempts to make the reader ‘forget [the novel’s] quality of verbal artifice.’” Bell-Villada goes on to say, “This heightening of invention and imagination in literature is Borges’s concrete reply to a question frequently posed by modern novelists and critics alike: namely, what is to be done, what *can* be done, after Joyce and Proust, after Woolf and Kafka?” (49). The works of these artists are not easy works to read, and neither is that of Borges. The word *obscure* often comes to mind concerning the modernists and Borges, but while Borges’s work comes across as obscure, Bell-Villada argues that his prose is “neither inaccessible nor obscure” but that

“it nonetheless has an intellectual density that makes no concessions to the lazy reader” (44). Bell-Villada may be right on a certain level, but the fractals Borges uses add that “erudite obscurity”—of which he speaks in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*—to Borges’ own work as well, and that is what stymies the “lazy reader” of whom Bell-Villada speaks. One often must read Borges a second or third time to understand the complexities of his stories. The fact that Borges was able to take up the challenge to follow the modernists and to succeed is a testament to his mastery of the written word.

Borges was a poet as well as a master storyteller, and his prose reflects the style of Cicero rather than that of Seneca, who wrote epistolary prose crafted for rhetoric (Cooksey). Ciceronian prose is more lapidary; According to John R. Holmes, it contains rhythmic techniques that are consciously crafted and appeal to the ear. Holmes states, “The hallmarks of Cicero’s prose style are the period and the rhythmic clausula. The period is a long, stately sentence which suspends the verb until the end...with chains of subordinate clauses and balanced antitheses.” This sentence from “The Library of Babel” provides an example: “Man, the imperfect librarian, may be the work of chance of malevolent demiurges; the universe, with its elegant appointments—its bookshelves, its enigmatic books, its indefatigable staircases for the traveler, and its water closets for the seated librarian—can only be the handiwork of a god” (113). The five subordinate clauses repeat the word *its* giving the sentence a rhythmic, poetic quality. The Ciceronian style of Borges differs from the Senecan style of many of the European modernists, with the exception of Proust, who also wrote in Ciceronian prose. This style, along with his tropes of circular time, labyrinths, mirrors, and fractals, makes his work unique and

compelling; the written word calls the readers in and sends them on infinite bifurcations of prose just like the book of Ts'ui Pên.

### Expressions of Self and the Search for Infinity

One way in which Borges claims agency in his writing is through his expression of self through his characters. In “Borges versus Proust: Towards a Combative Literature,” Tim Conley addresses the question of self-agency in Borges’ works, saying that he would not “do so churlish a thing as *express himself*. To do so [...] is not an act of literature. Instead anamnesis [...] is mediated by characters” (47). Both Conley and Thomas H. Ogden attribute to Borges this character-driven style of self-agency; in “Kafka, Borges, and the Creation of Consciousness” Ogden asserts that Borges’ work “not only altered the development of Western literature, but also contributed to shaping the ways in which we are alive to ourselves as self-conscious beings” (370). Relating Borges’ need to overcome his fear of public speaking so that he could make a living as a lecturer to his invention of a literary alter-ego named “Borges,” Ogden tells us that “Borges lived in a complex relationship with ‘Borges’ [...] the two are intertwined, but nonetheless ‘the other one’ provided Borges some cover at the point in his life that he was forced onto the public stage. In an important sense, Borges in this way invented himself (and lost himself) as a character in the story that was his life” (378). Ogden argues that in “Borges and I,” the protagonist is the author who loses himself to either his literary “other” or to oblivion (378), while in “The Library of Babel,” the narrator represents not only the creation of “Borges”—the public, literary persona—, but the invention of the real, human Borges (385). Ogden’s arguments point to the text as more than just a venue for self-expression, but also a means of self-invention.

A lesser-known story, however, completes the picture of the man who invents himself in the written word. While “Borges and I” describes the struggle between the real

man and the public persona, and “The Library of Babel” gives us a metaphor for the creation of both, “The House of Asterion” explores the private struggle of the real man, separate from his invented literary persona. Without the library, he must define himself outside the context of literature and the knowledge of his real purpose; thus, we find a different kind of creator inhabiting “The House of Asterion.” Taken together, these three works illustrate the struggle between the author’s desire to create and his need for justification and redemption from an “other.”

In “The House of Asterion,” Borges uses a Greek myth—the myth of the Minotaur—to illustrate the theme of isolation, in a Nietzschean, existential sense that places the responsibility for one’s existence and choices on the individual, since God is dead and there is no one to guide us. In his story, he paints the Minotaur not as a monster, but as an individual with human characteristics, isolated from other people by his labyrinth, their fear of him, and his own concept of his social standing. Borges applies a cubist perspective to the labyrinth in “The House of Asterion,” giving us both the Minotaur’s view of his labyrinth, as his home and the whole world, and the sovereign’s view, in which it is a prison and a death-trap, by presenting the voice of the Minotaur as an interior monolog up to his death, and then switching to third-person at the very end as he describes Theseus’ reaction to the Minotaur’s acceptance of death.

Asterion, in his isolation, carves out an identity for himself based on both his limited knowledge of the physical world, and his dreams and visions. According to David García Pérez, the Minotaur becomes a sort of *deus faber*, or a creating god (221). Because he does not read, and spends his days and nights alone, Asterion has no concept of the world beyond his labyrinth, or of a person who might have created him. He

identifies with the sun: “[e]verything exists many times, fourteen times, but there are two things in the world that apparently exist but once—on high, the intricate sun, and below, Asterion.” Asterion concludes, “[p]erhaps I have created the stars and the sun and this huge house, and no longer remember it” (Borges 221). He comes to this conclusion because only he and the sun are unique, and he has no other basis for conjecture.

Asterion’s conclusion reflects a Jungian take on the myth, as he relies both on his subjective view of the real world, and on his visions and dreams. In his book, *Jung and the Jungians on Myth*, Steven F. Walker asserts, “Jungian psychology [...] values the data of the objective world mainly as a support for the investigation of this inner world [the realm of subjectivity]” (30). An interesting connection can be drawn between this Jungian perspective of Asterion and Borges himself when he makes the statement, “[i]f I were asked to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father’s library. In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library” (Borges, “Autobiographical” 209). The library and the labyrinth become one, as they do in “The Library of Babel,” and the narrator—or “Borges”—is trapped in the infinite galleries of books, just as Asterion is imprisoned in his stone galleries, which he intimates are infinite in number. As the Library is the universe, so Asterion’s “house is as big as the world—or rather, it *is* the world” (Borges “House” 221). As the human pilgrims in “The Library of Babel” seek their affirmation in “the books of *apologi* and prophecies that would vindicate for all time the actions of every person in the universe” (Borges “Library” 115), as Ogden hints throughout his critique, the author, who wonders “if, indeed, I am anybody at all” (Borges “Borges” 324), finds his vindication in the literature of “the other.”

The words “justification” and “vindication” go together with the redemption that Asterion seeks, as he awaits the redeemer whom he hopes will take him “to a place with fewer galleries and fewer doors” (Borges “House” 222). Justification differs from redemption, but Borges indicates that we seek both, an idea that echoes the desires of Christians, fulfilled in the role of Jesus. Galleries, whether they consist of books or of stone, create a prison as well as a refuge for humanity, and death, it seems, is the only way out in either story. Without the concept of God as justifier and redeemer, death becomes the redeemer, and it is this redemption that Asterion awaits. Ogden claims that, in the invention of the literary persona, “Borges [...] invented himself (and lost himself) as a character in the story that was his life” (378). Like Asterion, he lives so that the “other,” the redeemer, can deliver him from his isolation.

In the meantime, both Borges and Asterion invent “distractions” to pass the time (Borges, “House” 221, and “Borges” 324). The author seeks distraction “in hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typefaces, etymologies, the taste of coffee, and the prose of Robert Louis Stevenson” (324), while Asterion finds what distraction he can in the stone galleries of his labyrinth. He does not read, and has no faith in communication by the written word, which parallels the separation of the author from his literary persona. Asterion’s distractions include games and night visions, and it is from these visions that he perceives the infinite nature of everything along with his own—and the sun’s—uniqueness (221). His subjective view of the world causes Asterion to invent himself, just as the author invents himself in the persona of “Borges.”

In this Jungian parallel of the objective with the subjective, “The House of Asterion,” then, becomes a part of a unique trilogy of writings in which Borges gives us a

picture of himself. Two celebrated pieces, “The Library of Babel” and “Borges and I,” partner with the lesser-known “The House of Asterion” to produce a portal through which the reader can see a portion of the inner workings of Jorge Luis Borges. While “Borges and I” gives us the perspective of the author who finds his justification in Borges the “other,” and “The Library of Babel” shows us the human desires for justification and redemption, Asterion gives us a picture of the Borges who loses himself outside of his father’s library, and who lives his life waiting for both his justification and his redemption. The myth of the Minotaur becomes, in effect, the myth of *the Mythmaker*.

From a postcolonial perspective, the self-agency afforded to the narrator in the story of Asterion—as well as many other stories by Borges—can be viewed as an inversion of Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, because while the Empire—the community outside the labyrinth—has its own view of Asterion—a distorted view of a monster who has no intelligence or compassion for humans, but consumes them, like the so-called “cannibals” in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—Borges gives us a different view, just as Chinua Achebe does in *Things Fall Apart* for the African people that Conrad misrepresents. Borges gives us the compassionate Asterion, who lives, from his own perspective, not in a labyrinth, but in a house. While the labyrinth plays a large role in this story, the word “labyrinth” is never used once – not even when the perspective changes to that of Theseus at the end. Another absence from the perspective of the Minotaur is the word “Minotaur,” used only one time in the whole story and that from the perspective of Theseus, who represents the Empire. The reader may develop his or her own picture of Asterion from the beginning of the story, especially if he or she has not



made the connection to the Greek myth, and that view is not completely dispelled until the reader encounters Theseus.

Borges opens with an epigraph: “And the queen gave birth to a son named Asterion,” from Apollodorus’ text. My experience, the first time I read this story, stemmed from not knowing that *Apolodoro*—the Spanish term for Apollodorus—was the ancient author of a version of the myth of the Minotaur. My picture of Asterion, then, sprung from his status as the son of a queen. The speech of Asterion in the first two sentences indicates that he is a high-born person of power: “I know that I am accused of arrogance and perhaps of misanthropy, and perhaps even of madness. These accusations (which I shall punish in due time) are ludicrous” (220). Elevated diction furthers the impression of royalty first seen in the epigraph, as does the implication by the word “punish” that Asterion has judicial power.

In speaking of the uniqueness of his house, Asterion takes the appearance of a person with knowledge of the world; “Those who say there is a similar house in Egypt speak lies” (220). In speaking of his own uniqueness, Asterion becomes a person versed in philosophy when he tells us, “I am not interested in what a man can publish abroad to other men; like the philosopher, I think that nothing can be communicated by the art of writing” (220). Neither Socrates nor Pythagoras wrote books that contained their teachings, and Evelyn Fishburne and Psiche Hughes, in *A Dictionary of Borges*, speculate that while Asterion’s philosopher could have been either of these, “Pythagoras is probably ‘the philosopher’ alluded to by Asterion,” as Borges had elsewhere in his writing “referred to this very characteristic of Pythagoras” (197-8). Ironically, Asterion as

a self-styled philosopher presents the specious reasoning of the sophists, whom the philosophers such as Socrates despised.

Also ironic is Asterion's perception, the one time he ventures out of his house, of the people of Crete. He describes them as people with "colorless faces, as flat as the palm of one's hand" that inspired dread in him, and who made "crude supplications" upon recognizing him. They fell prostrate before him, and some "gathered stones," which parallels some of the ways that people reacted to the risen Jesus in the Bible, as well as the Orientalist view that Third World tribes revered the white people as gods. Asterion sees himself as the center, as the Europeans did, and the people of Crete become the "other." He gives his authorized view of them as subhuman and crude, and establishes his own superiority by saying, "Not for nothing was my mother a queen; I cannot mix with commoners, even if my modesty should wish it" (220). He sees himself as courteous and hospitable, engaging in activities that sound normal to the European center with his imaginary double—"another Asterion. I pretend that he has come to visit me, and I show him around the house." He imagines himself bowing "majestically" and engaging in polite conversation and filial laughter with his "friend" (221).

Not only does Asterion conjure a friend from his imagination, but his other "distractions" that help him pass the long days are somewhat suspect: "Sometimes I run like a charging ram through the halls of stone until I tumble dizzily to the ground; sometimes I crouch in the shadow of a wellhead or at a corner in one of the corridors and pretend I am being hunted. There are rooftops from which I can hurl myself until I am bloody. I can pretend anytime I like that I am asleep, and lie with my eyes closed and my breathing heavy" (221). The reader senses some discomfiture at this point, imagining

perhaps someone who is losing his grip on sanity, but still human and powerful, like a mad prince. The end of the story comes as a surprise, because the readers find that Asterion's self-image is not true. The powerful mad prince is dispatched as quickly as are his victims, because he does not defend himself.

Borges presents in Asterion the humans who must define themselves because deracination has left them devoid of identity. Asterion is the ultimate "other"; imprisoned for his difference, hidden from society, isolated, and left to discern the world through his own limited means. Unable to read, he is left without the power of language. He knows only his labyrinth; he has no roots, and no creator. As the labyrinth is "the world" (221), Borges implies that we are all prisoners in the world. Asterion longs for a redeemer—why would he long, if his house were not a prison? He has no contact with the infinite, and so he concludes that he carved the labyrinth, and becomes for himself the *deus faber* of whom Pérez speaks.

### Seeking the Infinite in the Galleries of Time and Space

Borges' grappling with the infinite raises the question of whether a study of faith can fit into the corset squeezing the fat lady that Aizenberg has dubbed the study of postcolonial theory. Some might say that faith has no business in the study of marginalized people, because it has to do with one's relationship with God, and not with other humans, but I have found that these concepts of hybridity, deracination, exile, and the "other" do indeed apply to humanity's attempts to explain or to commune with the infinite. For anyone who believes in life after death, the human being can be seen as a hybrid—an eternal being who still must die—and the earth becomes a liminal space where one does not belong, but where one is stuck until death. In the context of the infinite vs. the finite, the liminal becomes paradoxical, leaving the pilgrim to wonder not only where he or she belongs, but if, in fact we humans exist at all in the real world. If one believes, as did Plato, that human beings come from an eternal place, of which this world is only a shadow, then the concepts of deracination and exile are prevalent in many faiths. Annette U. Flynn claims that "[t]he theme of the elect runs through Borges' work, even though neither he himself [...] nor his characters [...] seem to be among them" (17). While the elect denotes more those who are chosen than a hegemonic power structure, Flynn's point can be directly related to a postcolonial reading in that the idea that some are allowed to experience eternity while others are not speaks to a sense of exile and "otherness" in those who are not among the elect. For Borges' characters, this "otherness" results in imprisonment in time and space even while the character may sense the presence of eternity.

José Luis Najenson argues that, unlike Sartre, Borges did not turn to literature in order to express that which philosophy could not express; rather, he considered philosophy and theology as splendid forms of fantastic literature—the “servants of literature” that provide esthetic value, rarity, shadow, or distance (trans. from Najenson 75). In this view, Najenson differs from Flynn, because Flynn argues throughout her book that Borges is indeed searching for God. Najenson asserts that even when Borges suggests an inveterate sympathy for certain conceptions of the world or of life such as Kabbalah, his interest in these is essentially literary. Najenson attributes to Borges a sort of primordial skepticism in which all human creation expressed in words will be a product of human fantasy (trans. from Najenson 75). When one considers the plight of Asterion, his delusions of divinity, and his ultimate death, one can see some truth in Najenson’s conclusions, but the fact that Asterion’s delusions do not necessarily negate the infinite or the metaphysical does, at the very least, allow for another interpretation. In that vein, I will explore the concept of the infinite in the writings of the agnostic Borges, and I propose that this agnosticism is a liminal space between belief and non-belief that allows the mind to explore infinite possibilities.

While not everyone believes that there is a God, or even that there is an “eternity,” I would argue that the question of infinity, and humankind’s place in it, has crossed the mind of even the staunchest atheist at least once. Whether one defines the infinite as “God” or as merely that realm that falls outside of time and space as we know it, most of us wonder if there is, indeed, another side. Many people wish for just one glimpse of eternity, since nothing on this earth provides concrete proof that it even exists, and Borges illustrates this longing in his fictions. In “The Garden of Forking Paths,” the

main character is “Dr. Yu T’sun, former professor of English in the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao” (119). In that one introductory phrase, Yu T’sun is connected with three different cultures: Chinese, English, and German. As a spy for the Germans, he represents a deracinated character, and his mission leads him to a connection with his roots that he never expects. Nataly Tcherepashenets asserts that “Borges’s approach to ‘place’ suggests imagined settings for mystical experiences and impossible objects. It is a trope that stands for the human aspiration to bridge the gap between the finite and the infinite” (xiv), and she also informs us that in Kabbala, in which Borges had a great interest, the intent is “to decipher and interpret the world as a reflection of divine mysteries” and that the “interweaving of two realms, the divine and the mundane, is unique for Jewish mysticism” (1). In this story, Yu T’sun experiences an encounter with the eternal through a mysterious pullulation that he feels as Stephen Albert explains the mystery of his ancestor’s book. Ts’ui Pên’s book (based in reality) and his labyrinth (infinite, thus out of the bounds of reality in Borgesian thought) are one and the same. Two disparate realms interwoven bring about for Yu this encounter, however remote, with the infinite. The garden of forking paths made by Stephen Albert is a physical manifestation of his explanation that recreates for Yu T’sun the garden, the book, and the labyrinth of his ancestor. The physical garden has boundaries and a gate; it has physical limitations, like all earthly space, but it signifies the infinite labyrinth of Ts’ui Pên, and through the mysterious, nightmarish pullulation that Yu T’sun felt, it brings to him a palpable encounter with infinity.

Borges’ early life points to a disjointed view of God; he tells us, “When I was growing up, religion belonged to women and children; most men in Buenos Aires were

freethinkers—though had they been asked, they might have called themselves Catholics” (“Autobiographical” 207). He does not claim to have believed in God, and relegates religion to the women and children. One might infer here that Borges already found himself in a liminal space between faith and lack of faith; the words “when I was growing up” indicate that he was still a child, and his shame at not being healthy enough for military service denotes an exclusion of sorts from the men, who were “freethinkers.” His insistence on reading banned books as a child, however, negates the idea that he would blindly accept the faith of the women and children, thus showing him to be a freethinker in his own right. From this liminal space, one may feel the freedom to explore many ideas that might have been denied in the realm of both the men who paid lip-service to Catholicism and the women who believed in it, and Borges implies such exploration in his fictions, as well as his poetry.

In his stories, God is a questionable entity. In the “Library of Babel,” for example, the narrator, who searches the galleries with the other pilgrims for the book that contains his vindication, hears from the Mystics that there exists a cyclical book that is God, but the narrator says, “their testimony is suspect, their words obscure” (113). Borges alludes to God or to a god many times in his stories, but never with any conviction. Asterion makes himself out to be a god of sorts, creator as well as redeemer, but he is mistaken. While some, like Flynn, see in Borges’ words a search for God—and it may very well be true—I see his search as one for a more abstract interpretation of the infinite, even though the reader can sense some hope that God exists in Borges’ poetry. While God’s being is doubtful, Borges acknowledges the existence of infinity in his fictions, and though his characters never grasp it, they apprehend it, and they sometimes see or hear it. These

close encounters with infinity never include God, but are supernatural and mystical all the same. The Library of Babel “has existed *ab ñternitate*” (113), suggesting a concrete belief in eternal time, but “it is composed of an *indefinite, perhaps infinite*, number of galleries” (112 emphasis mine), indicating some doubt as to the existence of infinite space. Human beings are limited to earthly space with boundaries like those of Stephen Albert’s garden, but although doubt exists, Borges still proves willing to explore the possibility of an infinite universe through the labyrinth that is the book of Ts’ui Pên. His portrayal of the cyclical time of Nietzsche’s Eternal Return in the ghostly characters that surround Yu T’sun also illustrates time as eternity cycling to the beginning as in Scheherazade’s story of the 1001 nights.

While Borges explores the possibility of the infinite, he also presents earthly possibilities for his characters’ encounters. To madness and misanthropy, among other conditions, he gives consideration, though Borges focuses on the metaphysical. In “The Aleph,” the narrator Borges doubts the existence of the Aleph, concluding that “Carlos Argentino was a madman” (281). Curiosity gets the better of him, however, and he agrees to go to Daneri’s cellar, but even as he lies on the cellar floor, he questions his judgment in allowing a madman to lock him in the cellar after giving him a drink (282). He sees the Aleph, and thus all of eternity, and all the while he is rooted to the cellar floor, unable to touch the Aleph. In “A History of Eternity,” Borges tells his readers that “For us, time is a jarring, urgent problem, perhaps the most vital problem of metaphysics, while eternity is a game or a spent hope” (123). He also describes eternity as “a daughter of mankind” (123), indicating that humans may have invented these concepts in our own search for vindication. Tcherepashenets alludes to his lecture on Spinoza, and his observation that



“for Spinoza, God is as infinite as the universe, ‘an infinite circumference’ which has an infinite number of radii, but only two are known to us: space and time” (qtd in Tcherepashenets 7).

While we see the influence of many philosophers in Borges’ writing, the one with whom he identifies most is Arthur Schopenhauer. He began reading Schopenhauer during his time in Switzerland, and he says, “Today, were I to choose a single philosopher, I would choose him. If the riddle of the universe can be stated in words, I think these words would be in his writings” (Borges “Autobiographical” 216-17). According to Robert Wicks, writer for *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

Schopenhauer’s particular characterization of the world as Will is [...]frightening and pandemonic: he maintains that the world as it is in itself (again, sometimes adding ‘for us’) is an endless striving and blind impulse with no end in view, devoid of knowledge, lawless, absolutely free, entirely self-determining and almighty. Within Schopenhauer’s vision of the world as Will, there is no God to be comprehended, and the world is conceived of as being meaningless. When anthropomorphically considered, the world is represented as being in a condition of eternal frustration, as it endlessly strives for nothing in particular, and as it goes essentially nowhere. It is a world beyond any ascriptions of good and evil.

All of these images of the world are captured in the postmodern fictions of Borges, and they illustrate the ramifications of the postcolonial state of mind. Annette Flynn speaks of Schopenhauer’s world as Will in relation to the individual, saying that, in the world, there

are no individuals except those that we impose on it. She quotes Professor Christopher Janaway, who explains,

*“But what is the principle on which this division of the world into individual things works? Schopenhauer has a very clear and plausible answer: location in space and time. Now if you take this view, and also think, with Kant, that the organizing of things under the structure of space and time stems from the subject [i.e. the perceiving mind], and applies only to the world of phenomena, not to the world as it is in itself, then you will conclude that individuals do not exist in the world as it is in itself. The world would not be broken up into individual things, if it were not for the space and time which we, as subjects, impose.”* (40 Flynn’s emphasis)

Borges illustrates this philosophy of Schopenhauer’s in his story “The Circular Ruins,” in which the main character comes to the circular ruin by boat “in the unanimous night” (96). The world unanimous conveys an undivided world—perhaps Schopenhauer’s world as it is in itself?—and the man leaves the boat and “scramble[s] up the steep bank (without pushing back, probably without even feeling, the sharp-leaved bulrushes that slashed his flesh” (96). The reader gets the sense that this man, who kissed the mud on his arrival, was one with the earth, rather than an individual, although he had a purpose. “The goal that led him on was not impossible, though it was clearly supernatural: He wanted to dream a man. He wanted to dream him completely, in painstaking detail, and impose him on reality” (97). In this story, Borges conflates the dream world with the real world, but it is only in the dream that individuals exist. He chooses the ruined temple, a liminal space whose “god went unhonored by mankind” (96), in which to sleep, to carry

out his dream-plan. In his dream the ruined temple becomes an amphitheater, and “clouds of taciturn students completely filled the terraces of seats” (97). The students are silent, as is the man who is also described as taciturn. His “homeland was one of those infinite villages “where the language of the Zend is uncontaminated by Greek and where leprosy is uncommon” (96). The man comes from infinity, and chooses a ruined earthly temple that is also sacred ground—humankind’s attempt to reach the infinite—ruined, so the attempt has failed. The ruined temple and the failure to reach the infinite represent the frustration of which Schopenhauer spoke. The frustration is made manifest in the discovery of the man who, once he has dreamed his “son” and imposed him upon reality, sending him to another ruined temple, finds that he, too, is the product of a dream. The only individuals in the story are imposed upon the world in the space of a temple, and the reader is left in a world where there are no real individuals, raising the question of whether the reader is real, or is the product of a dream. Borges’ prose calls into question not only our choices, but our very existence. God finds expression only in a ruined temple, and our efforts to touch the infinite are futile.

When one considers his poetry, however, one finds a Borges who delves deeper than Schopenhauer’s world as Will. Borges’ poetry suggests that, while he has not comprehended God as Supreme Being, he has not dismissed the idea either. One cannot read “Luke XXIII” without questioning such a dismissal because although Borges looks at the scene of the crucifixion from the perspective of the Good Thief, he neither questions nor denies the deity of Christ. “Luke XXIII” tells us the story of the man whom the Catholic Church regards as the first saint:

Gentile or Hebrew or simply a man  
Whose face has been lost in time

We no longer rescue from oblivion  
The silent letters of his name.

He knew only that mercy which  
A thief may know that Judea  
Nails to a cross. The time that went before  
We cannot now reach. In his final

Labor of dying crucified  
He heard, amid the mockery of the people,  
That he who was dying at his side  
Was God and he said to him blindly

Remember me when you come  
To your kingdom, and the inconceivable voice  
That will one day judge all beings  
Promised him from the terrible cross

Paradise. They said nothing more  
Until the end came, but history  
Does not allow to die the memory  
Of that afternoon on which they both died.

Oh, friends, the innocence of this friend  
Of Jesus Christ, that candor that caused him  
To ask for and to gain Paradise  
From the disgrace of punishment

Was the same that so many times flung him  
Into sin and random bloody crime. (*Palabra Virtual*, my translation)

Although I found a translation of this poem that conveys the poetic style with more eloquence, I chose to translate it more literally because Borges' words indicate, at the very least, a tacit acknowledgement of the possibility of the existence of God. The poetic translation offers in place of "God" the words "a god," which deviates from Borges' use of the Spanish "*Dios*" in the fourth line of the third stanza. The capitalized form is usually reserved for the Supreme Being, as opposed to the diminutive form "*dios*" which can indicate either. This is not to say that Borges is purporting a belief in an absolute God; his essays and fictions tell us clearly that he did not believe in such a being. His

poetry, however, expresses a sense of hope that his prose does not convey, and Borges' use of the capitalized form should not be dismissed.

That said, I wish to focus on the last seven lines of the poem, which convey that the subject of the poem is not God, but the Good Thief, and specifically his innocence or candor—one might call it audacity—which serves the dual purpose of flinging him into sin—perhaps even the shedding of blood—and causing him to ask for and attain that infinity to which Borges and his fictional characters aspire to no avail. If memory holds no record of this man, or even of his name, why is he so important? I suggest that the answer to that question lies in Borges himself. Like his alter-ego “Borges,” and like Asterion in his labyrinth, the Good Thief signifies Borges, who, though he cannot comprehend infinity nor dare to hope that he may participate in it, audaciously grapples with the infinite from the liminal, labyrinthine space of his doubt.

### Conclusion: Beyond Postcolonial

Jorge Luis Borges would not call himself a postcolonial writer. In a conversation with Borges, Donald Yates asked him about his influence on Latin American Literature, and Borges responded, “I hope Latin American literature has escaped my influence” (193-4). Since he wrote his most famous works without political spin, it is a safe assumption that his goal was not to produce postcolonial works as such. His chief objective in writing was to explore the workings of the human mind and to create aesthetic experiences for his readers that would take them on an existential journey and leave them with questions rather than answers, just as real life did for him.

Regardless of his personal goals, however, Borges did, in fact, influence Latin American literature, inspiring a new generation of writers. I contend that his writing is beyond postcolonial, because his works are not written in response to European works he considers racist, like Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* responds to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. While such works serve a real purpose and have their rightful place in the canon, the protest should not be the only avenue for the marginalized writer. Borges broke through the barriers to the canon, not by protesting, but by connecting with his audience. Each time we read a Borges story, we find something new, and it gives us pause to think about the world from a different perspective. Borges does not scream out, “I am an Argentine writer and you must acknowledge me!” Rather, he writes in a manner that merits acknowledgement. Ashcroft *et alia*, in speaking of the inability of appropriated language to convey the lived experience of marginalized peoples, claim that “in effect, all writing in South Africa is by definition a form of protest or a form of acquiescence” (83), but Borges’ writing transcends such incommensurability. The style

and world-vision of Jorge Luis Borges changed the course of Latin American prose, taking it from the political works of the earlier writers to the works of Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez, who are well-known in the United States and all over the world, and thus breaking the boundaries that isolated the works of Latin American writers. I am convinced that because of Borges, we have writers such as Ernesto Sábato, María Luisa Bombal, and Isabel Allende.

Borges has not only inspired Latin American writers, however. His influence extends to works that originate in the United States as well; in fact, his story “The Circular Ruins” inspired a 2010 blockbuster movie called *Inception*, directed by Christopher Nolan, who took the imagery of the fractal that Borges associated with levels of human consciousness and translated it to the big screen. Given this vast influence, one may hope that Borges’ works will be studied more extensively, and will inspire interest in even more Latin American writers, like Sábato and Bombal, so that their works can inspire us as well. Like his writing, the depth and scope of which offers endless possibilities, perhaps the world-vision of Jorge Luis Borges will offer new dimensions to the world of literature.

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