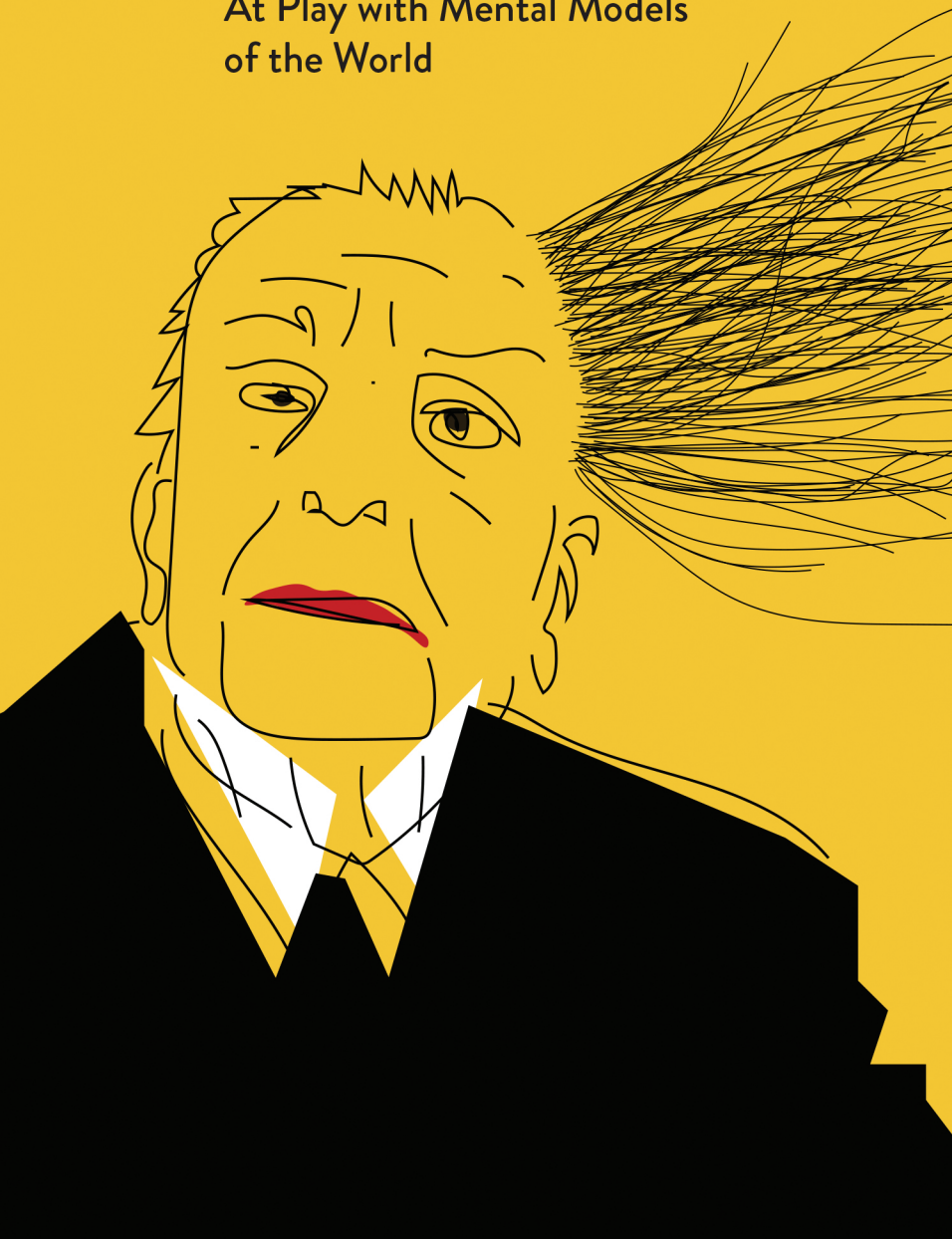


Luis O. Arata

# Jorge Luis Borges

At Play with Mental Models  
of the World





JORGE LUIS BORGES



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*Fig. 1.* Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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## Acknowledgments

This brief book is long in a history of heartfelt thanks, starting with my deep gratitude to Jorge Luis Borges for the gifts of his creations that across space and time animate these pages.

My mother instilled in me a flavor for fiction. My father unexpectedly sent me a copy of *El elogio de la sombra* when it was published in 1969 and I was a student of physics. Then Jeannette Arata de Erize gifted me a copy that Borges autographed for her of his then complete works just published in 1974.

Juan Lin inspired exciting ideas during our long talks on science, literature, philosophy, and life while we were both graduate students in physics at Stony Brook University. Then David Grossvogel, my doctoral advisor at Cornell University, trusted that I could blend a background in science, an interest in play, and research on theatre to do my PhD dissertation.

Jay Labinger, Kate Hayles, and colleagues of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts, showed me how science and literature can interact for mutual enhancement. Then the groundbreaking book *I of the Vortex* of neuroscientist Rodolfo Llinás helped me see in a new light the workings of our mind dealing with the world, with others, and with ourselves.

Laura Rosato graciously brought me to where Borges worked at the old National Library in Buenos Aires and let me carry out research there one afternoon, initiating what would eventually become these pages. Then María Kodama kindly took my questions and shared her thoughts in conversation.

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My sons Julio and Carlos prod me playfully to keep adventures going, with my wife Laurie offering always her unwavering love and encouragement.

## Prologue

To what extent does the mind shape our perception of the world? In *Living by Fiction*, Annie Dillard ponders the question and proposes metaphorically that “the mind fits the world and shapes it as a river fits and shapes its own banks.”<sup>1</sup> And since fiction is an invention of the mind, to think that it might have something to do with reality leads Dillard to ask: “Do we ever discover meaning, or do we always make it up?”<sup>2</sup> To explore answers, she often invokes Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges in how he transacts with the world through fiction. I imagine Borges would have smiled in sympathy at her travails, and nodded approvingly, for Borges did live by fiction in his own special way, as reader and writer, at play with mental models of the world.

The pages ahead explore mind–world relations through creative writings and reflections of Borges along with insights from corresponding research carried out in the field of cognition. The attention will be on models of being in the world that Borges playfully created and tinkered with over the years. Rather than offer exhaustive coverage, which would be impossibly lengthy, I focus only on a selection of Borges’s works that relate to modeling a sense of self. These texts will help illuminate features of the constructive imagination that Borges set in motion to personally blend mind and world, a venture to which, through his creative writings, he dedicated his life until the end.

1 Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction* (HarperPerennial, 1988), 15.

2 Ibid., 14.

The first two chapters of this book focus on the functions of modeling and play in mind–world interactions, and the special flavors that Borges brings to them through his writings. The remaining chapters examine an evolution of models that flow through the work of Borges from his first book to his last, which illustrate diverse ways of modeling in a broad range of conditions and which share a driving sense of curiosity. This evolution is divided into three chapters that correspond roughly to three stages of his life. One is his early period of explorations, culminating with his short stories in *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*. The second is the onset of Borges's blindness, a period of remodeling and adaptation with a recurring feel of paradise perhaps lost. The final chapter delves into what could be seen as a paradoxical paradise regained, infused with a sense of adventure emerging from hushed despair.

As much as possible, I approach Borges directly through his own words as they appear in their last iteration in *Obras completas*. In this book, quotations are given in English, although Borges wrote entirely in Spanish. It is particularly difficult to translate the work of someone like Borges, who plays with multiple meanings of words and sentences. His sense of play may get lost in translation. This is especially evident in titles found in the edition of *Selected Poems* (SP) referenced in this book. For instance, *El otro, el mismo* is translated as *The Self and the Other*. *La cifra* appears as *The Limit*. Fortunately, *Los conjurados* is not given a translation and left in Spanish. In this book, for simplicity, these three titles appear in Spanish. When possible, translated quotations are taken from the three main books of translations listed in the bibliography: *Selected Poems* (SP), *Selected Non-Fictions* (SNF), and *Collected Fictions* (CF). Where I offer my own translation, the original passage refers to the corresponding volume of *Obras completas* (OC), the collected works also listed in the bibliography.

This book is meant to be accessible to readers with a broad range of interests: readers fascinated with the interactive workings of mind and world through fictions that stimulate cognition; Borges readers of all levels and persuasions, getting started or wondering what else could emerge from his writings; curious readers, amateurs in the true sense of the word; and students and

specialists both, who wish to reflect on the cognitive values of modeling and play, in the broadest sense of these terms, with Borges as the source. Readers with a thirst for adventures that enhance the imagination may find inspiration and enjoyment ahead.



## The Art of Modeling

Jorge Luis Borges offers his view of modeling—the paradoxical need to simplify observations when sense-making—in a brief work of fiction entitled “On Exactitude of Science.”<sup>1</sup> He turns to a quite useful type of model of the world: the map. The essay tells of fastidious cartographers who aim to achieve the most precise map of an empire and ultimately succeed. Yet the map they chart with meticulous precision, coinciding point by point with every detail found in the empire, turned out to be as vast as the empire itself. Despite the total success of the enterprise, future generations deem the effort useless. Ruins of the map still dot the land. Driven by a zeal for absolute and complete accuracy, the empire’s cartographers ignored the fact that maps are functional abstractions designed to simplify a landscape with a particular purpose in mind. A road map, for instance, needs to include only the necessary information to get from point A to point B. A map of a subway does not have to respect distances if it highlights how to get from one station to another.

Could our mind engage directly with the world? Philosopher Paul Feyerabend notes, in *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being*, that the world is abundant beyond our wildest imagination. This situation limits the scope of our understanding: “only a tiny fraction of this abundance affects our minds.” Feyerabend reflects on how the mind transforms the world to seek understanding. He notes: “There is

1 Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Penguin, 1998), 325.

no escape: understanding a subject means transforming it, lifting it out of a natural habitat and inserting it into a model or a theory or a poetic account of it.”<sup>2</sup> Feyerabend observes that as we interact with the world, we simplify nature’s complexities to focus on that which helps us live. The rest is filtered out: “[W]e regard those things as real which play an important role in the kind of life we prefer.”<sup>3</sup> The reality we perceive has the inevitable personal touch—the style—of the observer, from poetry to science.

“On Exactitude of Science” illustrates the need for abstraction in constructing models, maps in this case. By necessity, disciplines develop idiosyncratic methods of representation that are of use in carrying out their specific tasks. These representations may be called models. Perhaps the simplest model is the exemplar, something used to indicate a simple and obvious quality. This would be, for instance, a person or a landscape that an artist selects to use as inspiration for representation. The most demanding models may well be scientific theories, since such models tend to make exclusive claims about realities they propose to represent.

Borges touches on the topic of representation in a creative essay entitled “The Postulation of Reality.” The title suggests that reality, in a deep, absolute sense, is not discovered but postulated or assumed. The implication is that to perceive something as real is already to select and to omit from what is perceived, as well as to accept that perhaps there is something to this examined reality that escapes our senses. To act on reality, we make assumptions and simplifications that suit our purposes, much like Euclidean geometry relies on postulates and hypotheses to create a system useful for mappings that can be shared. Geometry is a simplification of reality, yet a most useful one for constructive purposes. Borges notes: “The very fact of perceiving, of paying attention, is selective; all attention, all focusing of our consciousness involves a deliberate omission of what is not interesting.”<sup>4</sup> This suggests

2 Paul Feyerabend, *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being*, ed. Bert Terpstra (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 12.

3 Ibid., 71.

4 Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans.

that what we consider of interest tends to guide our simplifications of a reality in which we act. Borges adds that our interests are necessarily associated with our memories and feelings: “We see and hear through memories, fears, expectations.”<sup>5</sup>

Psychologist Philip Johnson-Laird notes that modeling extends to our thought process. He describes in *Mental Models: Towards a Cognitive Science of Language, Inference, and Consciousness* how thinking can be envisioned as the manipulation of internal representations of the world: “[H]uman beings understand the world by constructing working models of it in their minds.” He adds that, “since these models are incomplete, they are simpler than the entities they represent.”<sup>6</sup> Johnson-Laird sets out to investigate the nature of mental models, particularly how they lead to intentionality and self-awareness. He observes that mind and world interact through models that the mind constructs of the world. The function of mental models is to abstract from the world what is of use to engage in reasoning. We create models that filter and organize what we retain to construct our sense of reality and mediate our views of the world: “[Y]ou may say that you perceive the world directly, but in fact what you experience depends on your model of the world.”<sup>7</sup> We reason by fashioning models that allow us to perceive meaningful patterns and connections in our environment. Such representations blend aspects of both the observer and the observed. Based on these perceptions and their representations, we make choices and act in the world: “[S]uch representations can then be used in much the same way that a navigator uses a map to avoid danger and to reach a desired destination.”<sup>8</sup> Representation in modeling can be of any sort that serves to express, signify, or enact the purposes, desires, or visions of the modeler.

Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (Penguin, 1999), 61, henceforth SNF.

5 Ibid.

6 Philip N. Johnson-Laird, *Mental Models: Towards a Cognitive Science of Language, Inference, and Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 10.

7 Ibid., 402.

8 Ibid.

One component of mental models is that they organize our prior knowledge. Philosopher Thomas Metzinger, in *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*, notes that the past forms a context that helps us filter what we face in the present: “[T]he immediate past continuously creates a context for the present—it filters what can be experienced right now.”<sup>9</sup> Prior knowledge is one component that goes into the making of the models which present our realities to ourselves. He remarks, “a world-model active in the brain is transparent if the brain has no chance of discovering that it is a model.”<sup>10</sup> The filtering and modeling of realities in the perceived world go unnoticed so we may function. They feel as though our representation of the world is “as it is,” not “as we see it.”

In the poem “Break of Day,” Borges notes that the world as we perceive it may have no meaning or purpose beyond the ones our minds give it: “I recall the dreadful conjecture of Schopenhauer and Berkeley / which declares that the world / is a mental activity, / a dream of souls, / without foundation, purpose, weight or shape.”<sup>11</sup> The mind is a participant observer of a reality outside of itself. Perceptions affect the mind that mediates our existence in the world. And the mind simplifies perceptions of the world depending on our preferences and activities, and to help realize our intentions. Borges is aware of the “dreadful conjecture” that a model of the world with purpose and foundations is perhaps a product of the mind. We cannot deny that a world exists and that we are in it, but what we perceive are simulations of that reality “out there” in ways that we can somehow understand, so we may be able to exist in it.

The next step in the development of such a model of the world is to create a sense of self. For Borges that would be like a mirror where the mind perceives itself personified, a sort of avatar placed in our mind’s simulations of reality so that we can act in the world. Paradoxically, Borges proposes in one of his

9 Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (Basic Books, 2009), 31.

10 Ibid., 41.

11 Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman, trans. Willis Barnstone et al. (Penguin, 1999), 23.

earliest creative essays, barely over six pages long, entitled “The Nothingness of Personality,” that the self does not exist. He repeats four times at the start of different paragraphs, “There is no whole self,” populating the essay with examples from readings and experiences to support his claim. Then he changes the pattern to: “The self does not exist,” and finishes repeating one last time: “There is no whole self,” echoing this insistent conviction (SNF, 3–9). Borges does not deny our consciousness of being and the security of feeling that we are here, now. What he claims to deny is the duality or antithesis between self and non-self. He argues that the sense of self is fluid and complex. He recalls a sensation he had one time that “beyond the episodic, the present, the circumstantial, we were nobody” (SNF, 6). He concludes with a reference to Arthur Schopenhauer’s opinion “that the self is a point whose immobility is useful for discerning, by contrast, the heavy-laden flight of time” (SNF, 9). The self, for Borges, is an applied construction of the mind rather than a fixed, independent entity in the mind.

We turn now to neuroscientist Rodolfo Llinás, who offers in *I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self* a general understanding of how modeling and the sense of self work in human behavior. The book’s title conveys the idea that Llinás develops of a sense of self that is in flux, like a vortex. This circulation creates in our mind a ghostly presence that seems to resonate with the diffuse self that Borges envisions in “The Nothingness of Personality.”

Llinás proposes that modeling, a characteristic of mobile creatures, is associated with the development of a nervous system centralized in a brain to coordinate motion more effectively: “[T]he brain’s control of organized movement gave birth to the generation and nature of the mind.”<sup>12</sup> Plants do not require such a strategic nervous system. They achieve all their life functions in place. They do not need a brain since their existence is sedentary. Llinás gives the example of the sea squirt, a mobile sea creature at first, much like a tadpole. It has a ganglion-like brain linked to a nervous system. The sea squirt swims until it eventually attaches itself to a suitable fixed surface. From then on, it enters a veg-

12 Rodolfo R. Llinás, *I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self* (MIT Press, 2001), 50.

etative phase that no longer requires motion. At that point, the sea squirt metamorphoses. It digests its brain-like ganglion and centralized nervous system, transforming essentially into a plant for the rest of its life. Llinás draws from the example of the sea squirt's transfiguration the sense that the brain enables mobility by centralizing sensory information that helps control motions in a purposeful way: "[T]his allows a creature to move actively in a direction according to an internal reckoning—a transient sensorimotor image—of what may be outside."<sup>13</sup> When the sea squirt stops propelling itself, the brain is no longer needed.

Llinás proposes that the sense of self and mind evolved in mobile creatures from the need to predict and guide interactions: "[S]elf is the centralization of prediction." He adds that the feeling of having a self, a mind, hinges on a loop of interactive reflexivity, noting that "the self is not born out of a realm of consciousness, only the noticing of it is (i.e., self-awareness)."<sup>14</sup> The centralized nervous system of mobile creatures acts as an organizer that weaves together internal and external information to create models that help to map, predict, and plan actions in order to navigate as safely as possible and try to satisfy needs. A sense of self functions within this guiding system as a locator of the creature's own position in the mental models generated of the environment in which motion happens.

Humans extend the use of modeling in creative ways, above and beyond the function of physical navigation. We engage in mind navigation as well. The mind uses models to achieve better understanding of situations and environments. Llinás notes that for us humans, modeling leads to the startling conclusion that our waking life is a dream guided by the senses. He writes: "We are basically dreaming machines that construct virtual models of the real world."<sup>15</sup> Such dreams are models that we create and modify continuously to filter and make sense of the environment based on what we wish to do. These virtual models simplify the world to allow us to act more effectively. For us they go beyond survival and extend into the artistic and metaphysical. The virtual models

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 94.

we create are like dreams. Their reality, so to speak, depends on whether those dreams allow us to live as desired.

*I of the Vortex* was published in 2001. In 2003 its Spanish translation appeared. This version contains an opening prologue from a novelist friend of Llinás, the fellow Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, who noted that the two of them had often talked about the nature of the thought process and the experience of consciousness. He compared Llinás's view with that of Spanish dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca. Both address what García Márquez calls the rational miracle of dreaming with open eyes. It is fitting that he evokes Calderón de la Barca's play *Life Is a Dream* to characterize the nature of the self as a directed dream, as Llinás also envisions, based on his studies in neuroscience. In a similar vein, Borges writes in the preface to *El informe de Brodie*: "Literature is nothing but a directed dream."<sup>16</sup>

The mind operates on the world through fabrication and simulation. Fabrication hinges on how the mind selects materials from the environment, and with them builds models that help simulate chosen aspects abstracted from the world. The illumination provided may be personal, exemplar, a version of reality of sorts from the creations of an inquisitive and creative observer. In models, assumptions and objectives play formative roles. Observed aspects of the world are selected and translated in mindful ways into the language of a discipline or endeavor, in a pertinent style, assuming there is a desired level of correspondence between the two. Those components are crafted into a system that represents the subject matter in some satisfactory way so as to perform expected tasks: "[A] model is a mediator between reality and imagination that enables the performance of tasks according to preferences."<sup>17</sup>

Models may look like theories, but they make no claims to exclusivity, as theories tend to do. There can be multiple models of a given aspect of the world, fashioned out of different assumptions that seem appropriate for the occasion, offering different fits from which to choose based on preferences. Some models

16 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, vol. II (Sudamericana, 2011), 428.

17 Luis O. Arata, "A Unified View of Models," *Leonardo* 44, no. 3 (2011): 282.

turn out to be more useful than others when it comes to helping perform desired tasks. Models hinge on assumptions, postulates, and axioms, as well as desires, objectives, and goals that the model is expected to perform or tailored to fit. This is an imperfection that makes models dependent on point of view, on personal preferences, on subjective factors. What may matter most is how well they illuminate the domain on which they focus, and how well they function to achieve desired results.

As a writer, Borges travels through a world being turned into words, keenly aware of the gulf that separates words from what they seek to represent or evoke. In an early essay entitled "A Profession of Literary Faith," a young Borges states as he begins his literary voyages: "I believe words must be conquered, lived, and that the apparent publicity they receive from the dictionary is a falsehood" (SNF, 26). Over the years, Borges will soften in his feelings for the shared meaning of words that makes communication possible, but he remains aware that words offer openings, not absolutes.

Borges adds, using a touch of modeling language: "My postulate is that all literature, in the end, is autobiographical" (SNF, 23). He navigates texts that others rendered and brings his personal view into the mix. He transfigures experiences into narratives following his inclinations, offering views of collective realities with a voice that is deeply his as well as shared, through language and themes that resonate with the reader. This is not veiled memoir. For Borges, the autobiographical comes from inserting personal preferences in interactions with what appears to be outside of one's own sense of self. Borges experiences the autobiographical element in writing as intersubjective. There is not an overt desire for self-representation; it is rather that Borges senses he cannot take himself out of his writings, out of his responses to others and to the world. What Borges means by "autobiographical" is that deep down, literature is profoundly personal in ways that become the veiled author's signature, a style made of preferences, assumptions, and desires. Yet this sense of personal perspective is not relativism either. Not everything goes. There is a world with a mind of its own, so to speak, with patterns that resist our will. There is also the craft of writing, the limitations and opportunities of storytelling, the fuzzy boundaries of language. In model-

ing, we cannot take ourselves out of the world-pictures we create. The observer inevitably interacts with the observed in ways that range from interpretation to affecting what is observed.

One of Borges's main writing tools is the metaphor: "Any metaphor, as beguiling as it may be, is a possible experience, and the difficulty lies not in its invention [...] but in achieving it in a way that astonishes the reader" (SNF, 24). Nearly sixty years later, Borges writes in "The Islands of Tigre" of a duty he imagines that writers share beyond merely trying to startle the reader. It is certainly one he has come to feel deeply, "the mysterious duty of searching out metaphors, adjectives and verbs for everything in the world."<sup>18</sup> Borges considers that the metaphor is among the most basic instruments of a writer to engage in discovery, to detect hidden, unnoticed relations among the things of the world.

In fiction, metaphors are the most abundant type of models used. A metaphor can be seen as a compact, simple model made with words. Philosopher Max Black remarks in *Models and Metaphors* that metaphors propose that two separate realms share a likeness bordering on identity. The two are distinct, yet the metaphor connects them and gets them to interrelate. This is what he calls the "interaction" view of metaphors.<sup>19</sup> Black argues that a rich metaphor is more than a substitution of one term for another, or a comparison of two terms. He notes that in an effective or nontrivial metaphor, the two terms brought together become connected in a dynamic way, which seems secret and mysterious. The fusion of realms that a metaphor achieves could be unpacked in various ways through lengthy expositions, but that would reduce the interactive richness of the metaphor, which is the source of its mysterious nature. At the same time, a metaphor acts as a filter in how it simplifies, by selecting only certain aspects of the realities of the two terms connected, and what they seem to suggest. Yet the dynamic nature of their interaction appears to conjure a new reality. The function of a metaphor is

18 Jorge Luis Borges and María Kodama, *Atlas*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Dutton, 1985), 64.

19 Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 1962), 38.

to surprise and challenge the imagination with the suggestion of striking relations not perceived before.

What becomes of metaphors when they go beyond linking two terms and grow into a web of interrelated concepts? Black proposes that when metaphoric systems become elaborate, they can be seen as linguistic models. Models expand the reach of metaphors. He notes that a model is a “sustained and systematic metaphor.”<sup>20</sup> A linguistic model is, at heart, an extended metaphor. Conversely, a metaphor is a compact model.

The mind uses models and metaphors both to simplify and to seek deeper understanding of a situation, an environment, an intuition. They exude a fuzzy flavor of truth. Linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson note in *Metaphors We Live By* that the ability to comprehend experiences linguistically is done using metaphors, as if it were a sense, like seeing or touching or hearing. When language is the medium, metaphors act like simple models. They serve to provide some understanding of aspects of concepts and experiences expressed through words. Lakoff and Johnson write: “Metaphors are basically devices for understanding and have little to do with objective reality, if there is such a thing.”<sup>21</sup> Metaphors help us navigate in our minds through areas that are beyond our present knowledge; they are central to the mental modeling that, according to Llinás, helps mobile creatures move. Metaphors help us navigate, mentally and physically, through thoughts and information.

As we explored before in the essay “The Postulation of Reality,” Borges agrees with the notion that objective reality might not exist as such, as something that is wholly external and independent of our perceptions. Perhaps the simplest reason is that we cannot know what we do not, in some way, perceive. An absolute reality beyond our senses has to be postulated or assumed. What we discover happens through the mediation of our senses or our instruments. It is always mediated, and that mediation introduces inevitably the restrictions of a point of view, of models, of prior knowledge. Lakoff and Johnson

20 Ibid., 236.

21 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 184.

observe: "Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally."<sup>22</sup> To understand something, we need to interact with that which we wish to understand. Our interactions with the unknown are mediated by models and metaphors. "Metaphor is a matter of *imaginative rationality*. It permits an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another."<sup>23</sup> Lakoff and Johnson reach a conclusion dear to Borges: "We live our lives on the basis of inferences we derive via metaphor."<sup>24</sup>

To exemplify the functioning of models and metaphors, we can turn to the essay "Pascal's Sphere," since it illuminates Borges's engagement with metaphors. The first sentence of the essay is startling: "Perhaps universal history is the history of a few metaphors." By way of introduction to the piece, Borges then declares: "To outline a chapter of that history is the purpose of this note" (SNF, 351). The chapter in this suggested history concerns a legendary metaphor of God that has had a surprising evolution through time. The proposed chapter begins with a reference to a metaphor presented by Xenophanes of Colophon: in his view, God is like an eternal sphere. Rather than two components, this metaphor has three: the divine, eternity, and the sphere. The mystery of the divine is linked to the enigma of eternity. At the same time, the divine is cleansed of anthropomorphic qualities and rendered in the abstract shape of a sphere, an object often imagined as the most perfect geometric figure in three dimensions. The essay goes on to trace the evolution of this initial metaphor until the arrival of the Renaissance, when the term "eternal" is replaced by a more accessible one to the imagination: "intelligible." Later, François Rabelais changes the term further, to "intellectual." Borges then notes that with advances in astronomy, the universe is rendered as a sphere, from Ptolemy to Copernicus. Giordano Bruno borrows the model of God as a sphere and changes it to suit astronomy. He writes: "We can state with certainty that the universe is all center, or that the center of the universe is everywhere and the circumference nowhere"

22 Ibid., 193.

23 Ibid., 235. Emphasis in original.

24 Ibid., 273.

(SNF, 352). By the time we get to the genial mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, a deep sense of the mismeasure of humanity is emerging. We are vanishing beings caught between the infinitesimally small microworld and the infinitely big universe. A profound believer in God, Pascal equated nature with the divine and proposed: "Nature is an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere" (SNF, 353). Borges proposes that this metaphor reflects Pascal's sense of dread as a human facing an incomprehensible universe: "He hated the universe and yearned to adore God, but God was less real to him than the hated universe." To stress this view, Borges notes that in a critical edition of Pascal's thoughts containing this metaphor, the original word was not "infinite" but rather *effroyable*: "frightening." Borges concludes with a modification of the initial sentence of the essay, inserting four new words that here I render in italics to highlight them: "Perhaps universal history is the history of *the various intonations* of a few metaphors." In Pascal, the shift of intonation is the hidden sense of fright when he first writes "frightening sphere" and then changes it to "infinite sphere."

Borges playfully suggests that alterations made over time to the initial metaphor of Xenophanes of Colophon reflect the historical progress of human understanding of the divine. This progress in turn traces the deep history of the evolution of human knowledge. And, in turn, new knowledge affects events in human affairs. So, this simplification of universal history as the story of a fundamental metaphor is itself a main driver of that history, which is what Borges intends to show in the first place. In its own tangential way, "Pascal's Sphere" happens to illustrate the transformation of a metaphor into a model, with a surprising twist introduced by Borges in the end. The essay has the tautological flavor of a mathematical proof.

There is a further twist in the essay, hidden to the reader's view, perhaps a playful touch on the part of Borges. The metaphor of the sphere itself was not frightening to Pascal. As a mathematician he admired the sphere for its perfect geometrical shape and used it as a metaphor of the divine in its endless beauty. Frightening was the mismeasure of humanity in nature's infiniteness, where we hover like a speck of dust lost somewhere between

an impossible center appearing everywhere and a circumference that is nowhere. What Borges left out to achieve the splendid circular nature of his essay is that Pascal had written and crossed out, along with *eff* (which suggests *effroyable*), the full term *étonnante*: “stunning.” The intonation Pascal intended for his metaphor was not “frightening,” but an uplifting “stunning.”<sup>25</sup> Nature, in the image of God, is a stunning infinite sphere. With a subtle change of intonation to mark the absence of the divine, Borges shifted the metaphor of the sphere to his narrative liking, from one of beauty to a feeling of inevitable fright for the human mind.

For Borges, models and metaphors affect mostly our sensibility, our sense of self. They offer occasions to be surprised, to be astonished, and to reflect. From just about the start of his writings, Borges senses that fiction, in its interactive capacity to stir the mind, illuminates the world for us. Our words may conjure the world for us.

25 Luis O. Arata, “Borges on Pascal’s Sphere,” *Variaciones Borges* 50 (2020): 198.



## A Penchant for Play

Inevitably, our mental models do not coincide precisely with what they intend to represent. This mismatch results in imprecisions, much as words may imply more and less than what they are expected to indicate. Lack of precision is not lamentable in this context; rather, it offers leeway that may invite multiple viable ways to fashion desired models for an intended purpose.

Returning to the central paragraph of the essay “The Postulation of Reality,” Borges proposes that leeway in representation is enabling for literature: “I would recommend this hypothesis: imprecision is tolerable or plausible in literature because we almost always tend toward it in reality.”<sup>1</sup> The imprecision that Borges highlights in literature reflects our interactions with reality. Echoing this thought, and from a scientist’s perspective, Nobel laureate in Medicine Rita Levi-Montalcini notes in her memoir *In Praise of Imperfection*: “The fact that the activities that I have carried out in such imperfect ways have been and still are for me a source of inexhaustible joy, leads me to believe that imperfection, rather than perfection, in the execution of our assigned or elected tasks is more in keeping with human nature.”<sup>2</sup>

Our perceptions have an inevitable lack of precision. Our capacities to plan, to know, to interact, come short of exactitude.

- 1 Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (Penguin, 1999), 61, henceforth SNF.
- 2 Rita Levi-Montalcini, *In Praise of Imperfection: My Life and Work*, trans. Luigi Attardi (Basic Books, 1988), 5.

This leeway opens the way to play. It can emerge in the form of personal variations in interpretation and expression. Imperfect or incomplete information gives room to play, to juggle possible options to follow. In the case of literature, such leeway invites multiple acts of representation of a topic, many ways to picture a subject. Faced with life's unending complexities and relentless changes, play affords us the flexibility to try out different approaches to such challenges, which opens the way to unexpected discoveries and perhaps more satisfactory outcomes.

Borges concludes in "The Postulation of Reality" that, "for us, living is a series of adaptations, which is to say, an education in oblivion" (SNF 61). He leaps back from literature to life and links imprecision to adaptation by suggesting that it helps us adapt to changes we perceive. Faced with variations in our lives, we may try different ways to navigate through changes. To facilitate adaptations, as we wander along zones uncharted in our minds, Borges takes a paradoxical leap to propose that adaptation in life hinges on learning to forget. Adapting to a new situation benefits from shelving memories, traditions, habits, and unconscious expectations that might hinder the process of trying out other ways to address the situation as we search for satisfactory outcomes. This decoupling from a strict adherence to the past enhances our flexibility to deal with surprising changes.

To appreciate relations between adaptation and play, we turn to Jean Piaget, who observed that play is a necessary component of adaptation, along with imitation. In *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, Piaget suggests that play is an extreme form of assimilation.<sup>3</sup> The other component of adaptation is accommodation. Its extreme form is imitation. In the process of adaptation, our cognitive schemas readjust, with guidance from the circumstances to which we seek to adapt. Piaget places play and imitation at opposite ends of the spectrum of adaptation. Adaptation happens through a blend of accommodation to a novel situation as well as assimilation of parts of that situation. In accommodation, our mental schemas adapt by trying to imitate aspects of the new situation. In assimilation, the new situa-

3 Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, trans. C. Gattegno and F.M. Hodgson (W.W. Norton, 1962), 91.

tion is toyed with so that it is reshaped in trying to make it adapt to our mental schemes. Borges thinks that education in oblivion is part of this adaptive process. Learning how to forget aspects of our mental schemas yields measured flexibility that facilitates adaptation.

We can now take the adaptive model that Piaget derived from childhood behavior and extend it to activities happening later in life. It is reasonable to assume that our models do not change significantly in form as we mature. What may change is the balance of imitation and play, perhaps tilting more towards imitation, which is the classical view of education. But play continues, taking on different manifestations. For instance, we may become more interested in games. In games, play is allowed to happen in a focused way, within preconceived rules. Johan Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, offers an overarching analysis of what we can understand as play in adult life. Adult play may be less freewheeling than child's play, and may be more subdued by a desire to follow the established rules of games associated with a reality to which the player wishes to adapt. The relationship between the game of chess and the art of war is a good example.

Huizinga wrote his study out of a growing conviction, stated in his foreword, that "civilization arises and unfolds in and as play."<sup>4</sup> He proceeds to explore the play element in a motley range of human activities such as law, war, knowing, poetry, philosophy, and art, at their initial stages of development. Huizinga argues that the play element persists to different degrees as these activities unfold in contemporary civilization. He explains such persistence in these terms: "The play-concept as such is of a higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness."<sup>5</sup> The extent to which it is possible, for example, to feel and be playful about our differences and identities, is a good index of our wisdom. Huizinga's argument resonates powerfully with Borges. During an interview published in 1971, Borges notes: "In my stories I

4 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Beacon Press, 1955), ix.

5 Ibid., 45.

have always mixed metaphysics and dogmas with apocryphal facts, farce with reality, not to mention that I have always joked a little!"<sup>6</sup> To what extent can we take such paradoxical commentary about his own work seriously? Borges may offer a simple answer in "Questionario Proust." Asked what quality he prefers in people, he replies: "[N]ot to take oneself too seriously."<sup>7</sup>

Not to take Borges too seriously, as he himself playfully proposes with a smile, opens to the reader a wider field of interaction and understanding that invites play from a personal perspective. Just as Borges considered himself to be a reader first and a writer second, his reader is invited to practice creative reading as well with writings that are enriching playgrounds for the imagination.

Borges writes in the Prologue to *Inquisiciones*: "I don't know if there is literature, but I know that to shuffle such possible discipline is an urgency of my being."<sup>8</sup> The term that Borges uses for shuffling is *barajar*, which refers directly to shuffling cards. To shuffle playing cards becomes, in Borges, a metaphor that imbues the reading of literature with paradoxicality. Borges turns reading into a game to play: to shuffle literature as if it were a collection of pieces to build new, surprising things. To shuffle cards is to augment disorder and uncertainty in the game that is about to be played. The metaphor reinforces his praise of imprecision in literature as reflective of reality. And to heighten the metaphor's impact, Borges adds that this action of *barajar* carries profound urgency.

Already in his first book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Borges includes a brief poem about an iconic card game played in Argentina: *el truco*. Then five years later, in *El idioma de los Argentinos*, he includes an essay on the card game. He writes in "Truco" that playing this card game enacts fundamental questions about existence: "Thus, from the painted cardboard labyrinths of Truco, we have approached metaphysics: the sole

6 Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos recobrados*, vol. 3: 1956–1986 (Sudamericana, 2011), 300.

7 Ibid., 307.

8 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, vol. I (Sudamericana, 2011), 61, henceforth OC I.

justification and purpose of all subjects” (OC I, 276). Daniel Balderston quoted from this poem in an epigraph to an article on Borges and games.<sup>9</sup> Balderston connects how Borges writes to the ways of playing described in a groundbreaking book on economics, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern. Games allow explorations of indeterminacy in economics. They push beyond deterministic models, attempting to introduce unpredictability in this highly complex field. The use of specific game models offers a broader understanding of the field as it seeks to include the unpredictability of human factors in equations that before relied on the assumption of perfect rationality. Balderston argues in his article that Borges turns to games in a similar way to explore intractable areas of human experience through literary expression. Models and games help us think in lively and creative ways; if we look to them for absolute predictive power, we are likely to be disappointed.

In one of his final books, *La cifra*, Borges includes another brief poem about play and games. The poem is entitled “Go,” about the ancient board game of strategy. He envisions Go as an astrological game whose board is a map of the universe where white and black stones exhaust time and people can get lost, just as they might lose themselves in love, or in the course of the day.<sup>10</sup> Metaphorically, Borges pictures the games of Truco and Go as models of the fabric of time and life. Borges also lists Hermann Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game* among the hundred books of his personal library.<sup>11</sup> He sees the game as an extended metaphor of the art of musical composition, and wishes that Hesse had developed further the intricacies of a universal game that blended all human forms of expression and knowledge. A Glass Bead player wins by combining in new, surprising ways elements from dif-

9 Daniel Balderston, “The Theory of Games and Genetic Criticism: On the Manuscript of *La Lotería en Babilonia*,” *Variaciones Borges* 36 (2013): 155.

10 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, vol. III (Sudamericana, 2011), 361, henceforth OC III.

11 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, vol. IV (Sudamericana, 2011), 491, henceforth OC IV.

ferent disciplines. The novel tells how, over time, the game becomes entrenched in its own hierarchies, and the possibility of playing it in ways that go beyond its own rules, to find new ways to recombine but also go beyond traditions, is correspondingly diminished. Games are often initially playful, but it is not unusual that they lose their lightness and agility, and turn into inflexible competition within entrenched traditions.

The Glass Bead Game may have lost its playfulness over time, but Borges did not. He remained playful in his work to the end. Borges notes this along the way, as in his second prologue to *Historia universal de la infamia*, where he reflects that his book emerged from the “irresponsible game of a timid man who did not dare to write stories and who distracted himself in falsifying and distorting (without aesthetic justification at times) other people’s stories” (OC I, 573). And he concludes: “The man who executed it was very unhappy, but he entertained himself by writing it; may some reflection of that pleasure reach the readers” (OC I, 574). In the foreword to *The Garden of Forking Paths* he comments on his style of playing. Rather than composing vast books whose core ideas may be said in a few minutes, he prefers to “pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them.” Then he muses: “A more reasonable, more inept, and more lazy man, I have chosen to write notes on *imaginary* books.”<sup>12</sup> Borges insists he is a reader first, then a writer, happy to attribute ideas to others. He is a tinkerer of cherished texts, a bricoleur who plays with his favorite passages of books. The library is his playground. In “Poem of the Gifts” he tells of imagining paradise as a type of library.<sup>13</sup> Playing is a cognitive mode for Borges, as he assimilates texts and ideas from others without quite committing to any. His eclectic sense of reading infuses his writing with its own flavor of play.

Laura Rosato and Germán Álvarez note, in *Borges, libros y lecturas*, that Borges was not a disciplined, linear reader. The way he read did not respond to the logical order proposed in a book

12 Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Penguin, 1998), 67.

13 Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman, trans. Willis Barnstone et al. (Penguin, 1999), 95.

but to his personal curiosity. His reading was a process of mental associations unruléd by the will of the text, of the author. Borges searched for recurrences, similarities, and connections among his readings. Rosato and Álvarez observe that Borges would avoid sequential readings of entire books. Instead, he would focus on specific topics, or randomly select pages. This resulted in a flexible, fluid way of reading.<sup>14</sup> Balderston researched Borges's methods of writing and notes in *How Borges Wrote* "how important the concept of the open text was to Borges, and the ways in which his manuscripts show him working out a poetics of uncertainty, incompleteness, possibility."<sup>15</sup> He observes: "Borges [...] wrote by a painstaking process of putting out many possibilities, selecting from them, then rewriting from those. There were usually no outlines or prior plans."<sup>16</sup> Balderston concludes: "Uncertainty, pullulation, possibility: for Borges the tentative, the fragmentary, the marginal are at the very center of his aesthetics."<sup>17</sup>

From fragments of readings, Borges fashions models of what interests him, and multiplies these models with variations as his views alter. Modeling is for him a fantastic type of play, especially when it involves metaphors. Borges remarks that when life amazes us, we create metaphors almost instinctively to express in our own terms what we experience (OC I, 289). The excesses of linguistic metaphors resonate with our desire to connect with what happens behind, beyond, and in between words. He is particularly interested the nature of the *kenning* found in Old Norse and Old English poetry, and devotes an essay to this topic, "The *kenningar*," in *History of Eternity*. A kenning is a compound term made of two dissimilar words joined to bring out a richer meaning in the word they metaphorically replace. For instance, "stallion of the waves" was used instead of the word "ship" (OC I, 662). The substitution is a compact metaphor. It accentuates

14 Laura Rosato and Germán Álvarez, *Borges, libros y lecturas: Catálogo de la colección Jorge Luis Borges en la Biblioteca Nacional* (Ediciones Biblioteca Nacional, 2010), 30–35.

15 Daniel Balderston, *How Borges Wrote* (University of Virginia Press, 2018), 20.

16 Ibid., 211.

17 Ibid., 214.

the swiftness and vigor of a ship at sea, and conveys a sense of adventure, boldness, and confidence. At the same time, this kenning transforms the ship into a mythical creature with enhanced attributes that extend the meaning of the word replaced. Borges notes that a kenning defines objects in a functional way. The kenning animates the object. To replace a kenning by what it signifies is to dull the object, to empty it of beauty and poetry. Borges sees in the vocabulary of these elementary metaphors a way for poetry to find a soul in things, so to speak, and to render the world more human, filled with wonder and adventure. Where otherwise there would be a ship, now we see a heroic entity interacting with the human world. These special metaphors are like tiny, animistic models that envision the interactions of objects and people as they become poetically connected. Borges believes that creating metaphors makes us feel as boundless as the world (OC I, 289).

Borges is like a wanderer, a *flâneur*, as Sylvia Molloy has argued in her essay “*Flâneries textuales: Borges, Benjamin y Baudelaire.*”<sup>18</sup> In Borges, being a “*flâneur*” is another form of play, in this case strolling through landscapes without a clear sense of trajectory, letting the environment set the course. She compares his love of wandering along the streets of Buenos Aires to a similar mood expressed by the poet Charles Baudelaire in his prose poem “*Les fenêtres.*” Baudelaire writes of roaming at night along city streets, gazing at lit windows for signs of life that might inspire different narratives to help him feel that he is what he is. The poet imagines such stories as he ambles along. This aimless strolling found in Borges and Baudelaire is another form of play that comes from not following preselected paths, a type of free play open to surprising possibilities that the wanderer may encounter and might otherwise have ignored. For Borges, the purpose is similar: to stroll and feel the world through the mediation of models he constructs in his mind to help him feel that he is what he is, in a fluid sense, as he plays with the stuff of the world and shapes it interactively.

18 Sylvia Molloy, “*Flâneries textuales: Borges, Benjamin y Baudelaire,*” *Variaciones Borges* 8 (1999): 16–29.

There is an overarching coherence in how Borges plays. He tinkers with books, landscapes, and histories, to assimilate what then emerges in his writings with an evolving feel of surprise that becomes his signature. He enacts playful approaches to explore puzzling aspects of our inner senses, through the development of multiple models of similar issues in different contexts, rather than pursue a self-consistent trajectory. He prefers to assemble in his writing the stuff of his investigations rather than accommodate to external models. This may have been, for Borges, the best way to portray an ultimately unknowable world of complex, changeable phenomena. Readers may be as puzzled as he is by what he explores. In Borges's final book *Los conjurados*, in his poem "Sherlock Holmes," readers' memories of Arthur Conan Doyle's character confer on him a fictive immortality. Towards the end of the poem, Borges shifts away from his poem's protagonist to write: "Before [death] reaches us, let's play with the mud / of being for a while, of being and have been" (OC III, 514). The verses suggest that for Borges, the most basic materials he likes to play with consist of the mysteries of the sense of self, possibly also an enduring fiction, as we will explore in the chapters ahead. Being in time is plastic. In one of the last poems of this book, "Todos los ayeres un sueño," Borges offers this final variation on play and modeling: "The past is clay that the present molds as it pleases. Endlessly" (OC III, 533).



## What Model Might I Be?

Borges notes in the 1969 prologue to a new edition of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, his first book published almost half a century earlier, that it foreshadows all that he wrote later. If we take Borges at his word, poems in the book may sketch the initial strokes of models he will continue to refashion throughout his later work.

We will start by examining these elements and how they may contribute to elaborations of a sense of self. A concern repeated in poems scattered throughout *Fervor de Buenos Aires* is a sense of personal death foretold. Borges foresees his remains entombed in Buenos Aires. In the poem “Recoleta Cemetery,” he wanders among crypts pondering “souls dispersed into other souls.” Borges associates death with a paradoxical, personal sense of attachment to the nature of space and time. He writes that life’s forms “are space and time, / they are the magic instruments of the soul, and when it is extinguished / space, time, and death will be extinguished with it.” Space and time are essential to life. They vanish in death. He remarks: “I thought of these things in the Recoleta, / the place of my ashes.”<sup>1</sup>

Later, in the poem “Year’s End,” Borges writes that he has a “murky pervasive suspicion of the enigma of Time,” with a capital *T*. The suspicion is that something in us will endure after death: “It is our awe at the miracle / that, though the chances are infinite / and though we are / drops in Heraclitus’ river, / allows something in us to endure, / never moving” (SP, 19). And later,

1 Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman, trans. Willis Barnstone et al. (Penguin, 1999), 7, henceforth SP.

in the 1969 version of this poem, Borges adds a new final verse, to suggest that what endures, rather than a sense of self, is something that did not find what it was after.<sup>2</sup> What endures after death, he reflects, is an unfulfilled desire rather than a soul-like entity.

The book's closing poem, playfully entitled "Lines That I Could Have Written and Lost Around 1922," spins a selection of disparate elements that form what Borges suspects might suggest who he is. The list ranges from the dawns that start his days to the nights with moonlit tombstones that remind of what he will become. Verses swing from the image of a sphinx in a book that he fears opening to the battles of his ancestors, the Saxons, Arabs, and Goths. At the end of the list, Borges wonders if he is the sum of all such things or if they are secret keys to that which we will never know (OC I, 57; trans. in SP, 31). Such puzzling overflow of incongruent components portrays a motley quest among divergent paths through the mysteries of what might make us what we are. Perhaps the self is just what asks these questions, what desires understanding but never knows for certain. This is a voyage through words, fragments of readings, and narratives, which Borges will continue in books to come.

Five years after the publication of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Borges writes in the prologue to *El idioma de los Argentinos* that his concerns as a writer can be grouped into three cardinal directions: language, eternity, and Buenos Aires. Language is his basic tool of inquiry. He gives it a baroque flair in attempts to voice his personal perceptions of being and nothingness. Buenos Aires becomes mythical, to act as a center of gravity for his sense of self. The idea of eternity becomes a possible attribute of a vague sensation of enduring through time, of timelessness. In the prologue to *El idioma de los Argentinos*, Borges notes that three directions appear in the short narrative "Feeling in Death," included among the book's essays (OC I, 263). After dusk, on a deserted street in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Borges suddenly has the sensation of being a detached, abstract observer of the world, as if lifted out of space, while time stops its flow: "When

2 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, vol. I (Sudamericana, 2011), 33, henceforth OC I.

we can feel this oneness, time is a delusion which the indifference and inseparability of a moment from its apparent yesterday and from its apparent today suffice to disintegrate.” The stillness of the scene evokes a sensation that leads him to perceive a sense of self beyond life: “I felt as the dead feel, I felt myself to be an abstract observer of the world.” He goes on to reflect that in contrast to this experience, basic human experiences such as physical suffering and pleasure appear detached from our sense of self. This leads him to conclude that, “life is too impoverished not to be immortal.” The narrative sketches a possible model of a timeless, overarching self, detached from life, from space, consciously suspended in a state that seems to exist beyond space and time, a paradoxical experience blending solipsism with a feeling of *déjà vu*: “I suspected myself to be in possession of the reticent or absent meaning of the inconceivable word *eternity*.”<sup>3</sup> The core of the experience is that a situation has happened before as he experiences it now, and therefore that the passage of time is an illusion. Behind the illusion emerges a hidden eternity where something in us persists.

Psychologist and neurobiologist Dean Buonomano, in *Your Brain Is a Time Machine*, quotes Borges on the sense of eternity: “To be immortal is commonplace; except for man, all creatures are immortal, for they are ignorant of death.”<sup>4</sup> Our minds generate our sense of mortality through the memory of others dying. This is the memory of the future that Borges expresses in the poem “Recoleta,” when he envisions his own death foretold and where he will one day be buried. It is a memory that shapes his sense of self and leads Borges to explore whether there are alternatives to what looks like an inevitable future. The anxiety of the eventual vanishing of his sense of self is directly linked to time.

3 Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (Penguin, 1999), 138, henceforth SNF. Emphasis in original.

4 Dean Buonomano, *Your Brain Is a Time Machine: The Neuroscience and Physics of Time* (W.W. Norton, 2017), 195.

"The brain is continuously generating real-time predictions of what will happen next, and when it will happen."<sup>5</sup> Buonomano goes on to reflect: "[I]f one were to unwisely attempt to summarize the function of the brain in three words, these words might be *anticipate the future*."<sup>6</sup> Our sense of self depends on time-related matters emerging through our brain and mind. According to Buonomano, how we envision our personal sense of time can be grouped into two overarching models: presentism and eternalism. In eternalism, past, present, and future are equally real. This is the favored view in science, proposes Buonomano. "Under eternalism *now* is to time as *here* is to space."<sup>7</sup> Buonomano adds that the human mind tends to give us an eternalist perspective: "[O]ur species is defined in part by our incessant tendency to mentally hop back and forth between the past, present, and future."<sup>8</sup> These moments in time appear real. What happened did happen and will continue to have happened. The future waits for us. We can imagine it to be determined or at least shaped by events forming chains that, instant by instant, reach into futures. By contrast, in presentism, only the present is real. The past dissolves into narratives. The future feels undetermined and open to the imagination. The sense of self is shaped through models we create of the past and the future based on the belief that they may well represent what is beyond the present, in both directions of time.

In *The Ego Tunnel*, Thomas Metzinger modifies slightly this notion of presentism. He observes: "Strictly speaking, what you are experiencing as the present moment is actually the past." This is due to the time-delay that results from our brains having to model what we perceive in a meaningful way. When we act on such perceptions, we act on what has already passed. Our mind tends to gloss over this time-gap to create a sense of immediacy that helps simplify our actions. Metzinger remarks: "Now is an illusion. There is no immediate contact with reality."<sup>9</sup>

5 Ibid., 82.

6 Ibid., 232. Emphasis in original.

7 Ibid., 11.

8 Ibid., 194.

9 Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the*

Along similar lines, Buonomano writes: “We are not conscious of instantaneous moments, but rather of chunks of time that capture meaningful and interpretable events—the ‘specious present.’”<sup>10</sup> Our minds subjectively represent chunks of time, not instants, as present. In a presentist account, as opposed to an eternalist one, the sense of self would perhaps be less affected by mortality since attention and feelings remain focused on what is happening in the specious present. That is all the time needed for mobile creatures, other than humans, to navigate environments to serve their needs, as Llinás noted, while remaining unaware of their own mortality.

We can use these two models of perceived time as tentative frameworks to explore interactions of time and self in the evolving work of Borges. It appears that Borges starts with mostly eternalist views. In the last two chapters, we will explore how Borges seems to gradually shift to presentism as part of a changing sense of self.

After the first publication of “Feeling in Death” and over the next twenty-four years, Borges reprints the brief narrative of his experience of eternity within two larger essays, in two different books, underscoring the strange, unsettling significance that the episode holds for him. The essays have curious titles: “A History of Eternity” in *History of Eternity*, and “A New Refutation of Time” in *Other Inquisitions*. These titles are like playful winks to the reader, suggesting leeway and uncertainty on the topic of time. “A History of Eternity” contains a note that balances its title with discrete humor as Borges reveals that to write what sounds like a fantastic history, he worked with “whatever was at hand” in his library (SNF, 139). His creative way to approach a vastly complex metaphysical subject is to tinker with what he already has personally explored and stacked in his modest personal library and in his memory. He weaves ideas and fragments, churning concepts as if conjuring the unexpected through the magic of words. From the start, Borges introduces idiosyncratic, eclectic, overflowing, paradoxical concepts of time that range from a sense of “eternity, whose shredded copy is time” (SNF,

*Myth of the Self* (Basic Books, 2009), 38. Emphasis in original.

10 Buonomano, *Your Brain Is a Time Machine*, 231.

128) to “eternity is the style of desire” (SNF, 136). And in a similar vein, the second essay, “A New Refutation of Time,” contains a preliminary note indicating that the refutation he offers is “the feeble artifice of an Argentine adrift on a sea of metaphysics” (SNF, 317).

The first article begins with a perplexing self-denial: “I have glimpsed or foreseen a refutation of time, one in which I myself do not believe, but which tends to visit me at night and in the hours of weary twilight with the illusory force of a truism” (SNF, 318). The glimpse alluded to is the one he describes having experienced in “Feeling in Death.” And Borges offers in the preliminary note to the article a comment that applies to both essays, remarking about the self-contradictory title “A New Refutation of Time,” “I shall let this fleeting joke stand to prove, at least, that I do not exaggerate the importance of wordplay.” When in doubt, Borges plays.

*History of Eternity* not only has a playful title, but its prologue also questions, or tinkers with, the concept whose history is supposed to be presented. Borges wonders how he could not have sensed that the desire for eternity is a splendid artifice. And yet this artifice is dear to him because it helps him escape, if only briefly, from the “intolerable oppression of the successive” (OC I, 637). Then, in the lengthy essay “A History of Eternity,” Borges reveals his suspicion that nostalgia is what engenders his desire to model eternity. He notes: “For us, time is a jarring, urgent problem, perhaps the most vital problem of metaphysics, while eternity is a game or a spent hope” (SNF, 123). The final part of the essay cites in full his previously published “Feeling in Death,” noting that it constitutes his “personal theory of eternity.” He adds: “mine is an impoverished eternity, without a God or even a coproprietor, and entirely devoid of archetypes” (SNF, 137).

It is notable that in the first reprint of the essay, Borges changed a detail of the episode he remembers. The detail is one word that refers to time. In the first published version, Borges recalls his startling experience of timelessness and remembers what he said to himself at that very moment: “This is the same as it was twenty years ago” (OC I, 329). In the reprint the quote becomes: “This is the same as it was thirty years ago” (SNF, 138). Borges quotes himself in the essay, repeating what he said at the

time he had the experience, which should remain unchanged since he tells what actually happened during the event. Yet in the second version Borges changes a time span that should remain invariant, as it was first conveyed. He could well be playing with time within the narrative of the event to call our attention to the variability of memory. He could also be illustrating how narrative can affect itself, with a wink. Dilated time in the reprise of “Feeling in Death” also resonates with Balderston’s belief that Borges wishes the recalled experience to endure: “[W]hat begins to take shape that strange night is something that he does not want to finish.”<sup>11</sup> The time dilation from the first version to the second one, perhaps hardly noticeable to readers, is there for Borges to savor as he plays with the narrative feel of eternity.

Borges makes no new change in the third reprint of “Feeling in Death” published sixteen years later in *Other Inquisitions* as part of the essay “A New Refutation of Time.” Borges indicates that the sense of eternity inscribed there no longer satisfies him: “[I]t is less logical and explanatory than sentimental and divinatory” (SNF, 318). His third printing of his putative experience of eternity begins with a simple and reasonable caveat, surprising nevertheless given the nature of the entire article: “All language is of a successive nature; it does not lend itself to reasoning on eternal, intemporal matters” (SNF, 324). Buonomano appears to offer the same view: “Language poses a long-standing impediment to unambiguous conversations about presentism and eternalism. [...] Language assumes an inherently presentist perspective.”<sup>12</sup>

Borges offers this endgame to the essay: “*And yet, and yet...* To deny temporal succession, to deny the self [...] appear to be acts of desperation and are secret consolations. [...] Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger than mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.” To enhance this paradoxicality, Borges closes the article quot-

11 Daniel Balderston, *How Borges Wrote* (University of Virginia Press, 2018), 60.

12 Buonomano, *Your Brain Is a Time Machine*, 146–47.

ing Angelus Silesius: "Friend, this is enough. Should you wish to read more, / Go and yourself become the writing, yourself the essence" (SNF, 332; emphasis in original). Borges seems to be done with the recalled feeling of eternity associated with the death of the self, and desires to move on.

In his second book, *Inquisiciones*, published in 1928, Borges launches a direct exploration of the sense of self with the essay "The Nothingness of Personality." As briefly noted back in chapter 1, Borges insists that there is no whole self. Then, in "A New Refutation of Time," he writes that the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" is invalid: "[T]o say I think is to postulate the I, a *petitio principii*." Then he recalls how Georg Lichtenberg proposed that we should say "It thinks" rather than "I think." Referring to the sense of self, Borges goes on to write: "[T]here is not, behind the face, a secret self governing our acts or receiving our impressions; we are only the series of those imaginary acts and those errant impressions" (SNF, 321). Borges repeats this view half a century later, in a lecture entitled "Immortality." He revisits this idea of a disjointed, diffuse sense of self, and notes that René Descartes should have asserted: "It is thought, therefore something is" (SNF, 486). Descartes postulated the "I" as an unproblematic entity, the way we tend to imagine it under normal circumstances as we go about our daily routines. Along with Lichtenberg, Borges senses that the "I" cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, the sense of self is one of our most profound mysteries.

Our mental models function well with a simplified sense of self taken as an enduring unity. This simplification helps us go about our daily lives without self-examination. Yet Borges, as a writer, thrives on introspection. Already in one of his earliest poems, "Inscription on Any Tomb," included in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, he senses the need to change the postulate, the belief, the assumption that there exists a unified self and that this entity called "I" represents who we are. He writes: "Blindly the uncertain soul asks to continue / when it is the lives of others that will make that happen, / as you yourself are the mirror and image / of those who did not live as long as you / and others will be (and are) your immortality on earth" (SP, 21). For Borges, a unified self precludes a sense of immortality, of self enduring

outside of time. He turns instead to a feeling of uncertainty, constitutive of a dispersed self since it gives leeway for the possibility of some sort of continuity through the others that will be.

"Avatars of the Tortoise" also presents a view of uncertainty's capacity for self-extension as self-dissemination: "We (the indivisible divinity who operates in us) have dreamed the world. We have dreamed it to be resistant, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space, and fixed in time; but we have permitted tenuous and eternal interstices of illogical reason in its architecture in order to know that it is false."<sup>13</sup> Here emerge aspects of a model of the self that Borges will tinker with for the rest of his literary life. The model hinges on the assumption that a diffuse self may better serve the hope of overcoming the erasure of time and give access to some type of immortality. In "History of Eternity," Borges remarks: "Personal identity is known to reside in memory" (SNF, 136). Along with time, the role of memory will remain a cornerstone of his evolving and bifurcating models of self. The enduring sense of self may well emerge from the persistence of memory, bringing us back to a state of mind in which we were moments ago and which also reminds us of who we are supposed to be. Not being a philosopher but rather a writer who takes delight at toying with metaphysics, Borges will proceed to shred his sense of self into a multitude of themes to emerge in bits and pieces through poems and essays, and as part of the stuff of his emerging fictions.

His celebrated book of short stories, *Ficciones*, contains a variety of models that enact aspects of the self. "The Circular Ruins" begins within the setting of a "unanimous" night and the circular ruins of an abandoned temple, setting a stage of metaphors that Borges likes to connect with the idea of eternity as a universe in which all is unanimous in time; the ruins are a figure for his interest in circular time modeled on eternal recurrence. As noted earlier, Borges presents in "History of Eternity" a model of eternity where sequential time becomes simultaneity or repetition of

13 Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Alastair Reid, *Borges, A Reader: A Selection from the Writings of Jorge Luis Borges* (Dutton, 1981), 109, based on OC I, 541.

sameness, even with variations. Modestly, he considers this to be an impoverished model of eternity (SNF, 137).

The figure of repetition in "The Circular Ruins" is itself repeated in Borges's comments on models of circular time in "The Doctrine of Cycles." What repeats itself is both new and the same, much like a sense of self, of an "I" that feels fixed yet changes. This is the simpler eternity that Borges now imagines. Borges cites Néstor Ibarra in a footnote on the topic of *déjà vu*, in support of his personal sense of eternity, remodeling implicitly what he thought his prior experience of "Feeling in Death" was about:

An initial perception, any perception, takes place, but *beneath the threshold of consciousness*. An instant later, the stimulus acts, but this time we receive it in our conscious mind. Our memory comes into play and offers us the feeling of *déjà vu*, but situates the recollection wrongly. To justify its weakness and its disturbing quality, we imagine that a considerable amount of time has passed. [...] In reality it is an immediate past, and the abyss that separates us from it is that of our own distraction. (SNF, 121; emphases in original)

The protagonist in the story engages in the supernatural task of dreaming a man and bringing him into reality. Borges adds: "[F]rom time to time, he was disturbed by a sense that all this had happened before."<sup>14</sup> Once dreamt, the created man is sent away with his memory erased so he may not realize he is someone else's dream. Then the narrative shows that what happened before repeats itself: "With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he realized that he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him" (CF, 100). The patchwork of aspects of the self that Borges puts into play in this story are as disparate as the protagonist's three final reactions: terror that there is no personal, unified and enduring self; humiliation for not having an independent identity; and relief in realizing that our memory manages to spare us remembering that which may terrify and

14 Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Penguin, 1998), 99, henceforth CF.

humiliate us. Perhaps even the beginning of joy in being derivative, in having come from something else.

The story “Funes el memorioso” (translated as “Funes, His Memory” or “Funes the Memorious”) is a model of what may happen if memory turns unforgiving, unable to selectively forget in order to help us function in the world. A fall had knocked Ireneo Funes unconscious. “When he came to again, the present was so rich, so clear, that it was almost unbearable” (CF, 100). His brain remembers all that happens. He is unable to forget any detail. Funes absorbs everything he perceives and stores it in his memory. This condition forces Funes to withdraw from the world and live in a state of immobility, in darkness and solitude, to reduce abundance and minimize change, to lessen his burden of memory. To go on living, Funes turns to solitary confinement. He dies young. By having a perfect memory, Funes loses his ability to think clearly. Borges uses the model of Funes to observe: “[T]o think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract” (CF, 137). Neuroscientist Rodrigo Quian Quiroga turns to this story in his book *Borges and Memory: Encounters with the Human Brain*. He explains how “Funes the Memorious” shows that, in order to function, we engage in delicate balances of remembering and forgetting. This involves what he terms a “healthy filtering,” since remembering is a process of reconstructing a memory in the present as we assemble bits and pieces from memories already filtered.<sup>15</sup> Memory is a creative process.<sup>16</sup> Quian Quiroga cites William James, observing that to remember in a functional way we also have to be able to forget. This is the paradox of “Funes el memorioso”: Funes immobile in a dark corner of a room, overwhelmed, unable to function, vegetating.

A story that offers a partial model of an enduring sense of self is “The Secret Miracle.” It illustrates a sense of self suspended in time. The story’s protagonist is about to be executed. Before the inexorable date of his death, he makes a wish in a dream to be

15 Rodrigo Quian Quiroga, *Borges and Memory: Encounters with the Human Brain*, trans. Juan Pablo Fernández (MIT Press, 2012), 123.

16 Ibid., 192.

allowed to complete a play he had been writing, for this would at least justify his life. This is how he voices his wish to God:

*If, he prayed, I do somehow exist, if I am not one of Thy repetitions or errata, then I exist as the author of The Enemies. In order to complete that play, which can justify me and justify Thee as well, I need one more year. Grant me those days, Thou who art the centuries and time itself.* (CF, 160)

His wish is granted as a secret miracle, for he is allowed to complete the play in his mind as he faces bullets that the firing squad just shot. Time is suddenly placed on hold. The physical universe stops, including his own body and the bullets suspended in space. Yet his mind continues to function. When he eventually completes the play, physical time begins to flow again, and he falls dead before the firing squad. Paradoxically, in this model what endures is not inscribed in the physical world. The protagonist completes the play in his mind. Yet this was his wish, his chosen way to justify his existence. He does not hesitate to proceed, in suspended animation, to finish his work and, as desired, to justify his existence. We may engage with the model that Borges sketches, and extrapolate from the story to think that once completed, the play would endure like a soul in a realm that is not of this world but of the divinity granting the wish. It certainly endures in the history of the written word, for now at least.

The story "The South" offers a model of a possible autonomy of the self from worldly occurrences. Borges notes in its prologue that the story can be read as a direct narrative and also in another way (OC I, 779). That second reading is not revealed but has been often inferred from narrative clues provided in the story. The protagonist has had a serious accident and undergoes surgery. After his discharge, he decides to take a train and journey back south to his ranch in the countryside. The narration notes: "It was as though he were two men at once: the man gliding along through the autumn day and the geography of his native land, and the other man, imprisoned in a sanatorium and subjected to methodical attentions" (CF, 176–77). This observation seems to cut a moment in time into two different experiences: "gliding," and "imprisoned." Then we follow the protagonist on

his journey south. He is instructed to get off the train at a station prior to his destination for reasons he does not care to understand. He walks over to a store for assistance. There he decides to have something to eat. Three customers at a nearby table pick a fight with him. One of them challenges the protagonist to a duel. He is handed a knife that he does not know how to use in combat and steps out without fear to face his fate: "As he crossed the threshold, he felt that on that first night in the sanatorium, when they'd stuck that needle in him, dying in a knife fight under the open sky, grappling with his adversary, would have been a liberation, a joy, and a fiesta. He sensed that had he been able to choose or dream his death that night, this is the death he would have dreamed or chosen" (SF, 179).

The model of the self that emerges from the second reading of "The South"—in which the protagonist dreams he journeys back to his beloved countryside, when in the physical world he is about to undergo surgery—suggests that the self can transform bodily inputs and turn them into more desirable scenarios. In clinical cases, this could be seen as a delusion, if it were fixed, intransigent. But under stress, we cope and act through mental models that, although not capable of changing physical outcomes, may soothe us in desperate situations, and help us heal. As such, our mental modeling meshes with our sense of self to make the best out of dire situations. Confabulation may act on behalf of a more loving psychical reality.

In a lecture that Borges delivered in 1978 on the topic of time, he noted that of the three categories into which we have divided time, the most difficult to understand is the present. It seems to be a mixture of past and future. This resonates with Buonomano's sense that the brain is what helps us anticipate the future, and with Metzinger's observation that the present is actually an illusion, a moment of the past. Llinás argues that the brain is what helps us move as it creates models of the environment and places our sense of self in it to plan displacements in time through the world. Metzinger writes: "One essential function of consciousness is to help an organism stay in touch with the immediate present."<sup>17</sup> This, according to Buonomano, is the

17 Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel*, 35.

specious present, the chunk of time that we sense is the present, just long enough to be able to enact our mind models and move, as Llinás notes, without awareness that time is passing. This links the sense of time with the sense of self, which Borges also intuitively links. Borges concludes the lecture by remarking that of all metaphysical problems, the nature of time is the one that touches us the most in a personal way. It leads us to question who we are, as a person and as a plurality of selves.<sup>18</sup>

18 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, vol. IV (Sudamericana, 2011), 214.

## The Blind I

Borges was named Director of the National Library of Argentina in 1955, a sublime development for a lover of books. Yet by that time he had become nearly blind: “There I was, the center, in a way, of nine hundred thousand books in various languages, but I found I could barely make out the title pages and the spines.”<sup>1</sup> The paradox of body and mind seeming to part ways on a treasured relation at such a wondrous moment opened a new field of reflections. Borges managed to adapt to the radical change and would go on in his new post for eighteen years. Inwardly, his imagination opened to a new phase. The strangeness of the transformation that blindness brought about led Borges to gradually examine what he perceived as new mysteries. His rich curiosity kept him engaged, refining his prior models, perhaps adapting to his profoundly changed condition.

Looking back on the transition to blindness, Borges observes: “Since I lost my sight in the fifties, I have not been able to exult in writing in this casual manner. I have had to dictate everything, to become a dictator rather than a playboy of words. It is hard to play with toys when one is blind.”<sup>2</sup> With humor in the face of adversity, Borges did not give up on writing, for he sensed it

- 1 Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (Penguin, 1999), 475, henceforth SNF.
- 2 Seamus Heaney, Richard Kearney, and Jorge Luis Borges, “Borges and the World of Fiction: An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges,” *The Crane Bag* 6, no. 2 (1982): 78.

was an essential part of who he was. He transferred the page to his mind. Writing would take place in his imagination. In a shift to the roots of oral tradition, he turned to playing with words to create simpler expressions that his memory could handle; he then interacts with someone to help him put words to the page, read them back, and participate in editing to shape a finished piece. Meanings blended with rhythms and sonority of sentences to assist in remembering and piecing together in his mind what, with the help of an assistant, would eventually take a finished written form. As for reading, there were many willing to do it for him. In 1964, a sixteen-year-old Alberto Manguel joined his readers and would be among them for the next four years. About half a century later, Manguel went on to serve, like Borges, as Director of the National Library of Argentina, although for only two years. In the brief memoir *With Borges*, Manguel tells how he would visit Borges three or four times a week in the small apartment he shared with his mother and with Fany, the maid. "His was a particular kind of blindness, grown on him gradually since the age of thirty and settled in for good after his fifty-eighth birthday."<sup>3</sup>

The first major book by Borges published after the onset of his blindness is *The Maker*, which appeared in 1960. It starts with creative essays, prose poems, and brief fictions that remodel some of his earlier themes. "Everything and Nothing" returns to a preoccupation with the elusive nature of personal identity. The brief story tells of William Shakespeare's final wish. He asks God: "I who have been so many men in vain want to be one man only, myself." God replies out of a whirlwind: "Neither am I what I am. I dreamed the world the way you dreamt your plays, dear Shakespeare. You are one of the shapes of my dreams: like me, you are everything and nothing" (SNF, 89).

About halfway through the book, the form changes to poems, perhaps implying that Borges increasingly composes in his mind and finds poetry more inviting to a blind man's way of creating. In an interview in 1958, Borges noted that poetry for him has

3 Alberto Manguel, *With Borges* (Telegram, 2006), 15.

always been more of an adventure,<sup>4</sup> and from then on, poetry and brief, poetic prose would become his main literary vehicle.

The transition from narrative to poetry in *The Maker* happens after "Borges and I," first published separately in 1957. It is indicative of a remodeling of the self now underway for Borges. In this prose poem we see two rather conventional models of the self for a writer. One is the Borges whose name appears on books. He emerges from what readers take away from his writings and from his image. That is the public self. The other is the private, reflective self: how Borges sees himself, how he imagines being. These two selves appear distinct from each other. Sometimes they get along. At times they are rivals, which brings up the question of who is in control of the other. Who shapes the other? There is no clear answer. The two manage to coexist: "I live, I stay alive, so that Borges can make his literature, and this literature is my justification." Then the private self confides: "I must remain in Borges rather than in myself (if in fact I am a self)." The parenthesis in the quotation is a throwback to one of his previous conceptions of self, as an absence, a nothingness of personality, or—what is nearly equivalent—a decentered, diffuse sense of self. The solid Borges may well be the persona, the outer self. But then, at the end of the narrative, a puzzled writer suddenly notes: "I don't know which of us wrote this."<sup>5</sup>

Borges liked to express this prior sense of himself, before blindness, as a series of infinite reflections in mirrors without the possibility of seizing on any one of them as a stable or final self-representation. He had written about the nothingness of personality, the absence of a solid self. In blindness, reflections of the self he could sense were no longer rendered through mirrors; now invisible, they were within the workings of his mind. The public Borges remained something out there, with some staying power but with a feeling of illusion. This new uncertainty brings into question his previous models of the self, suggesting that there is a more malleable, slippery, and imprecise third level of self. Borges

4 Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos recobrados*, vol. 3: 1956–1986 (Sudamericana, 2011), 288.

5 Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman, trans. Willis Barnstone et al. (Penguin, 1999), 93, henceforth SP.

seeks to model it while blindness erases most markers of the visible world. Now he navigates through life using an unmoored avatar of Borges among his mental models. In “Borges and I,” an emergent third Borges appears out of interactions among the other two, as if perhaps blindness blurs the boundaries between them. Physical points of reference have eroded. Memories, thoughts, and dreams may begin to weave an inner sense of self that could feel as real as the once-dominant self that helped guide physical activities. A perplexed new self emerges hesitantly, like a newborn, seeking to feel its way around a transfigured landscape.

Transformations of the self that Borges experienced when becoming blind resonate with what cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter calls a “strange loop.” In *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, he describes this process as “an interaction between levels in which the top level reaches back down towards the bottom level and influences it, while at the same time being itself determined by the bottom level.” This model applies to the concept of self: “The self comes into being at the moment it has the power to reflect itself.” Hofstadter adds: “I postulate that similar level-crossing is what creates our nearly unanalyzable feelings of self.”<sup>6</sup> In the mind, inner and outer senses interact. What the senses relay, inputs from the world, are then able to interact with the mind to elicit responses that in turn guide our actions in the world, oftentimes without our awareness. The self seems to emerge as a new, higher level of cognition out of this loop of inputs and outputs, of feedback and feedforward.

Borges is vividly aware of the strangeness of the sense of self and of its tenuous, puzzling nature. Yet for all its uncertainties in our cognition, our dreamlike self, as Rodolfo Llinás notes in agreement with Hofstadter, is a key component for our survival. It is fundamental to the avatar that we place in our mental models of the environment where we move and interact. Our ghostly sense of self affects how we behave in the world. In *I Am a Strange Loop*, Hofstadter notes that this sense of self serves as a survival enhancer. He observes: “Our very nature is such as to prevent us from fully understanding its very nature. [...] What one acquires

6 Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (Basic Books, 1979), 709.

is an appreciation of how tenuous we are at our cores, and how wildly different we are from what we seem to be.”<sup>7</sup> For Borges, the maker, such differences—between what we are, physically, and what we seem to be—is a source of inexhaustible play and modeling. The process of creating representations of the self in turn affects the sense of self. For Borges, the hope may well be that by playing with models of the self, there might emerge like a revelation a deeper understanding of the sense of self.

After “Borges and I,” *The Maker* switches from prose to poetry with “Poem of the Gifts.” Borges remarks that he always thought of paradise as a type of library. The poem tells of fate’s double-dealings, since he entered his imagined paradise as Director of Argentina’s National Library just as he became blind. In the poem, as Borges slowly walks the hallways and stacks, he recalls the memory of his predecessor Paul Groussac, who went blind while serving as Director of the Library. Borges feels that he shares the darkness of hallways and stacks with Groussac, the two together. And he wonders which of the two writes the poem of the gifts: “A single sightless self, a plural I?” (SP, 97). In loving tribute, Borges imagines that the two now cast one single shadow. Names do not matter as the two share the same fortune in their invisible paradise. “Poem of the Gifts” is colored by its buoyant title, which seems to lift Borges out of the sorrow of a paradise lost. He reflects about his blindness: “No one should read self-pity or reproach.” He grins at the splendid irony of being granted a library and blindness at the same time (SP, 95).

Yet poems in his next book *El otro, el mismo* do show sadness rising from his loss, deepening his previous preoccupation with the mysteries of death. Previously, Borges invoked death at a distance, as a rather remote fate, especially in his first book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. Now death looms closer to his unmoored sense of self. “Waking Up” exemplifies the conflicts that Borges senses in blindness: “Daylight leaks in, and sluggishly I surface / from my own dreams into the common dream / and things assume again their proper places / and their accustomed shapes.” It ends, “If only Death, that other waking-up, / would grant me a time free of all memory / of my own name and all that I have been!”

7 Ibid., 363.

(SP, 201). Borges suggests that death may be preferable to his new condition. Internal turmoil spins in his mind. In "1964" Borges writes: "It is not magic now, the world. [...] Now you have only / your loyal memories and the empty days. [...] That which was everything must turn to nothing. / I only keep the taste of my own sadness" (SP, 217). The richness that he sensed in the physical world, now vanished from view, is a loss that his mind cannot replace with other charms. His memory of how he used to be turns into a source of constant sorrow.

Then hope resurfaces in "Poem Written in a Copy of *Beowulf*." Borges senses again that there may be new opportunities as he explores his blindness: "Beyond my anxiety and beyond this writing / the universe waits, inexhaustible, inviting" (SP, 207). The poem "A Blind Man" in *The Unending Rose* notes, paradoxically, that not much is lost in blindness. Borges reflects with optimism, "I have lost no more / than the inconsequential skin of things" (SP, 357). And in the prologue to this book, Borges observes: "Going over the proof of this book, I notice with some distaste that blindness plays a mournful role, which it does not play in my life. Blindness is a confinement, but it is also a liberation, a solitude propitious to invention, a key and an algebra" (SP, 345). Borges adapts to his new condition by finding new areas of exploration in his mind. The blind librarian goes on to serve as Director of the National Library for a total of eighteen years. Alberto Manguel recalls from the early days when he read to Borges, a decade into his blindness: "He believed, against all odds, that our moral duty was to be happy, and he believed that happiness could be found in books, even though he was unable to explain why this was so." Borges noted on this matter: "I don't know exactly why I believe that a book brings us the possibility of happiness, but I am truly grateful for that modest miracle."<sup>8</sup> For fun, he would like to pretend at times to not be blind. At home in his surprisingly small library, he could remember the location of books. And because of his extraordinary memory, he could play at being able to read. "For Borges, the core of reality lay in books."<sup>9</sup>

8 Manguel, *With Borges*, 72.

9 Ibid., 31.

In his approach to changes, Borges remains playful. Blindness opens a new playground that Borges approaches with curiosity, mixing anxiety and hope. He adjusts to having others read for him so that his love of books endures. Writing turns into more of an action that happens in his mind, followed by dictations and revisions. This more intense process of creation requires sharp memory. It echoes the fate of the protagonist of “The Secret Miracle,” who manages to complete a play in his mind.

In *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human*, V.S. Ramachandran notes that our brains have evolved a special ability: “[T]o create an internal mental picture or model of the world in which we can rehearse forthcoming actions, without the risks or penalties of doing them in the real world.”<sup>10</sup> This coincides with what Llinás indicated in *I of the Vortex*. Ramachandran extends this concept of modeling in the mind to displacements. He proposes that the arts also contribute to mental modeling, and that such creative models have physical consequences for our well-being. Beyond entertainment and display, the artistic imagination functions as a language that helps extend our mind’s artistic play to create models that may apply in some fashion in the environments where we function. At work here is the *exaptation principle*, “the notion that adaptation to one specific function becomes assimilated into another, entirely different function.”<sup>11</sup> Poetry, for instance, engages in exaptation when it shapes language to reach beyond the usual applications of words. Fictions may weave narratives to conjure surprises through the emergence of what had not been envisioned before. The playful interaction of disparate elements brought together creatively may yield deeper understandings. Exaptation could be deliberate, opportunistic. In literature, it may be guided by a sense that exploring new possible combinations of words and narratives might yield discovery. Borges notes in the prologue to *El otro, el mismo*: “Poetry is a mysterious chess, whose chessboard and whose pieces change as in a dream” (SP, 149). Poetry plays meaningful games with language, introducing variations

10 V.S. Ramachandran, *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human* (W.W. Norton, 2011), 242.

11 Ibid., 181.

in concepts and intonations to figure an evolving search for the possible.

Rethinking the nature of time, Borges feels that blindness changes the feel of duration now that he cannot look to see what time it is. In *El otro, el mismo*, the poem "The Instant" models a special sense of presentness that emerges from the invisibility of routine clockwork: "The present is singular. It is memory / that sets up time. Both succession and error / come with the routine of the clock" (SP, 215). The poem "The Past," in *The Gold of the Tigers*, also grapples with a transformed sense of time.<sup>12</sup> It celebrates the present as timelessness, the only time that remains as it arises from the illusion of yesterday and the absence of a future. The past becomes a space of motionless wax figures and literary recollections that are gradually lost in reflections. Blindness transforms Borges's former obsession with mirrors. They become indifferent for Borges since he cannot see his reflection anymore. In *The Maker*, the poem "Mirrors" suggests that blindness offers him deliverance: "I ask myself what accident of fortune / handed me this terror of all mirrors" (SP, 105). Mirrors are now a thing of the past, of memory, of dreams. He can see through them with better understanding of how they once affected him: "God has created nights well-populated / with dreams, crowded with mirror images, / so that many feel that he is nothing more / than vain reflection. That's what frightens us" (SP, 107).

The poem "Cambridge," in the book *In Praise of Darkness*, proposes that: "As in dreams, / behind the face that looks at us there is no one." We are like a one-sided coin. The inner and outer selves are one. And for a blind Borges, that unique side is composed of memory: "We are our memory, / we are that chimerical museum of shifting shapes, / that pile of broken mirrors" (SP, 271). The paradoxically uplifting poem "In Praise of Darkness" rises above despair to find new adventures, as Borges grows old as well: "Old age (the name that others give it) / can be the time of our greatest bliss. / The animal has died or almost died. / The man and his spirit remain" (SP, 300). Borges adds: "All this should frighten me, / but it is a sweetness, a return." And he concludes:

12. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, vol. II (Sudamericana, 2011), 494–95, henceforth OC II.

"I reach my center, / my algebra and my key, / my mirror. / Soon I will know who I am" (SP, 301). This is a remodeled mirror for Borges, one that cannot multiply him in idle reflections but an ideal one that reveals his enduring self, if there is one to be found. He retains hope in what may be a deliberate illusion of his own imagination. Yet, by design, it animates him to go on.

In blindness, Borges's sense of self emerges more from memories. No mirror can show his face to suggest the image of a self. For example, the poem "A Blind Man" suggests the possibility of surprise and discovery: "I do not know what face is looking back / whenever I look at the face in the mirror. [...] I think, too, that if I could see my features, / I would know who I am, this precious afternoon" (SP, 357). The blind man's gaze on a mirror that he cannot see goes beyond the reflecting surface into a field of memories in pieces that, unconstrained by visual limitations, might now interact with greater freedom and come to express revelations that could not be accessed before. Also in *The Unending Rose*, the poem "I Am" brings the possibility of discovery into question: "I am no one. [...] I am echo, emptiness, nothing" (SP, 357). The poem leads in an entirely different direction that feels like a dead end. For Borges, this new field of poetic and imaginative expression is like a garden full of forking paths where the blind man will feel his uncertain way forward.

The poem "Elegy" in *The Gold of the Tigers* offers completeness to Borges's reflections on the fate that blindness brought him. Paradoxically, he feels that, deep down, his reflections while blind apply to others as well: "Oh destiny of Borges, perhaps no stranger than yours" (SP, 231). The models he used during this period apply to the former Borges as well. They subsume his past ones. Since the onset of blindness, Borges has sought to explore his new condition through his work, following a multitude of directions through a mindscape that feels like an extension of dreams now that the visible physical world is a map he no longer turns to for orientation. The type of mental modeling needed to function in the waking world offers Borges no clear sense of direction. He follows all possibilities that come to mind, often contradictory, with strange resonances, transformative of what before he took for granted, particularly altering the memories that are a key aspect of his sense of self. His work shows the traces

of his journeys through this uncertain landscape, recalling the aphorism that Llinás proposes, that we are dreams guided by the senses. With altered senses, Borges manages to navigate through a world he no longer sees but feels, turning inward to his mind to try to compensate. He seeks new, uncertain ways forward, while still aspiring to find meaning through literature, and perhaps one day compose his masterpiece—as he often puts it with a wink and a smile.

Two unexpected but not surprising books emerge along the way, in a style that Borges finds different from his previous work. One is *For Six Strings*, a collection of poems composed in the style of the milonga, a precursor of tango, but simpler, lighter, without what Borges considered to be the contrived sentimentality of the inconsolable “tango-song” (OC II, 353). In the prologue, Borges invites the reader to add the missing music of a typical milonga to complete the experience with an airy flair that enhances the topics presented, observing playfully that words count less than music. The second book, published five years later, is *Brodie’s Report*. It plays again with themes found in *For Six Strings*, published in 1965. Here, Borges attempts to expand his prose poems into short narratives, but deliberately avoids what he now considers “the shocks of a baroque style as well as those afforded by unforeseen or unexpected endings” which were the signature of his early stories in *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*. He notes, “now that I am seventy years old I think I have found my own voice.” This narrative voice, he proposes, is more realistic and direct. It may be the result of having writing replaced by dictation, which hampers the development of narrative intricacies that before could be pursued on the page. He observes: “I have, in short, preferred to prepare my readers for my endings, rather than to astound them.” Then he adds: “These reasonable, rational arguments are quite likely the result of weariness; advanced age has taught me to resign myself to being Borges.”<sup>13</sup>

What Borges is this? Not entirely the one who played with philosophical themes and narrative paradoxes to reflect complexities of the human self, but rather one who now returns to sto-

13 Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Penguin, 1998), 346, henceforth CF.

ries and episodes of his younger days. He composes fragments in what he senses is a more direct, less convoluted style. It is striking how Borges, having somewhat adapted to blindness over almost a decade, opts to revisit topics that marked him during his youth, as if he suddenly decided to turn and look back. In this respect the earlier prose poem "The Maker" foreshadows these two special books. In the poem, Borges reflects on blindness through a nameless protagonist evoking Homer. Borges imagines sharing the fate of the mythical Greek author but adds a surprising note of hope: "He descended into his memory, which seemed to him endless. [...] In this night of his mortal eyes into which he was descending, love and adventure were also awaiting him" (CF, 293).



## Shared Adventures

Rodolfo Llinás fashioned the metaphor that we are dreams guided by the senses to express a deeply subjective aspect of our being in the world. The world for us is made of what we absorb through our senses. Perceptions, guided by salience, help us move in environments created by personal needs, preferences, and prior knowledge. Our senses detect changes as they continue to process perceptions to keep guiding our displacements. Dynamic models of our perceived world emerge from this loop of feedback and feedforward. Recursive interactions fashion a dreamlike presence with the feel of reality. This loop creates a sense of self as our minds internalize the process to help us live and thrive. We are what moves in the world and in our minds, what affects the environment and our thoughts, what fails or succeeds in fulfilling needs, and what adjusts preferences based on results of actions.

By exaptation, the human mind may engage in modeling the imaginary. This extends the domain of the world we inhabit in body and mind to include the plausible, the fictional. In turn, such exaptations may affect our lives when our mental models assimilate them in order to internalize the imaginary. Our human sense of self, our self-awareness, and our personification in our own minds may well be exaptations of the mental modeling that mobile creatures perform in order to survive and thrive. Biologist Stephen Jay Gould worked the concept of exaptation into a model of evolution to argue that such notable extensions, which emerge as if by chance and cross the boundaries of diverse applications, may have tangible consequences. Variations that

arise at the personal level can make a difference in “an unconstrained world bristling with possibilities, and nudgeable by the smallest of unpredictable inputs.”<sup>1</sup>

One remarkable extension, that we evolved over time through our tinkering and that we continue to develop as we play with it, is human language. Language allows us to construct dreamlike concepts, metaphors, and narratives, which affect actions and in turn nudge the world, as Gould put it, in ways that we may not quite foresee. At a personal level, language and the models fashioned with it may design our desires and assumptions, along with our internal sense of who we are.

Before becoming blind, Borges had already imagined a strange power of words. He attributed to his father the lesson that words serve not only to communicate but also act as magic symbols. It was in his father’s library where he first felt the incantation of words.<sup>2</sup> In the essay “Narrative Art and Magic,” included in his book 1932 *Discusión*, Borges proposes that the magical rather than the natural is suited for his narrative. He understands magic as a process “in which every lucid and determined detail is a prophecy.”<sup>3</sup> In the prologue to *El otro, el mismo* he writes: “The roots of language are irrational and of magical nature. [...] Poetry wants to return to that ancient magic.” And returning to the spirit of combinatorial play, Borges adds: “Poetry is a mysterious chess, whose chessboard and whose pieces change as in a dream.”<sup>4</sup> Then, in the 1975 prologue to *The Unending Rose*, Borges notes: “The word must have been in the beginning a magic symbol, which the usury of time wore out. The mission of the poet should be to restore to the word, at least in a partial way, its primitive and now secret force” (SP, 343). His poetry shows

1 Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 1341.

2 Jaime Alazraki, *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges* (G.K. Hall, 1987), 23.

3 Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (Penguin, 1999), 82, henceforth SNF.

4 Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman, trans. Willis Barnstone et al. (Penguin, 1999), 149, henceforth SP.

a growing desire to access a fabled time when there was no distinction between the poetic and the prosaic, when all was tinged with magic, when “every moment of existence, every act, ought to be prophetic” (SP, 305). In the Inscription to *Los conjurados*, his final book, Borges remarks: “To write a poem is to attempt a minor magic. The instrument of that magic, language, is mysterious enough” (SP, 467). Here we can imagine magic in a minor key, as a sort of incantation and (serious) play. Jumping from one topic to another, composing poetry is episodic and adventurous. Surprises along the way may yield a prize catch, an elusive discovery, a horizon.

By now Borges has turned seventy. The blind enchanter feels he has plenty of leeway to play and experiment in the safety of his established persona. In the Prologue to *The Iron Coin* he observes: “This miscellaneous collection that chance caused me to write during 1976 [...] will not be of greater or lesser value than my previous books of verse. This modest prediction, which I am not at all troubled to concede, affords me a kind of impunity. I can let myself go with a few caprices since I will no longer be judged by the text itself but rather by the vague but still sufficiently precise image that people have of me” (SP, 371). Borges gets to play at a personal level with the possibilities of exaptation as he enters what may be seen as his final period, facing new relations of mind and body, due to blindness and the frailties he experiences with advancing age. He continues to imagine that a poetic arrangement of words may be able to bring forth a deeper experience or even a revelation.

Along the way, his models of the self in the world adapt to the changing tides of his senses. Remodelings hinge on his rising sense that words have the potential to conjure beyond what they tend to mean. At the same time, in a gradual departure from what he considered the baroque tendencies he put into practice before his blindness, Borges turns to increasingly succinct verses. Poetry gives him greater latitude to play with materials as they emerge in his mind from the past and the present, and as he imagines possible futures. The 1972 prologue to *The Gold of the Tigers* notes that his poetry is “plying familiar skills, with an occasional mild variation and with tedious repetitions.” And in a poem included in his final book *Los conjurados*, Borges writes that the past is not

an imposition, a prison, but clay to be molded in the present.<sup>5</sup> He moves away from a sense of eternity that implies a historical determinism, to one of presence, of present and constant becoming. By 1981, Borges announces in the prologue to *La cifra* that his writings are now like intellectual poetry, where images give way to abstractions, as he moves away from a previous poetry of imagery, myths, and fables (OC III, 317).

This shift in form is linked to a change in mood. Borges reflects that when he wrote the pieces that compose his first book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, he sought evenings, outskirts, and sorrow. Almost fifty years later, he seeks mornings, centrality, and serenity (SP, 3). Borges gets to see life from the perspective not of youthful sorrow about a future that leads to death but of a present that he may embrace before it goes away. A metaphorical shift from sunsets to sunrises, from imagining what will be to exploring what becomes, marks an evolution of models of the self as Borges adapts to his life changes. This involves reshuffling familiar themes, which are broken down to snippets and rearranged like pieces of a puzzle. Through his writings he engages with changes and challenges, offering what may be imagined as a journal of the mind redesigning perceptions, memories, and desires to navigate an unknown world that inevitably transfigures his sense of self.

When his mother and closest companion passes away, Borges composes "Remorse," a paradoxical poem on the topic. He writes: "I have committed the worst sin of all / That a man can commit. I have not been / Happy" (SP, 381). The poem raises the question of how Borges might approach this stark revelation of unhappiness. What will he do about it, if anything? The question is left dangling in suspense, as if it could conjure an unwritten answer.

Another challenge arises with quiet urgency. Borges feels that his life is coming to an end, with clear, measured certainty, rather than the longing reflections of his early period about an ending far into the future. His poetry and poetic essays take on a chaotic ordering. His poems show increasing simplicity in the approach

5 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, vol. III (Sudamericana, 2011), 533, henceforth OC III.

to topics at the heart of each piece. And Borges, as play master, finds perhaps greater freedom to tinker with what comes to mind as he feels his way forward, sensing his ultimate destination approach. Poems in the book *La cifra*, for instance, play with the idea of a cypher that numbers what Borges has been and has left to be by the time his days are done. Poems often consist of lists in the style of Walt Whitman, of what seem to constitute what he is. The opening poem, “Descartes,” implicitly transforms the cartesian cogito. It begins: “I am the only man on earth, but perhaps there is neither earth nor man. [...] I dream the moon and I dream my eyes perceiving the moon. I have dreamed the morning and evening of the first day.” An eclectic, disparate list of things follows, each preceded in cadence with “I have dreamed,” leading to a present, “I may be dreaming of having dreamed” and ending “I shall go on dreaming of Descartes and of the faith of his fathers” (SP, 423). I think becomes I dream.

Perplexed, Borges navigates through new zones that present challenges to his prior sense of self. He pursues attempts at remodeling his sense of self in ways that range from intellectual fervor to flashes of emotion, with touches of urgency. He weaves words together swiftly, concisely, often using snippets of previous themes, to play with resonances and see what could emerge, what might be revealed. But further challenges to the sense of self come from the body aging. Flashes of unhappiness appear like passing nightmares. The brief poetic essay entitled “Two Forms of Insomnia,” included in *La cifra*, invokes “the horror of existing in a human body whose faculties are in decline.” This condition is described as the horror of being and continuing being, as if being was a state of insomnia that would dissipate in a dubious dawn. Borges continues: “It is being well aware that I am bound to my flesh, to a voice I detest, to my name, to routinely remembering. [...] It is trying to sink into death and being unable to sink into death” (SP, 433).

One option to resolve such moments of unhappy stasis is to bring life to an end and be done with it. The poem “The Dream,” also in *La cifra*, invokes this perplexing option: “Curiously, a pill can erase the cosmos and erect chaos” (OC III, 349). Edwin Williamson speculates that Borges had thoughts of suicide going back to 1934, based on two crudely written stories he published

under the pseudonym “Alex Ander,” which are not included in any of his books. In the first story, the despondent protagonist goes to a shop to buy a gun but ends up getting a record player instead and forgets about the idea of ending his life. The second story is a sketch in which an actor is rejected in love and kills himself. Williamson speculates that Borges resisted similar temptations, thinking “that writing might offer a way out of his misery by giving some purpose to his life.”<sup>6</sup>

The poem “Dialogue about a Dialogue” in *The Maker* brings up suicide with a touch of humor. Macedonio Fernández, whom Borges considered a mentor, argues about immortality and the insignificance of death while the protagonist, possibly Borges, plays casually with Macedonio’s razor as if invoking Occam’s razor, the metaphor of parsimony, of cutting away what is superfluous in order to understand a problem. The protagonist proposes that they both commit suicide to resolve in a simple and direct way the question of what happens after death. In this dialogue, the protagonist doesn’t remember if they committed suicide, implying the paradoxical and comical possibility that the two doing the talking might be dead, or not. The book *The Maker* is dedicated to the poet and novelist Leopoldo Lugones, who took his own life. Borges brings up Lugones’s suicide and his own approaching death, now in a serious tone, as if the two merged in self-inflicted death.<sup>7</sup>

Borges transforms moments of despair into creations that help overcome somber feelings. He repeats the gesture of the protagonist of his story “The Secret Miracle,” who imagines different ways in which he is about to die because, by picturing them, he might prevent them from happening, the coincidence of such improbable similarities being extreme. Using such mental games, Borges would seem to model his death while knowing with a sense of relief that it could not possibly happen as he imagines, particularly in the form of suicide. The poem “The Suicide” begins to model the first steps of a suicide, as if to imagine what it would feel like: “I will die and, with me, / the weight of the intolerable universe. [...] Now I am looking on the final sunset. / I am

6 Edwin Williamson, *Borges, A Life* (Penguin Books, 2004), 208.

7 SP, 69.

hearing the last bird. / I bequeath nothingness to no one" (SP, 353). The short story "August 25, 1983" is a vivid model of suicide. The work is the first one included in *Shakespeare's Memory*, published in 1983. A sixty-one-year-old Borges arrives one night at a hotel and approaches to sign the register. Surprisingly, his name is already written in ink not yet dry. Borges goes up to his room and comes face to face with an older Borges laying on the bed. The two engage in a conversation about Borges, his past, his future. As for the present, they are not sure who might be dreaming whom, or if perhaps they are dreaming each other. Towards the end, the older Borges explains that the humiliation of old age drove him to suicide. He stops talking. The younger one realizes that his older self is now dead and leaves: "Outside awaited other dreams."<sup>8</sup> Yet Borges did not commit suicide on August 25, 1983, as imagined or perhaps planned. He would die June 13, 1986, not in Buenos Aires as previously envisioned, but in Geneva.

At the same time, an unexpected change emerges gradually as a happy surprise during this final period and adds a new dimension to his sense of self. It is love. Borges in love has to somehow figure out how to proceed as he sets out to explore enchantments arising in a renewed landscape of the imagination. This is not the idealized type of love of his previous years that resulted mostly in sorrow and dejection. Now he encounters a type of love quite different for him, uplifting, captivating. At first, Borges playfully envisions this change as a threat to his former self. In 1972, the poem "El amenazado" appears in *El oro de los tigres*: "It is love. I'll have to hide or flee. [...] A woman's name betrays me / A woman hurts through all my body."<sup>9</sup> His views of the self now start to shift gradually from solitary models to shared ones.

In *The Iron Coin*, the collection of poems that includes "Remorse," Borges concludes with the poem that gives the book its title. He wonders: "Why does a man require a woman to desire him?" He offers this initial reflection: "Within the other's shadow, we pursue our shadow. / Within the other's mirror, our

8 Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Penguin, 1998), 493, henceforth CF.

9 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, vol. II (Sudamericana, 2011), 515, henceforth OC II.

reciprocal mirror" (SP, 387). Here emerges the idea of reciprocity. It is the simple idea of a deep, mutual relationship with another different from oneself. For Borges, this is a new model that goes beyond the previous one of being one in the world, the dreamer of others, or being the dream of others, as if all were extensions of a single interconnected dream in which a myriad of components interacts with a center of perception that is his sense of self. Now he comes to feel a profound otherness, not a reflection or extension of variations of his sense of being, but a radical difference. Where there was only one self, interacting with life, now there are two. And what is special to this two-body system is that the two distinct entities interact through the force of a love that is a constant exchange, a reciprocity, that still maintains difference.

His next book, *The Gold of Tigers*, unveils brief sensuous images like delightful surprises. The poem "Tankas" reveals: "[P]recious is the contact / of your lips in the shadow" (SP, 307). The poem "The Gold of Tigers" abounds with images of yellow and gold, the only color that he can still vaguely discern, and luminous sunsets: "O gold more dear to me, of your hair / which these hands long to touch" (SP, 339). In the afterword to his next book, *The Book of Sand*, Borges writes of one of the stories in the book: "The subject of love is quite common in my poetry; not so in my prose, where the only example is 'Ulrikke'" (CF, 484). This is the story of a fleeting love encounter one night between a middle-aged professor, Javier Otárola, and a woman named Ulrikke. They had met earlier in the day during an event at a museum. The story is told with a touch of mystery and magical flair, as if it were an enchantment fated to happen. In the end: "There was no sword between us. Like sand, time sifted away. Ancient in the dimness flowed love, and for the first and last time, I possessed the image of Ulrikke" (CF, 421). The story models this sense of love as mutuality, which for Borges is an enchantment. What Javier Otárola comes to possess in the end is not Ulrikke as a being that is now his, but Ulrikke as her image in his mind. There is no sword between them, no separation, but one has not become the possession of the other. They gravitate together as two separate, free bodies circling each other, entangled in love.

Published five years after *The Iron Coin*, the poem "Happiness" in *La cifra* is a counterpoint as well as an answer to "Remorse."

The earlier poem expressed the condition of being unhappy without providing a way out. "Happiness" reveals a way past an unhappy stasis through the love of mutuality: "Praised be the love wherein there is no possessor and no possessed, but both surrender" (SP, 441). This sense of love as emerging from reciprocal, radical differences is reflected in the verse: "Inside the mirror an Other waits in ambush." It replaces the solitary view of himself in a mirror, or that of others as transfigured reflections of one self. To this new model, Borges adds a further detail that relates to his preoccupation with time and eternity: "Everything happens for the first time, but in a way that is eternal" (SP, 441). Love happens in a continuous present, as if past and future extended from this ongoing sense of presence that feels strangely timeless. The poem "Hymn" in the same books reflects this timelessness with joyful flair: "All the past returns like a wave / and those prior things recur / because a woman has kissed you" (OC III, 333).

The poem "Nostalgia for the Present," also included in *La cifra*, gives another view of the sense of presence that Borges in love has come to cherish: "At that very instant / the man was at her side in Iceland" (SP, 447). With the help of Williamson's biographical commentary, we may picture that the man is Borges and she is María Kodama, and the moment recalled in the poem is when their mutual love was revealed during their first journey together in Iceland. Borges names Kodama in his books' dedications and inscriptions, starting in 1977 with *The History of the Night*. In the next book, *La cifra*, Borges offers the following thoughts: "The dedication of a book is an act of magic. One might also define it as the most grateful and sensible way of pronouncing a name. Now I say your name, María Kodama" (SP, 419). Then, in his final dedication to her in *Los conjurados*, Borges reflects: "We can only give what is already the other's. In this book are things that were always yours. How mysterious a dedication is, a surrender of symbols!" (SP, 467). Now there are loops that join and animate the mind that was his to the mind that is hers.

In Kodama's book *Homenaje a Borges*, her last essay, entitled "What Was Art for Us?" is addressed to Borges. The brief work offers her perspective, reinforcing the sense of mutuality that Borges celebrated in his poems and dedications. She writes

that art was for them the magical possibility to perceive reality through creative transmutations. Williamson describes this change in Borges as a shift from a mystical idea of love to a sense of reciprocity, mutuality, a “surrender to his lover’s intriguing ‘otherness.’”<sup>10</sup> Their creative transformations included acting on each other through joint adventures and the love that blossomed in Iceland in 1971, when Borges and Kodama declared their mutual feelings and continued around the world. Borges’s *Atlas* is a result of their shared journeys. Its prologue says: “María Kodama and I have shared the joy and surprise of finding sounds, languages, twilights, cities, gardens and people, all of them distinctly different and unique. These pages would wish to be monuments to that long adventure which still goes on.”<sup>11</sup> The book is an eclectic and mostly uplifting mix of brief essays on a variety of topics triggered by episodes of their actual voyages. Perhaps the most striking one is the final piece, “On Salvation by Deeds,” accompanied by several images of a temple in Izumo, dated April 27, 1984. The story tells of Shinto divinities gathered to discuss their observations of humankind. They are distressed because humans created a weapon that could put an end to history. It is proposed that humankind be erased before such a senseless deed happens. Then one divinity observes that humans also created a poem that fits in seventeen syllables. The poem is intoned. Upon hearing it, the main Shinto divinity decrees that humanity shall go on existing. Because of this *haiku*, humanity is saved.

The story that Borges narrates is a model of hope in the face of self-inflicted adversity. In mysterious ways beyond our understanding, certain seemingly inconsequential creations, like poetry, emerge from our isolated sense of self and help us endure. As if by enchantment, playful, life-affirming deeds may conjure something in us like a revelation, with a resonance that in the end carries the day.

10 Edwin Williamson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 222.

11 Jorge Luis Borges and María Kodama, *Atlas*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Dutton, 1985), 8.

Another version of this model, offered in a simpler rendition without divine intervention, is contained in the poem "The Just" included in *La cifra*. The poem begins with a reference to the ending of Voltaire's *Candide*: "A man who cultivates his garden, as Voltaire wished." What follows are verses each listing a person—a musician, a linguist, a potter, a typographer—who carries out a simple deed; the poem then evolves to workmen playing chess at a café, a man and a woman reading from a poem, someone who strokes a sleeping animal, someone who prefers others to be right; and it concludes: "These people, unaware, are saving the world" (SP, 455). Although unnamed, the man and the woman towards the middle of the poem could well be Borges and Kodama. Their presence seems to linger to the end, with Borges coming into focus perhaps more prominently, as one of the many people unknowingly saving the world through simple joyful deeds. In the remodeling of self shaped by love, Borges shifts his sense of self from a center, to decentered phenomena, to a decentered participation with others, first through the reciprocal love of a woman, and then through the gradual emergence of others radically different from his own self or from the projections of his desires enacted by others.

Yet remodelings for Borges are not substitutes for his previous models, but additions to an expanding collection with which he goes on playing like pieces of a changing puzzle. He imagines that, in the end, all these combinations of trinkets will reveal the traces of his own face. The 1960 epilogue to *The Maker* reads: "A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. [...] Shortly before he dies, he discovers that his patient labyrinth of lines is a drawing of his own face" (SP, 143). Twenty-five years later, in his final book *Los conjurados*, the poem "The Sum" offers the same outcome. A person's lifetime of seeking to represent the world leads to the final discovery that it all amounts to the traces of his own face (OC III, 509).

Along with this persistence of a solitary model consisting of a lifelong creative quest that loops around to reflect oneself in the end, another model emerges in which the single image of the solitary searcher splits into two: a man and a woman. This second model broadens further, into an atlas in which the self is only one of many participants, perhaps contributing to the salvation

of the world, as in the poem "The Just." The poem "Los conjurados" offers an even further variation on the atlas model. Here, people have finally taken the resolution to be reasonable and find affinities that unite them rather than fight over differences. The model is that of the Swiss Confederacy, which is where Borges decides to end his days.

The final book that Borges composed, *Los conjurados*, collects mostly brief poems that, like a whirlwind of sparks, reflect snippets of themes he developed since his first book, now from the perspective of a life lived, and with remodelings that his experiences would weave into the new texture. The prologue says: "After all these years I have observed that beauty, like happiness, is frequent. A day does not pass when we are not, for an instant, in paradise" (SP, 469). An aged and blind Borges chooses to adorn his sense of self with attention to what is pleasing, and leaves aside the rest. His final poems show no concern with marble inscriptions on mausoleums, unlike his first book *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. The prologue of the last book is dictated "from one of my native lands, Geneva." His world has grown. In *Los conjurados* Borges reflects on "the relief that you and I will feel in the instant that precedes death, when fate unties us from the sad habit of being someone and from the weight of the universe" (OC III, 499). He is mostly thinking of a recently departed friend in Geneva. And in a poem that bears the name of his friend, Maurice Abramowicz, he exclaims: "We must enter death as one enters a party" (OC III, 506).

In a detailed account of what happened to Borges after the publication of *Los conjurados*, Williamson suggested that Borges sought to shape his life into a new narrative about his closing days and final adventure. When informed that he was terminally ill, Borges chose to stay in Geneva and be buried there, rather than in Buenos Aires in the Recoleta cemetery, among ancestors, as he had envisioned before. Borges had a final meeting with his French translator, editor, and friend, Jean-Pierre Bernès. Borges spoke of stories he had in mind. One was to rework the last chapter of the *Quixote*. He offered no details except that it would be told mostly from the perspective of Alonso Quijano.<sup>12</sup> Borges

12 Jean-Pierre Bernès, "Borges ou le vieil anarchiste paisible," *Magazine*

was fascinated with the Quixote practically since the start of his literary life. Before turning eighty, he was mostly interested in the narrative paradoxes of the *Quixote*. He reveled in the instances of metafiction that Miguel de Cervantes sprinkled throughout his novel to surprise the reader, such as when *La galatea*, a published book of Cervantes, is found in Alonso Quijano's library by a character who claims to be a good friend of Cervantes. Borges extended such paradoxes to imagine that Alonso Quijano dreamt of Cervantes. Creator and creation become interchangeable, blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, creating a loop of interactions between the two. This model may suggest that the human sense of self may be someone else's fiction, created from a different level of being. And yet that higher level of reality emerges from our fiction.

As Borges ages and encounters reciprocal love, his field of play shifts to savor the gifts that he has been granted as if by enchantments worthy of the *Quixote*. He feels closer to the dreamer, Alonso Quijano. This is perhaps the impulse behind dreaming of rewriting the final chapter of the *Quixote* from the perspective of the dreamer that the novel nearly ignores, rather than the dreamt one who ceases to exist a few days before his dreamer passes away without fanfare, as if going to sleep.

The final chapter of the *Quixote* begins with a simple paragraph noting that, since human life is not eternal and Don Quixote is no exception to this natural course, his life concluded when he least expected. His friends think that melancholy from his defeat in a joust and his forced return home to abandon the ways of chivalry for a year may be the source of his downturn. They wish him to return to his fictions. Yet, after a long sleep, he awakes to exclaim: "I am no longer Don Quixote de la Mancha but Alonso Quijano, once called the Good because of my virtuous life."<sup>13</sup> Sancho pleads: "the greatest madness a man can commit in his life is to let himself die, just like that, without anybody killing him or any other hands ending his life except those of

*littéraire*, May 1999, 37.

13 Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (HarperCollins, 2003), 935.

melancholy.” The reply is: “I was mad, and now I am sane.”<sup>14</sup> Calmly, Alonso Quijano has a priest hear his confession, dictates his will, and “surrounded by the sympathy and tears of those present, gave up the ghost, I mean to say, he died.”<sup>15</sup> This is a new model for Borges: the open-ended journey, the ongoing adventure, a series of episodes that in time lead to an ending, a passing away that feels like one more casual episode which happens to be the last one. It offers no solution to the puzzle of life save for having played with its affordances until no longer possible. This is the model of Alonso Quijano turning into Don Quixote and then resurfacing as Alonso Quijano in the end.

To achieve this journey in his mind, Borges proposes some remodelings of the *Quixote*, as if building a trail through the work of Cervantes to reach his own ending. He identifies with Alonso Quijano in the poem “Readers,” where he imagines that both he and Quijano dreamed their adventures in their libraries. The *Quixote* “is no more than a recording of his dreaming” (SP, 199). About fifteen years later, Borges expands on this variation and sides with Quijano in “Fame”: “Not to have left my library. / To be Alonso Quijano and not to dare to be Don Quixote” (SP, 453). The library recalls his father’s library, where he first became aware of the wonders of fiction, of the incantatory powers of words. In the poem “Someone Will Dream” (OC III, 512), Borges again imagines that Alonso Quijano could have become Don Quixote without actually leaving his library. Quixotic adventures can unfold through words that map out the fields of action out in the physical world, but the ultimate adventure happens in the mind and on the page. The body is the translator, the actor. The script is played out by the self. And Borges now imagines that the old hidalgo, Alonso Quijano, gets to live the ultimate adventure that Cervantes did not allow him to experience in the novel. In “Note for a Fantastic Story,” Borges suggests a variation to the *Quixote* in which “the old nobleman Alonso Quijano will know the love of Dulcinea” (SP, 437). This could have been a crucial destination in the remodeling of the last chapter of the *Quixote*

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 937.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 938.

that Borges mentioned to Bernès, imagining that before their days are done, both Quijano and Borges find their Dulcineas.

Who is Dulcinea for Borges and for a transformed Quijano? Is she an embodied figment of the lover's imagination, to be possessed as part of the lover's sense of self, or is she a separate being with a sense of self of her own that cannot be possessed but only embraced through reciprocity? This more human Dulcinea is the one that Borges may have imagined that Alonso Quijano would finally get to know, out there in the world rather than in his mind, someone who would share with him a sense of mutuality in love. *Atlas* reflects for Borges joint adventures with his Dulcinea out in the world, beyond Buenos Aires. And their reciprocity would be "for ever and ever and a day" as María Kodama recalled Borges said about their love, and quoted in the preface to her *Homenaje a Borges*.<sup>16</sup> Their fictions would interlace in a loving embrace.

Borges may have wished to end his days peacefully, quietly, in a place he also considered home, in loving company, as did Alonso Quijano. Dulcinea remained a dream for Quijano. Not so for Borges. Ten days after telling Bernès of his quixotic project, at dawn, with Kodama next to him, Borges passed away, his hand in hers. The future that Borges foresaw in his first book, of being buried in the Recoleta cemetery of Buenos Aires, did not quite come to pass as he imagined. He was able to alter it to his liking, and was buried at the Plainpalais cemetery in Geneva rather than at the Recoleta in Buenos Aires. The bright, shiny marble of his earlier visions was not used in his headstone. Kodama worked with the Argentine sculptor Eduardo Longato to create a special headstone. Longato reports that she wished to use stone with gray hues. They selected a silver blue marble from the province of Córdoba and chose to give it an irregular shape in the style of Nordic headstones dating back to the tenth century.<sup>17</sup>

Describing the headstone, Kodama remarked that the image on the front, under the name Jorge Luis Borges, shows a group of warriors, swords broken, in a courageous act of defiance. She

16 María Kodama, *Homenaje a Borges* (Sudamericana, 2016), 9.

17 Martín Hadis, *Siete guerreros nortumbrios: Enigmas y secretos en la lápida de Jorge Luis Borges* (Emecé, 2011), 207.

took the image from a book that Borges gave her. Above the seven warriors is an inscription about the medieval Battle of Maldon. She selected to have “and me forhtedon má” appear under the image on the headstone, meaning “and be not afraid.” On the back of the headstone is the image of a Viking ship. She had the stone placed so that the ship’s bow faced East, towards sunrise, as customary in Viking funeral rites. This recalls the vision that Borges summons in the poem “Elegy” from *The Unending Rose*: “I think of the proud ship, carrying back to sea the body [...] the burning boat the purity / and whiteness.” Here the poem refers to the funeral ship carrying the body of the Danish king Scyld Scefing in the Old English poem *Beowulf*. Then the poem continues: “I think of my own death, my perfect death, / without a funeral urn, without a tear” (SP, 361).

On the back of the headstone, above the ship, appears an inscription that recalls the story “Ulrikke.”<sup>18</sup> The inscription translates as: “He takes the sword Gram and places it between them,” a quotation from the Icelandic *Völsunga Saga*. As a whole, the headstone appears like a brief, final chapter of *Atlas*. Underneath the ship appears a text in Spanish that can be translated as: “From Ulrica to Javier Otárola.”<sup>19</sup> The names refer to the story “Ulrikke” and Kodama’s and Borges’s first travels in Iceland. These are the names she chose to put on the headstone, among the many that the two gave each other, playfully, to protect their love.<sup>20</sup> She evoked the names of the protagonists at the end of the story when the sword of Gram does not come between the lovers. Rather than a solitary monument, the headstone plays like a poem between Kodama and Borges, their selves entwined in the imaginary, her endless farewell, a moving model of his ultimate adventure.

18 Kodama, *Homenaje a Borges*, 179–80. Kodama used the name “Ulrica” for the same story.

19 Williamson, *Borges, A Life*, 492.

20 Kodama, *Homenaje a Borges*, 276.

## Concluding Remarks on Interactions of Mind, Self, and Models of the World

Mark Johnson writes in *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*: “Our meaning is human meaning—meaning grounded in our human bodies, in their humanly encountered environments. All the meaning we can make and all of the values we hold grow out of our humanity-interacting-with-our-world.”<sup>1</sup>

The human mind plays an indelible part in constructing meanings derived from body-mediated interactions with the world. The body produces perceptions out of these interactions. The mind acts on perceptions to filter, organize, and produce meanings. Meanings emerge from the workings of the mind as it creates models out of what is perceived to navigate the churning world in which we exist. But perceptions are idiosyncratic. They depend on the peculiarities of the perceiver. In this fuzzy and metamorphic world, multiple views, multiple models, can coexist, even if they are mutually exclusive.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 283.
- 2 Luis O. Arata, “Reflections on Interactivity,” in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, ed. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (MIT Press, 2003), 219.

Through his work, Borges provides us with a personal, passionate example of how fiction and reality blend to create a multiplicity of striking meanings. His writings trace the poignant human quality of a life devoted to conjuring meaning through the interactions of narrative models that emerge from weaving dreams, memories, observations, reflections, and choices.

Borges often turns to concepts from science, mathematics, and philosophy. He finds openings in those concepts and manages to remain free of strict scientific, historical, or philosophical confinements. He prefers to turn his attention to what seems unique through his perceptions of the world and of himself as part of the world. Using surprising variations, he creates models that illuminate his puzzling views, imagining that his creations might yield some hidden clarity regarding his favorite unknowns.

As noted previously, one of his preferred enigmas is the interaction of what may be considered fiction and reality, terms that Borges tends to treat as metaphors. A striking model of this interaction appears in his poem “Ni siquiera soy polvo” (“I’m Not Even Dust”) included in his book *Historia de la noche*.<sup>3</sup> The poem pictures Alonso Quijano wishing to be someone else, still unnamed, a fiction of his own creation drawn from books of knightly adventures. The reader intuitively feels that Alonso Quijano is beginning to imagine the one he will soon become: the knight-errant Don Quixote. Borges also pictures Alonso Quijano aware that he is the creation of Miguel de Cervantes, whom he calls his father. Paradoxically, Alonso Quijano also calls Cervantes his brother, as both of them, creator and creation, are someone else’s dream, in a reprise of the model he developed in “The Circular Ruins.” But in “Ni siquiera soy polvo” the earlier model is enriched with the realization that Alonso Quijano cannot even be dust, like Cervantes will be after passing away. Alonso Quijano is entirely fiction. In a final twist, Borges has him pray to his creator, Cervantes, to continue dreaming him so he may

3 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, vol. III (Sudamericana, 2011), 195–56. Translated as “I Am Not Even Dust,” in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman, trans. Willis Barnstone et al. (Penguin, 1999), 398–401.

go on to create Don Quixote, and devote himself fully to playing that role.

"I Am Not Even Dust" is rooted in the poem "Recoleta," collected in his first book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. In the earlier poem Borges conjures, in the cemetery where his ancestors are buried, what feels like a memory of the future. He envisions his own death foretold as he contemplates the preordained place where one day he would be buried. It is a memory that shapes his sense of self and leads Borges from then on to envision alternatives to what looks like an inevitable future and the eventual vanishing of his sense of self.

The poem "Sherlock Holmes," in his final book *Los conjurados*, offers a variation on the theme of both "Recoleta" and "Ni siquiera soy polvo." Readers' memories of Arthur Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes interact with the fiction to confer a sense of immortality. Borges imagines that characters like Don Quixote and Sherlock Holmes have an air of immortality as they persist beyond human time in books and in the minds of readers.

There is an overarching tendency in how Borges plays to create his works. He tinkers with books, landscapes, and histories to assimilate what then emerges in his writings with an evolving feeling of surprise that is his signature. He enacts playful approaches to explore puzzling aspects of our inner senses through the development of multiple models of similar issues in different contexts, rather than pursue a self-consistent trajectory. He prefers to assemble in his writings the stuff of his own investigations rather than accommodate strictly to external models. This is how he portrays an ultimately unknowable world of complex, changeable phenomena. Readers may be as puzzled as he is by what he explores. The models he provides do not have the completeness and solidity of established finalities. They remain paradoxical enough to let the reader interact with them, tinker with components, as if joining Borges in an open-ended quest for meanings.

Annie Dillard notes in *Living by Fiction* that the mind, unwittingly, cannot stop making sense. It weaves itself into the process through creative interactions that may feel like we are perceiving the world as it is, out there like a separate reality. But the mind

profoundly affects how the world is perceived.<sup>4</sup> We sense nothing until the mind decides something is salient and relevant to us. She wonders: “Does fiction illuminate the great world itself, or only the mind of its human creator?”<sup>5</sup> Borges lets both options interact playfully in the models he fashions throughout his work. He transforms his interactions with the world into personal explorations carried out on the page, through language, to construct models of the imagined, to try to conjure what he might never find. Towards the end of his life, Borges considers that his illuminations may turn out to be more personal than not. To freely paraphrase the conclusion of the essay “Pascal’s Sphere,” perhaps for Borges the totality of his work traces a history of his various intonations of a few models. Rather than a linear history, it is a labyrinth of trajectories that emerge through interactions of his mind and the world, creating models that may inspire readers to engage in their own variations and reflections. For us, it is illuminating to learn from Borges how creative interactions of mind and world give rise to models of our being in the unknown we perceive, while remaining at play in a mystifying world.

4 Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction* (HarperPerennial, 1988), 180.

5 Ibid., 13.

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