VICO'S IDEAS IN PHILOSOPHICAL MASTERPIECES

Borges and Vico

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Abstract

Jorge Luis Borges and James Joyce are authors of works that can be considered as literary commentaries on Giambattista Vico's *New Science*; the whole of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is based on Vico's masterpiece. Borges' fiction "The Immortal" is connected to the third book of Vico's work concerning the "discovery of the true Homer." Borges' "The Immortal" is connected to his essays on infinity and the circularity of time. These essays involve the principle of cycles found in Vico's conception of history as well as in the works of other figures in the history of philosophy. The metaphysical conceptions of finitude and infinitude correspond to the existential structures of mortality and immortality that determine the human condition as we experience it.

The Idea of Literary Commentary

There are two notable literary commentaries on Vico's *La scienza nuova*: an extended one, by James Joyce, and a very short one, by Jorge Luis Borges. Joyce based *Finnegans Wake* on the *Scienza nuova* as he had based *Ulysses* on the *Odyssey*, as I have discussed elsewhere.[1] The 628 pages of Joyce's work involve the whole of Vico's *New Science;* the twenty pages of Borges' fiction—"El inmortal"—are specifically

[1] Donald Phillip Verene, *James Joyce and the Philosophers at Finnegans Wake* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016); Verene, *Knowledge of Things Human and Divine: Vico's New Science and "Finnegans Wake"* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); and Verene, ed., *Vico and Joyce* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

connected to Vico's discussion of the search for and discovery of the "true Homer." For Joyce to write a big book, another big book was required as a foundation. For Borges, in writing his fictions as well as his non-fictions, brevity is his aim. But for Joyce as for Borges, who was an admirer of Joyce, all books are about other books.

"The Immortal" has a central place in Borges' writings and is connected to several of his essays on the idea of infinity and the circularity of time. In his Norton lectures at Harvard that appeared as the little volume *This Craft of Verse*, Borges, reflecting on how he conceived his fictions, gives "The Immortal" as an example. He says: "I thought of a quite good plot; then I wrote the story 'El inmortal.' The idea behind that story—and the idea might come as a surprise to any of you who have read the story—is that if a man were immortal, then in the long run (and the run *would* be long, of course), he would have said all things, done all things, written all things."

Borges continues: "I took as my example Homer; I thought of him (if indeed he existed) as having written his *Iliad*. Then Homer would go on living, and he would change as the generations of men have changed. Eventually, of course, he would forget his Greek, and in due time he would forget that he had been Homer." Borges concludes: "This idea of Homer forgetting that he was Homer is hidden under many structures I wove around the book."[2] Homer is the ideal figure for this story because he represents the origin of Western literature that is preserved in the memory of the Western canon. It is with Homer that the Western literary imagination begins.

Neither Borges' *ficción* of the immortal Homer nor Joyce's *Wake* are intended as commentaries in the ordinary sense.[3] They offer a differ-

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[2] Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse*, ed. Calin-Andrei Mihailescu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 112-13.

[3] Vico appears in several contemporary works of fiction. Vico is part of the theme of A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* (New York: Random House, 1990), 3-6, 10, 23, 510, 512, 548. A paragraph summarizing Vico's views appears in Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet: A Novel* (New York: Picador, 2000), 83. The novels of Carlos Fuentes are influenced by Vico's conception of history, especially *Terra Nostra*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1976), *passim*, and *Christopher Unborn*, trans. Alfred Mac Adam and Carlos Fuentes (New York: Vintage, 1990), 132, 255, 278, 461, 463, 519. Vico's philosophy of

ent approach to understanding Vico than that of Benedetto Croce's *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico* or Isaiah Berlin's *Vico and Herder* and the range of philosophical and historical studies that succeed them in Italian, English, French, German, and Spanish.[4] In literary guise Vico appears anew. From this perspective we find Vico, to use his own terms, as a "poetic character" or "imaginative universal" (*universale fantastico*), as a figure of the fantastic imagination. In Joyce, Vico appears as "the producer (Mr. John Baptister Vickar)" among other guises, including even the central figure of the *Wake*, H. C. Earwicker.[5] Vico is merged with the rare bookdealer Joseph Cartaphilus of Smyrna, who sells the copy of Pope's *Iliad* at the beginning of Borges' story.[6]

To consider Borges' literary use of Vico as a form of commentary raises the theoretical question of the relation of philosophy to literature. How are we to understand this relationship as such? The relation of philosophy to literature, I think, may be approached in four ways. It may be thought of as a field of philosophy, as philosophy *of* literature. So conceived, philosophy is considered as a mode of thought independent from literature. From its perspective, philosophy can examine literature as a production of the imagination and arrive at a theory of literature in a manner analogous to other "philosophies of," such as philosophy of science, philosophy of history, philosophy of religion, and so forth. Philosophy of literature pursues the questions: What is literature? What is its function in human knowledge? What is its place in human culture and human affairs? Philosophy of literature, then, is part of the field of aesthetics and the philosophy of culture in general.

A second conception of the relation of philosophy to literature is the finding of philosophy *in* literature. On this conception, works of literature

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history appears as part of a program of humane education described in Flaubert's posthumous novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1880). See Gustave Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 1902), chap. 4.

4 E.g., see Molly Black Verene, "Works on Giambattista Vico in English from 1884 through 2009," *New Vico Studies* 27 (2009): 83-304.

5 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 255.27. See Verene*, Joyce and the Philosophers*, chap. 4.

6 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Immortal," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), 183-95; "El inmortal," in *El Aleph, Obras completes* (Buenos Aries: Emecé Editores, 1957), 7-26.

are approached in terms of the philosophical ideas contained in them. Literary works may project views of reality that are of significance for metaphysics, and they may contain philosophically important views of the self and of ethics. Literature becomes a source for philosophical speculation. Philosophy in literature reflects the origin philosophy has as the transformation through reason of the apprehensions of the world in ancient myths.

The third conception of the relation of philosophy to literature is that of philosophy *and* literature. This approach affirms a dialectical relation between philosophy and literature as independent but connected directions of thought. Philosophy seeks to achieve a grasp of the nature of things through the pursuit of pure, rationally formed ideas. Literature seeks to fulfill the power of the imagination by the expression of patterns of images. The most immediate form of this expression is found in lyric poetry. Yet the image dominates all forms of fictive expression, even if joined with ideational patterns. Philosophy never frees itself from the image. Philosophical works are filled with metaphorical language, but their aim is to take the mind to the thought of the pure idea. Hence the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. Philosophy in its pursuit of the idea loses the immediacy natural to the image. Poetry sees no need to move beyond the vitality of the image.

The fourth conception of the relation of philosophy to literature is philosophy *as* literature. On this conception literature is conceived in the broadest sense, as the power of the word to embody thought. This conception places both philosophy and literature within the Republic of Letters. The great works of philosophy, such as those of Plato or Hegel, are seen as intellectual narratives, the self in dialogue with itself. The great works of literature, such as those of Dante or Goethe, are inherently narratives of the intellect as well as of the imagination. Great works of philosophy and great works of literature arise from the same impetus and point in the same direction—the attempt to grasp what is absolute. Both philosophy and literature, in the ultimate sense, are attempts to take language beyond itself and to allow the mind to approach the really real. Philosophy and literature seen in this way are two sides of a coin. Neither can be fully separated from the other. The philosopher becomes a literary thinker and the litterateur becomes a lover of wisdom. They are both parts of a single process of the human spirit.

Borges' "The Immortal" is an example of this fourth conception. It may be described as an instance of literary philosophy. In it, image and idea

are bound together so as to take the reader to a glimpse of the absolute through the interconnection of memory, time, and mortality. The unseen appears in the seen, yet remains in essence unseen. A fiction, as we encounter it at the pen of Borges, is a verbal emblem in which a large and complex meaning is condensed into a particular circle of thought. A fiction is not a novelty. It brings to mind elements of other works in the way that an emblem is composed of elements reflected in other emblems.

Borges says: "It is a laborious madness and an impoverishing one, the madness of composing vast books—setting out in five hundred pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes. The better way to go about it is to pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them."[7] Borges says that he takes this procedure of writing from other writings—from Carlyle's *Sorter Resartus* and Butler's *The Fair Haven*. He says he carries this procedure even further in some cases, by writing about imaginary books. Fiction becomes tautological—fiction about fiction.

At another place, commenting on his fictions, Borges says: "I have tried (I am not sure how successfully) to write plain tales. I dare not say they are simple; there is not a simple page, a simple word on earth—for all pages, all words, predicate the universe, whose most notorious attribute is its complexity." All words are about other words, just as all works are about other works. Borges says, further: "But I do wish to make clear that I am not, nor have I ever been, what used to be called a fabulist or spinner of parables, what these days is called an *auteur engagé*. I do not aspire to be Æsop. My tales, like those of the *Thousand and One Nights*, are intended not to persuade readers, but to entertain and touch them. This intention does not mean that I shut myself, as Solomon's image would have it, into an ivory tower."

Fictions are not fantasies or parables, that is, they are not retreats from the world or moral allegories. They allow the reader to think thoughts which, if expressed in purely discursive terms, would lose the complexities of their truth. What is truly simple is always in fact complex. As Borges continues: "Each language is a tradition, each word a shared symbol; the changes that an innovator may make are trifling—we should remember the dazzling but often unreadable work of a Mallarmé

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[7] Borges, Foreword (1944), in *Fictions*, 67.

or a Joyce."[8] We can say of a fiction what Horace says of a poem—that its purpose is to instruct, delight, and move (*Ars poetica* 333). All bad philosophy is sincere. The opposite of sincerity, in this regard, is not insincerity but irony. Irony is the trope that governs both philosophy and fictions. Discovered by Socrates as the instrument of his thought, irony inhabits all true philosophy.

Irony affords the mind distance from the matter in hand, non-attachment. It is this distance that we find in ourselves as philosophers and as readers of a fiction. The mind can hold something before it, knowing that it can never fully know (and certainly not literally know) what is before it. There is always more before the mind than what it can perceive and what it can hold in thought. Philosophical thought is in principle ironic. Truth is always partial. What is thought and what is not thought, its opposite, both have a claim to truth. The True, then, is the whole. The sense of the whole is what is captured in the fiction as well as in the philosophical narrative.

The Fiction

Much of Vico's *New Science* has the character of a philosophical fiction, such as his presentation of the primordial giants' first experience of Jove as the basis of his "poetic metaphysics" and his "discovery of the true Homer" as a figure of the imagination of the Greek peoples. Borges' attachments to the importance of memory and fictive grasp of ideas, as well as Joyce's, have a natural sympathy with Vico's approach to thought and language that unites philosophy and philology by paying close attention to the etymology of words.

In the opening lines of "The Immortal," the rare bookdealer Joseph Cartaphilus, who sells the volumes of Pope's *Iliad* to the Princess de Lucinge, in London, is Vico, who, like Cartaphilus, has a friendly love of paper (Italian: *carta* = paper; Greek: *philos* = friendly; Latinized: *philus)*. The bookseller is described as "an emaciated, grimy man with gray eyes and gray beard and singularly vague features [*un hombre consumido y terroso, de ojos grises y barba gris, de rasgos singularmente vagos*]."[9] Vico's early biographer, Nicola Solla, describes

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[8] Borges, Foreword to *Brodie's Report* (1970), in *Fictions*, 345-46.
[9] Borges, "Immortal," in *Fictions*, 183.

Vico as being "of medium height, his body tended to be adust [*adusto*], aquiline nose, and lively penetrating eyes."[10] Vico was a gaunt, adust, and melancholic figure, all skin and bones, derisively called (by his *gran tormentatore*, Nicola Capasso), "*maestro Tisicuzzo*," an antique slur meaning tubercular (*tisico*).

Vico's father was a bookseller in Naples; his bookshop was in San Biagio dei Librai (*libraio*, bookseller, bookshop), one of the system of streets commonly called *Spaccanapoli* because they split the ancient center of Naples in two. Vico was born and raised in the single room in which his family lived, above his father's shop. In 1726, the year following the publication of the first edition of his *New Science*, Vico served as appraiser of the library of Giuseppe Valletta, the best in Naples. In preparing the *New Science*, Vico said: "I entombed myself completely in the silence of a great library rich in all the various works of human thought, where I meditated on the most ancient authors of all nations from whom after more than a thousand years modern writers take their beginnings."[11] The *New Science* throughout is built upon citations to other works. Vico is a lover of books, of writings, of what appears on paper.

The manuscript that is bound into the last volume of Pope's *Iliad* that the Princess buys is the text of "The Immortal" that is declared to be written in English but that "teems" with Latinisms. Borges' Spanish rendering of it also teems with Latinisms. Vico's *Scienza nuova* is traditionally regarded as written in a Latinized style, thought to be so because Vico wrote his prior works in Latin and from the fact that Vico prided himself as having mastered Latin equally with his own language. Vico's oration on education *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*, is composed in an exceptional Latin style.

Once he has passed on the manuscript hidden in the *Iliad*, Cartaphilus, the double of Vico, dies on his way back to his birthplace, Smyrna, as Borges relates. Smyrna is in western Turkey, south of the ancient location of Troy. Borges says Cartaphilus "expressed himself with untutored

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[10] Donald Phillip Verene, *The New Art of Autobiography: An Essay on the Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 28-29.

[11] Giambattista Vico, *Vici Vindiciae*, *in Giambattista Vico: Keys to the New Science; Translations, Commentaries, and Essays*, ed. Thora Ilin Bayer and Donald Phillip Verene (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 134.

and uncorrected fluency in several languages."[12] This mixture of languages may indicate a mixture of previous identities, indicating that he may be one of the immortals, having lived many lives. Now, having passed on the manuscript regarding the immortals, Cartaphilus can finally achieve mortality and be returned to his humanity. He is buried on the Greek island of Ios in the south central Cyclades, in the Aegean Sea.

If we accept the opinion of Pindar (fr. 279), who holds that Homer's birthplace was Smyrna, Cartaphilus may also be Homer. That Cartaphilus speaks in various languages and dialects may reflect the fact that Homer's poems combine dialects of various Greek peoples, leading to the view that this is why so many Greek cities claim to be his birthplace, a view involved in Vico's theory of the "true Homer." Homer's works are not transmitted in any one dialect but in as many Greek dialects as there are cities that claim to be his birthplace.

The manuscript describes an odyssey, subsequent to that of Odysseus, of a warrior in the service of the emperor Diocletian in the revolt in Egypt in 296 A.D., which was suppressed by Diocletian in person at Alexandria the following year. The warrior-narrator says he "had fought (with no glory) in the recent Egyptian wars and was tribune of a legion quartered in Berenice, on the banks of the Red Sea." Although quartered in Berenice, a city founded by Ptolemy, he says his "travails began in a garden in hundred-gated Thebes." This is the Egyptian Thebes, formerly capital of Egypt, on the left bank of the Nile. The reference to the hundred-gated Thebes is to its description in the ninth book of the *Iliad*. Diocletian was known not only for his conquests but for his attachment to the old Roman religion, traditions, and discipline.

The narrator of the text is confronted by an exhausted rider, whose birthplace is beyond the Ganges, and who is in search of "'*the secret river that purifies men of death*.'" He dies before dawn, but not before relating that "on the far shore of that river lay the City of the Immortals." The narrator decides to go in search of that city. He encounters great difficulties; can find no water; his men desert him, etc. He is obsessed with the image of the City. He dreams of an "orderly labyrinth at

[12] Borges, "Immortal," in *Fictions*, 183. Quotations from "Immortal" in this section follow the sequence in which they occur in the translation of Borges' text and are thus not separately cited.

whose center lay a well." But he dreams: "I knew I would die before I reached it." Then he wakes from this nightmare to find himself before the City of the Immortals, surrounded by a group of Troglodytes, who survive by devouring serpents. We then learn his full identity: "Marcus Flaminius Rufus, military tribune of one of the legions of Rome." Flaminius Rufus drinks from the river the rider had sought. He says: "I plunged my bloodied face into the dark water and lapped it like an animal."

He enters the City of the Immortals to find that, instead of being a wondrous labyrinth of divine design, it is a deconstructed architecture such that "the width and height of the treads on the staircases were not constant." He says the architecture had no purpose. "There were corridors that led nowhere, unreachably high windows, grandly dramatic doors that opened onto monklike cells or empty shafts, incredible upside-down staircases with upside-down treads and balustrades." He decides that the "*gods that built this place were mad*." It "*pollutes the past and the future and somehow compromises the stars. So long as the City endures, no one in the world can ever be happy or courageous*." When he emerges he swears to put this experience out of his memory.

Who is Marcus Flaminius Rufus? Why must he erase so far as possible any memory of this city? Unlike Odysseus he is not royal, but his name is patrician. Marcus is a common Roman *praenomen*—the name, for example, of Cicero's son. Flaminius is a patrician surname from the Roman gens Quinctius. Rufus has noble associations—Rufus of Ephesus, the noted physician who had a knowledge of Egypt, and Quintus Curtius Rufus, who published a large history of Alexander the Great. He had expected the city to be a great work of the gods, an ideal city made actual and eternal, but it is a nightmare of deconstruction and disorder. The hope of something eternal being a perfection that can be set off against the imperfection of temporal existence—is dashed. What is immortal, eternal, is space and time gone mad. We are better off not to know of it.

Flaminius Rufus is left with the companionship of a single Troglodyte, who attaches himself to him and follows him in the manner of a faithful dog or horse. He says: "The Troglodyte's lowly birth and condition recalled to my memory of the image of Argos, the moribund old dog of the *Odyssey*, so I gave him the name Argos, and tried to teach it to him." He fails time and time again to get the Troglodyte to respond to the name. He reflects "that it is generally believed among the Ethiopians that monkeys deliberately do not speak, so that they will not be forced to

work; I attributed Argos' silence to distrust or fear." He realizes that the Troglodyte and he likely live in separate universes; that of the Troglodyte is one of swift impressions devoid of memory and thus without objects that populate the human world. Then in desperation, in a rainstorm in the frigid desert night, Flaminius Rufus cries out: "*Argos*!"

Suddenly, in answer, "Argos stammered out these words: *Argos, Ulysses' dog*. And then, without looking at me, *This dog lying on the dungheap*." This is the dog that appears in the seventeenth book of the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus returns to Ithaca, and that is living on top of "piles of dung from mules and cattle." Now very old, Argos recognizes his returned master by wagging his tail and dropping his ears instead of pricking his ears, as he did at strangers. Eumaeus, the loyal swineherd, believes Odysseus to have died far from home. Argos dies as soon as he recognizes Odysseus. Then Odysseus, in the guise of a beggar, follows Eumaeus into his own royal house to confront the suitors.

In the odyssey of Marcus Flaminius Rufus, Argos the Troglodyte is Homer. He says: "I asked Argos how much of the *Odyssey* he knew. He found using Greek difficult; I had to repeat the question. *Very little*, he replied. *Less than the meagerest rhapsode. It has been eleven hundred years since I wrote it*." Homer explains that the Troglodytes were the immortals. The city had existed as a marvel, but the Immortals had destroyed this version about nine hundred years ago and on the same spot they had built the incoherent city as a temple to the irrational gods that rule the world and who do not resemble men. Then the Immortals abandoned this city and went off to dwell in caves and exist only as self-absorbed beings, scarcely perceiving the physical world.

Homer, after composing his poems, had gone in search of the Immortals and lived for a century in the City of the Immortals. When it was destroyed it was Homer who counseled the incoherent city be built as its replacement. We are told: "We should not be surprised by that—it is rumored that after singing of the War of Ilion, he sang of the war between the frogs and rats. He was like a god who created first the Cosmos, and then Chaos." One thinks of Joyce's "chaosmos" (*FW* 118.21).

In the *Homeric Apocrypha*, in the "Battle of the Frogs and the Rats" the gods, at the advice of Athena, allow the meaningless event to take place. Athena says: "gods, let's forget aiding these creatures, in case one of you gets wounded by a sharp missile: they are close fighters, even if a god should come against them. Let's all just enjoy watching the battle from

heaven. So she spoke, and the other gods went along with her advice" (193-97). The war between these two species is without meaning. It is chaotic activity that simply ends, as the poem describes, when the day itself ends.

The manuscript states: "There is nothing very remarkable about being immortal; with the exception of mankind, all creatures are immortal, for they know nothing of death. What is divine, terrible and incomprehensible is *to know* oneself immortal." Mortality is the necessary condition of the desire for virtue, for the best life. The Immortal lives all lives and need not prefer one over the other. "No one is someone; a single immortal man is all men." Mortality is the condition that generates the drive to create meaning, to make literature. "Homer composed the *Odyssey*; given infinite time, with infinite circumstances and changes, it is impossible that the *Odyssey* should *not* be composed at least once." To be all things is the same as to be not. For to be is to be something particular, individual, that cannot be completely duplicated and that can pass out of existence.

In the life of mortals everything is contingent. "Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, and the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in the future, *ad vertiginem*." The existence of the Immortal is a turning around on itself without end. There is no past, present, and future. One thing is always counterbalanced by another. The Immortals are prevented from having any sense of pity, for any wrong will eventually be balanced by a right and the reverse. It is comparable to betting in games of chance: winnings and losings tend to equal out over time.

Flaminius Rufus and Homer separate, and the manuscript relates how this Roman Ulysses wandered through "new realms" and "new empires," fighting in the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066 in the ranks of Harold II and wandering through the centuries in the cultures of Europe and the East. He recorded the seven voyages of Sindbad and taught astrology in Bikaner in northwest India and in Bohemia in central Europe. He subscribed to the six volumes of Pope's *Iliad* in Aberdeen in 1714, just prior to its publication, which began in 1715, as noted earlier. He says: "In 1729 or thereabouts, I discussed the origin of that poem with a professor of rhetoric whose name, I believe, was Giambattista; his arguments struck me as irrefutable." On his way to Bombay in 1921 Flaminius Rufus drinks from a spring on the Eritrean coast and while so doing scratches the back of his hand on a thorn. A drop of blood appears, and he realizes he is once more mortal.

The True Homer

In the last several paragraphs of the manuscript, the tale told in the first person by Marcus Flaminius Rufus breaks off. These paragraphs contain a reflection on the credibility of the tale by Cartaphilus, who claims that what is related does not pass beyond the bounds of truth but in some details he detects "a certain falseness." He says it is "a way of writing that I learned from poets; it is a procedure that infects everything with falseness." This claim echoes Horace's *Ars poetica*, in which he acknowledges that poets make things up but also advises that poetry should not be inconsistent. The poet naturally fills in what is lost to memory. Cartaphilus is speaking for Borges himself in saying: "it does not matter that I may be judged a fantast [*fantástico*]."

The reason for the intermingling of truth and falseness is that the memories of two figures are intermingled—that of Flaminius Rufus and of Homer. This intermingling is characteristic of the poet inspired by the Muses, the daughters of Memory who, as Hesiod says, sing both true and false songs, but can sing true songs when they will. The Roman is both a warrior like Ulysses and a man of letters like Homer because on several occasions, especially when he first drinks the water of the river of the Immortals, he speaks the words of Homer that appear at the end of the famous catalogue of ships of the *Iliad*, of the "clan that drank the Aesepus' dark waters." The tale has thus been "composed by a man of letters desirous (like the author of the catalog of ships) of wielding splendid words." To this line is appended the footnote: "Ernesto Sabato suggests that the 'Giambattista' who discussed the origins of the *Iliad* with the rare book dealer Cartaphilus is Giambattista Vico, the Italian who defended the argument that Homer is a symbolic character, like Pluto or Achilles."

Finally, both Flaminius Rufus and Cartaphilus assert that now, at the end of their lives, they have lost all images supplied by memory and all that remains are words. The Roman Ulysses says: "As the end approaches, there are no longer any images from memory—there are only words." The "me" of memory—the "mememormee" on Joyce's final page of *Finnegans Wake*—with its storehouse of images formed as an individual, is gone. The river of Lethe, runs as well above ground as below. Flaminius Rufus says: "I have been Homer, soon like Ulysses, I shall be Nobody [*outis*]; soon, I shall be all men—I shall be dead." The manuscript ends with these words: "*As the end approaches*, wrote Cartaphilus, *there are no longer any images from memory—there are only words*.

Words, words, words taken out of place and mutilated, words from other men—those were the alms left him by the hours and the centuries." The immortal becomes a fiction without unique identity. As a fantast telling the story of his life—the story made up of the words of other fictions. Thought is now just the manipulation of words in a present.

What is Vico's account of Homer, the arguments of which seem irrefutable? In the third book of the *New Science*, Vico engages in a digression addressed to the "Discovery of the True Homer." It confirms the claim of the abovementioned footnote, that Vico regards Homer as a "symbolic character [*personaje simbólico*]." Vico says: "Homer was an idea or a heroic character of Grecian men [*un carattere eroico d'uomini greci*] insofar as they told their histories in song."[13] Vico takes a position between the views that Homer did not exist and that Homer is an abstract symbol. Instead, Vico regards Homer as actual but not in the sense of a given individual. Homer is a collective name for those ancient Greeks who narrated their histories in song. Homer, then, is a generic name of the imagination, or what Vico calls a "poetic character" or "imaginative universal" (*universale fantastico*), the logic of which is at the basis of all fables.

The two examples the footnote gives of such characters—Pluto and Achilles—are not the standard combination that Vico gives. His two constant examples of heroic characters are Achilles and Ulysses, the heroes of the two Homeric poems. All gods and heroes are poetic characters. Pluto, one of the children of Kronos, is not a hero but a god with the Roman name Dis. He is likely included here because of his association with the underworld, and Vico has several passages interpreting Pluto escorting Proserpine into the underworld.[14] Vico identifies Proserpine with Ceres, the goddess of grain, a symbol of ancient wealth, and with the fable of Aeneas the Trojan-Roman Ulysses and the golden bough.

Vico says that the discovery that the first gentile peoples were theological poets who spoke in poetic characters, and thus expressed the origin myths upon which all nations are founded, is "the master key of this Science."[15] These first humans could not form abstract class terms

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[13] Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), para. 873.
[14] Ibid., paras. 714, 716, and 721.
[15] Ibid., para. 34.

or "intelligible universals" (*universali intelligibili*) as formulated in Aristotle's *Organon*. They formed the primordial experience of thunder as Jove by onomatopoeia. The thunderous interjections of Jove gave birth to one produced by the human voice: "*pa*" which was then doubled as "*pape!*"[16] Prior to formulating the first name, Jove, the first humans or protohumans, like the Troglodyte Argos, experienced the world as a series of fleeting impressions without the impressions coming together as objects. Each instance of thunder was a unique perception. The sudden finding again in one of these perceptions the meaning of the whole series produces Jove as the first named object.

Once in possession of the power of the name, everything can be named and all flora and fauna become gods. Vico says: "The first founders of humanity applied themselves to a sensory topics [*topica sensibile*], by which they brought together those properties or qualities or relations of individuals and species which were, so to speak, concrete, and from these formed their poetic genera."[17] These topics are formed not by reflection or intellection but by imagination (*fantasia*) and memory. Vico says in his discussion of Homer that "memory is the same as imagination [*la memoria è la stessa che la fantasia*]."[18] The first humans, like children, have strong memories and thus strong imaginations; they think in poetic characters. Vico says: "'Character' means idea, form, model; and certainly poetic characters came before those of articulate sounds [that is, before alphabetic characters]."[19]

In Vico's "ideal eternal history" of three ages through which any nation develops—the ages of gods, heroes, and humans—poetic characters or universals are the thought-form of the ages of gods and heroes, and intelligible class-concepts or universals are the form of the human age. Once a nation develops to its heroic age it can employ heroes as poetic characters that embody virtues which direct behavior. The human mind at this age is unable to form moral abstractions such as courage or wisdom (*prudentia*, *phronēsis*). It forms these as the heroic characters of Achilles and Ulysses.

All warriors who are courageous are perceived as Achilles. All warri-

[16] Ibid., para. 448.
[17] Ibid., para. 495.
[18] Ibid., para. 819.
[19] Ibid., para. 429.

ors who are prudent and clever are Ulysses. These individuals are not *like* Achilles or Ulysses. They literally *are* them, and in addition Achilles is Achilles and Ulysses is Ulysses. That Achilles and Ulysses are one and many at the same time in the same sense is a meaning that can be reached only by the power of *fantasia*, not by rational reflection. Achilles and Ulysses can be univocally (literally) predicated of individuals in the same way that the rational mind can literally predicate the virtues of courage and prudence as properties of a class of individuals. The imaginative universal is phenomenologically presupposed by the intelligible universal.

The reflective or rational mind can have access to the logic of *fantasia* only through fictions. Once the world of mythical thinking is left, myth proper can never be made again. Lyric can capture only one aspect of the myth—the power of the immediate image. The lyric must be bonded with the dramatic and the epic to attain the fiction, because myth is more than immediate images. Myths, whether primal or societal, structure the world. Like the poetic characters upon which they are based, myths are a world of proto-thought accessible to an extent by the imagination, but whose inner form is not accessible to reason.

Vico says: "Aristotle in his *Poetics* says that only Homer knew how to invent poetic falsehoods. For his poetic characters, which are incomparable for the sublime appropriateness which Homer admires in them, were imaginative universals."[20] Aristotle says: "Homer more than any other has taught the others [poets] the art of framing lies in the right way. I mean the use of paralogism. Whenever, if one thing is or happens, another is or happens, men's notion is that if the latter is, so is the former—but that is a false conclusion."[21] Vico points out, rightly, that Horace in *Ars poetica* advises poets above all to imitate Homer's creation of characters.[22] Paralogism is incorrect reasoning and has a connection to legend (Greek *para-logos*, against speech or reason; legend, akin to *legein*, to collect, gather, speak; *logos*).

A fiction is always a doubling-up. Everything is a "twone" (*FW* 003.12). Two things can always be associated such that the presence of one seems to justify the presence of the other. As in an imaginative uni-

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[20] Ibid., para. 809.

[21] Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2:2336 (1460^a).

[22] Vico, *New Science*, para. 806.

versal, Cartaphilus can be Vico and yet be Cartaphilus. Flaminius Rufus can be Homer and yet be the Roman tribune attracted to the use of letters. The imagination can tolerate what reason cannot. Yet it is in the imagination that original connections are made that supply the beginnings for the rational sense of *logos*. In the fiction we can think the unthinkable.

The Circularity of Time and the Ethics of Immortality

The epigraph Borges affixes to "The Immortal" is from Bacon's essay "Of Vicissitude of Things": "Solomon saith: *There is no new thing upon the earth*. So that as Plato had an imagination, *that all knowledge was but remembrance*; so Solomon giveth his sentence, *that all novelty is but oblivion*.[23]

A source for Bacon's sense of vicissitude is Machiavelli's observation in the *Discourses*: "that things are forgotten." Machiavelli says: "To those philosophers who have held that the world is eternal, I believe it can be replied that, if such antiquity is correct, it is reasonable that there should be a record of more than five thousand years, except that such records of the past are blotted out by various causes, part of which come from men, part from Heaven."[24] Only what repeats itself in some way is remembered; what does not at some point is forgotten. Eternity depends upon repetition of events.

In the *Phaedo* Socrates says to Cebes that "coming to life again in truth exists, the living come to be from the dead, and the souls of the dead exist." Cebes replies that "for us learning is no other than recollection. According to this, we must at some previous time have learned what we now recollect. This is possible only if our soul existed somewhere before it took on this human shape. So according to this theory too, the soul is likely to be something immortal."[25] Knowledge, then, is dependent on what can be remembered and what can truly be remem-

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[23] Francis Bacon, "Of Vicissitude of Things," in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 451.

[24] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, in *The Chief Works and Others*, trans. Allan Gilbert, 3 vols. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 1:339-40.

[25] Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 63 (72E).

bered over time is what can repeat itself. What is purely novel disappears from memory because it is unconnected to the whole which exists beyond time and which itself does not change.

At the beginning of Ecclesiastes, the author of which by tradition may be Solomon, puts forth the claim that all novelty is oblivion in the famous lines: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun." This claim of repetition is followed by: "Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been, in the ages before us." And then: "The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who came after them" (Ecc. 9-11). The causes of oblivion are those that Machiavelli identifies: the acts of Heaven, natural disasters that destroy all records, and the acts of men's memory, which is affected as much by its powers of remembrance as those of forgetting.

To endorse this view of vicissitude and also to offset it, we may add the maxim of the Florentine historian Francesco Guicciardini: "All that which has been in the past and is at present will be again in the future. But both the names and the appearances of things change, so that he who does not have a good eye will not recognize them. Nor will he know how to grasp a norm of conduct or make a judgment by means of observation."[26] Guicciardini's *buono occhio* is the key to prudence. The circularity of time is not simply the condition of change; it is the time of eternity. The eternal, the immortal is not a reality separate from the contingent world of change; it is the circularity and repetitiveness of that world itself.

Poetry is based on falsehoods, not in the sense that poets lie in an ordinary sense. Poetic falsehoods are logical falsehoods. As Aristotle claims above, the paralogisms of poetry commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent found in hypothetical syllogisms. The poet or fictionalist is naturally speculative, thinking in the form of "if-then." But instead of affirming the antecedent to justify the consequent, the poet affirms the consequent and then claims the truth of the antecedent (instead of p implies q, p, therefore q; p implies q, q, therefore p). If Flaminius Rufus is Homeric, then he will be a Roman Odysseus; he is a Roman Odysseus; therefore he is Homeric. Hypothetical judgments embody the category

[26] Francesco Guicciardini, *Ricordi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1977), 131. My translation.

of cause; they state a causal connection. The poem or fiction does not accept this sense of causal implication. The poet or fictionalist replaces this sense of causality with the a-causal principle of the coincidence of opposites. According to this principle, anything may coincide with anything. Everything is a double of itself and everything is what it is in itself and what it is not, its opposite. The coincidence of opposites is present in everyone's experience. It is the basis of repetition and of the logic of the dream, as Joyce has demonstrated in his book of the dark, his "dreamoneire" of *Finnegans Wake* (280.01). *Coincidentia oppositorum* is natural in fiction, but surprises us in ordinary life.

In his non-fictions or essays Borges returns repeatedly to the subject of the circularity of time and the nature of immortality. In the "Doctrine of Cycles" (1936) he addresses the doctrine of the Eternal Return, which he finds in Nietzsche. Borges formulates it as: "*The number of all atoms that compose the world is immense but finite, and as such only capable of a finite (though also immense) number of permutations. In an infinite stretch of time, the number of possible permutations must be run through, and the universe has to repeat itself*."[27] This doctrine of cycles is challenged, Borges says, by Georg Cantor's doctrine of transfinite numbers entailed in his arithmetic of the infinite and theory of sets of points.

On this conception all that there is can be considered finite, yet within this finitude we can conceive of an infinite progression that never wholly repeats itself. Such an infinite progression can be conceived in terms of temporal moments or sets of spatial points. Transfinite is either an index of the ordered set of all natural numbers or can be generated from these by purely algebraic means. Another way to see this principle is to regard a cardinal number of a mathematical aggregate as not finite.

Although Borges presents this conception of finite-infinite in terms of Cantor's sets, we may more easily view it in the broader epistemological terms of a logical function of the form $\varphi(\chi)$ where χ is a series of variables constructed through its bond with a law of the series φ. The φ and the χ are of different logical types yet have meaning only when taken together. The law of a particular series is meaningless when taken in itself and the variables in such a series have no meaning apart from

[27] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Doctrine of Cycles," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 1999), 115.

the order that the law establishes in the series. Variables have no independent or intrinsic meaning as individuals. They are only individuals when serially ordered—when they are part of a progressively constructed whole. The $\varphi(\chi)$ is at any point finite, yet the series is infinite. At no point need it become a cycle or repeat itself.

In an essay of the same year, "A History of Eternity," Borges says: "as everyone knows—eternity is the model and archetype of time." He says: "For us, time is a jarring, urgent problem, perhaps the most vital problem of metaphysics."[28] Borges is at one with Hegel's claim that "the true infinite [*das wahrhafte Unendliche*] is the fundamental concept of philosophy [*der Grundbegriff der Philosophie*]."[29] All metaphysics depends upon the proper comprehension of the concept of infinity, which is the proper comprehension of time. Hegel distinguishes between the true infinite—the concept of an infinite progression that dialectically or functionally recapitulates itself (in the manner described above)—and the bad infinite (*schlechte Unendlicheit*)—an infinite series in which one thing simply comes after another and in which the finite and infinite are simple opposites, making the infinite conditioned by the finite. This is not an abstract problem, as Borges rightly holds, for time is the very condition of our human existence. In metaphysical terms, it is the problem of the finite and infinity or eternity. In anthropological terms, it is the problem of mortality and immortality.

In "When Fiction Lives in Fiction" (1939), Borges describes his first experience with infinity, which is his childhood notice of a Japanese scene painted on a large biscuit tin, in the corner of which reappears the same scene, in which appears the same scene, etc. Some years later he "discovered in one of Russell's works an analogous invention by Josiah Royce, who postulates a map of England drawn on a portion of the territory of England: this map—since it is exact—must contain a map of the map, which must contain a map of the map of the map, and so to infinity."[30] The source of this is most likely Royce's "Supplemen-

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[28] Borges, "A History of Eternity," in *Non-Fictions*, 123.

[29] G. W. F. Hegel, *Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, vol. 8 of *Werke* (Frankfurt on Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 203 (sec. 95). My translation.

[30] Borges, "When Fiction Lives in Fiction," in *Non-Fictions*, 160.

tary Essay" in *The World and the Individual*.[31] Borges sees, in this map and in the double portrait of Philip IV in Velázquez' *Las meninas*, the phenomenon of "the interpolation of a fiction within another fiction."[32] Since all books are about other books, as all artworks are about other artworks, a fiction is always a determinate moment either explicitly or implicitly in a "true infinity" of images.

In "Circular Time" (1941), Borges says: "I tend to return eternally to the Eternal Return." His purpose in these several pages is to define the three fundamental modes of the conception of circular time. The first is that attributed to Plato, which is the idea of a literal return to the past such that there will be, as Borges says Thomas Browne put it: "A revolution of a certain thousand years when all things should return to their former estate and he [Plato] be teaching again in his school as when he delivered this opinion."[33] The source for this conception of "Plato's year" is Augustine's *City of God* (12.14). The second mode is that of Nietzsche, as discussed earlier. Borges finds this Nietzschean view stated in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, in which he considers the view that instead of supposing matter to be of an infinite number of particulars, as did Epicurus, we consider it finite. Hume writes: "This world, therefore, with all its events, even the most minute, has before been produced and destroyed, and will again be produced and destroyed, without any bounds and limitations."[34]

Borges says: "I now arrive at the final mode of interpreting eternal repetitions, the least melodramatic and terrifying of the three, but the only one that is conceivable. I mean the concept of similar but not identical cycles. The infinite catalogue of authorities would be impossible to complete."[35] One of the authorities Borges cites is Vico, but he does not discuss Vico's conception of the life of nations as governed by *corso* and *ricorso*. He quotes Marcus Aurelius: "The lengthiest and briefest periods are equal. The present belongs to all; to die is to lose the present, which is

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[31] Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual: First Series, The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 504.
[32] Borges, "Fiction," in *Non-Fictions*, 160.
[33] Borges, "Circular Time," in *Non-Fictions*, 225.
[34] Ibid., 226, quoted by Borges.
[35] Ibid.

the briefest of lapses. No one loses the past or the future, because no man can be deprived of what he does not have."[36] And Schopenhauer: "No man has lived in the past, and none will ever live in the future; the *present* alone is the form of all life."[37] That to be alive is simply to be in the present is the first consequence of this third mode of eternal repetitions. "The second is a negation of all novelty, following the author of Ecclesiastes [as quoted in the epigraph for "The Immortal"]."[38]

Vico's *corso*—his cycle of three ages of ideal eternal history of gods, heroes, and humans—is followed by the *ricorso* of these ages. But the *ricorso* is not "Plato's year" of literal repetition, nor is it the eternal return of cycle after cycle in a finite universe. Vico's *ricorso* has the sense of a retrial in which he claims providence tries to teach its divine truth of a natural eternal republic a second time. The *ricorso* is a recollection of the *corso* and thus a repetition of it in different terms. Applied to Western history, the *corso* is the age of gods and heroes before Homer, whose poetry summarizes them and preserves them in the Greeks' common memory. The Homeric turning-point is followed by the heroic mind of Socratic reason that originates the distinctively human world of ideas and written laws that is continued by the Romans until the fall of ancient civilization.

The *ricorso* is a return to religion in the early Medieval or "Dark Ages" of Europe. This period is followed by the high middle ages of chivalrous heroism and Scholastic thought that is summarized by Dante, the "Tuscan Homer," as Vico calls him. Dante is followed by the Renaissance Humanists, who revive the thought and culture of Athens and Rome, which then declines into the Cartesian world of ratiocination and a jurisprudence of laws as regulations rather than the embodiment of virtues.

Borges says we "all secretly share the same destiny—the only possible destiny—thus universal history is the history of a single man." Time and our fate of mortality now becomes tolerable. Borges further says that our allotted seventy years "becomes no more than an affirmation that the number of human perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and vicissitudes is limited and that before dying we will exhaust them all."[39]

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[36] Ibid., 227.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 228.

Vico's *corso* is childhood; his *ricorso* is adulthood. At any moment we are in the true infinity of the present. We have the assurance that at no time can we be imprisoned by external events, if we have this inner form of human memory. To extend Borges' point, we may add that this assurance presupposes an education of the soul—*paideia*, *Bildung*—which is the education of memory, for memory is the form of our humanity in the present. "Personal identity is known to reside in memory, and the annulment of that faculty is known to result in idiocy."[40] It is the teaching of the Muses, who can sing of what was, is, and is to come.

In "A New Refutation of Time" (1944–47), Borges says: "In the course of a life dedicated to belles-lettres and, occasionally, to the perplexities of metaphysics, 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. This refutation is to be found in one form or another, in all my books."[41] To consider the question of the refutation of time Borges turns to Berkeley, the first figure of the modern version of philosophical idealism, Plato being such in the ancient world. Borges holds that idealism is perhaps the most ancient and most widely held doctrine in the history of philosophy.

Borges rightly puts aside the view that Berkeley's philosophy entails solipsism because "Berkeley affirmed the continuous existence of objects, inasmuch as when no individual perceives them, God does."[42] He also affirms Berkeley's ingenious refutation of the view that the mind can be material because the brain is simply an idea the mind has of itself. In Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*, Philonous says: "The brain therefore you speak of, being a sensible thing, exists only in the mind."[43]

The idealist position as Borges describes it, moving from Berkeley to F. H. Bradley, is that succession is the condition of our perceptions and thoughts but succession does not apply to the Absolute as such. Temporal succession, then, is a property of our subjective mind but not of divine mind, which perceives all simultaneously as an eternal present. Yet Bor-

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[40] Borges, "A History of Eternity," in *Non-Fictions*, 136.
[41] Borges, "A New Refutation of Time," in *Non-Fictions*, 318.
[42] Ibid., 320.
[43] George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, ed. Colin M. Turbayne (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs Merrill, 1954), 52.

ges, having argued that the idealist denial of time as ultimately real is not logically refutable, concludes: "To deny temporal succession, to deny the self, to deny the astronomical universe, appear to be acts of desperation and are secret consolations." He says our destiny to be mortal is not terrifying because it is unreal; it is terrifying because it is irreversible. Nothing can prevent our death as a particular self, even if the really real of the Absolute is not in itself temporal, that is, if its being is not successive. Borges concludes: "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 that 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."[44]

We may connect this sense of the personal in relation to temporal succession with Borges' final remarks in his "A History of Eternity." There he relates a passage entitled "Feeling of Death," from his book *The Language of the Argentines*. It captures his personal theory of eternity. "Mine is an impoverished eternity, without God or even a coproprietor, and entirely devoid of archetypes."[45] He describes walking, one evening, in an unfamiliar neighborhood. Suddenly he felt the simple scene he took in as if timeless. "I felt as the dead feel, I felt myself to be an abstract observer of the world: an indefinite fear imbued with knowledge that is the greatest clarity of metaphysics." The serenity of the night and of the scene produced a true sense of eternity. It was a sense of the unchanged, not of similarity or repetition of things but of something being absolutely the same.

Borges says: "When 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." He concludes: "Life is too impoverished not to be immortal. But we lack even the certainty of our own poverty, given that time, which is easily refutable by the senses, is not so easily refuted by the intellect, from whose essence the concept of succession appears inseparable."[46] Borges' "intimation of eternity" is a moment of metaphysical insight that overcomes the sense of *aporia* that Aristotle, in the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, describes as

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[44] Borges, "Refutation," in *Non-Fictions*, 332.
[45] Borges, "Eternity," in *Non-Fictions*, 137.
[46] Borges, Ibid., 138..

generating *thauma* (wonder), from which metaphysics originates.

Borges' final consideration of the problem of time is his lecture on "Immortality" (1978). Here he declares: "I don't want to continue being Jorge Luis Borges; I want to be someone else. I hope that my death will be total; I hope to die in body and soul." Borges says: "The most poignant text in all of philosophy, without trying to be so, is Plato's *Phaedon*."[47] This is the dialogue of Socrates' last day of life, in which Socrates discusses the question of the immortality of the soul with the two Pythagoreans, Simmias and Cebes, and which ends in the scene of his death. Borges marvels that on the last day of his life Socrates speaks of the inseparability of pleasure and pain as well as holding the soul to be separate from the body and that the soul, when freed from the body, can dedicate itself to thinking.

In this final lecture on the subject of immortality, Borges insists that he wishes to cease as Borges. After reviewing various philosophical views of the immortality of the soul, he concludes: "I would say that I believe in immortality, not in the personal but in the cosmic sense. We will keep on being immortal; beyond our physical death our memory will remain, and beyond our memory will remain our actions, our circumstances, our attitudes, all that marvelous part of universal history, although we won't know, and it is better that we won't know it."[48] Borges apparently sees his own immortality as that of those he includes within his own thoughts and writings. He will become one of the authors on whom other authors base their works. But Borges the actual man will be no more. Borges portrays himself as having reached a point at which he has been all he can be and he wants not to continue as a repetition of himself.

In his "Afterword," reflecting on the various fictions of *The Aleph*, Borges says the subject of "The Immortal": "is the effect that immortality would have on humankind," and that this text is an "outline for an ethics of immortality."[49] The metaphysics of infinity points to an ethics. Borges's considerations of infinity and immortality in his various nonfictions take us to the view that a concept of personal immortality is unnecessary for an ethics of humankind. For us to seek the best life it is not necessary for us to prove or believe in an afterlife in which the succes-

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[47] Borges, "Immortality," in *Non-Fictions*, 484.
[48] Ibid., 481.
[49] Borges, "Afterword," in *Fictions*, 287.

sion that characterizes temporal existence is overcome in an eternal present. The Kantian view that we require a sense of God as judge to be faced in an afterlife, in order to be moral in this life, is mistaken. The best life is its own reward. Borges quotes Plutarch: "Yesterday's man died in the man of today, today's man dies in the man of tomorrow."[50]

If we go to Plutarch's *Moralia*, we find that he adds: "Nobody remains one person, nor is one person; but we become many persons, even as matter is drawn about some one resemblance and common mould with imperceptible movement." We know this because we experience things differently at different times in our lives. Plutarch continues: "What, then, really is Being? It is that which is eternal, without beginning and without end, to which no length of time brings change. For time is something that is in motion, appearing in connexion with moving matter, ever flowing, retaining nothing, a receptacle, as it were, of birth and decay, whose familiar 'afterwards' and 'before,' 'shall be' and 'has been,' when they are uttered, are of themselves a confession of Not Being."[51]

Our Not Being is always at every moment in our Being. At death the successive sense of ourselves disappears and we are in time no more. Death gives us full access to Being. Whether this Being is that of our individual soul or a merger with the cosmic soul of *nous* remains an open question. It is evident by now that Borges' consideration of the interrelation of eternity and immortality, joined with the Vichian circularity of time, offers no intellectual solution to the problem of our mortality. We can confront this problem only existentially, not theoretically. It is an *aporia* not simply in thought but inscribed in the human condition itself.

We might take consolation in considering the Socrates of the *Phaedo*, who says we do not know what our state is after death for we cannot know what death is while alive. But we have the Socratic precept that no harm can come to a good man either in life or in death. A good person is one who makes no one the worse for knowing him. It is the ideal of true civility, the wisdom befitting the human. If we keep this precept before us, we can say to ourselves that which Plato was wont to say: *eu prattōmen*, "we shall fare well." More we cannot say.

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[50] Borges, "Refutation" in *Non-Fictions*, 331-32.

[51] Plutarch, "The E at Delphi," in vol. 5 of *Moralia*, trans. F. C. Babbitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 243 (19).