

# Synchronistic Worlds: Lovecraft and Borges

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On 7 December 1967, Jorge Luis Borges was in Providence, Rhode Island, on his second American tour to read and to lecture. That evening he consented to address a secret society of Brown University undergraduates and faculty members, dedicated to the discussion of general intellectual topics, and he began his conversation by observing that “The world is insoluble, but then you call yourself ‘The Sphinx,’ and must delight in riddles.” Borges went on to regale the society of “The Sphinx” (of which I was a guest and not a member) with a Socratic monologue on Robert Frost’s poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” wondering if the narrator of the poem really knew to whom the woods belonged, if they were humanity’s woods, God’s woods, Dante’s metaphysical woods, etc. I do not think that Borges solved this conundrum or that he even wanted to solve it, but, as with his tales, essays, and sketches, he certainly conveyed to the assembled company his deep delight in simply posing the riddle itself.

After the talk he signed my paperback copy of *Labyrinths* with a labyrinthine scribble dictated, of course, by his blindness, but also (as I thought at the time) in a script that consciously harked back to the mysterious stone hieroglyphs at the end of Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Since Poe has time-honored connections with Providence, I was prompted to ask this most learned and eclectic of contemporary writers if he happened to be conversant with another master of the fantastic who had lived and died in the city. Somewhat to my surprise, Borges replied that no, he was not at all familiar with the works of H. P. Lovecraft.

At about the same time, an interview that Richard Burgin conducted with Borges reveals that he *did* know something of Lovecraft’s art, yet in a context that prompted him to banish Lovecraft to an oblivion as complete as the one that swallows up his own figure of the Arabian scholar in “Averroes’ Search.” Speaking of an anthology compiled by six Argentine writers (including himself) who chose the best stories they knew and which came out in Buenos Aires “about six months ago,” Borges observed that “I don’t think the aim was really to find out the best stories in the world by any means, I think what they [the

other writers] wanted was to get an anthology that people might want to buy, no? That people might be interested in. Then one took [Melville's] 'Bartleby,' and one took, I don't know why, a very disagreeable and rather bogus story by Lovecraft." Borges asked Burgin if he had read Lovecraft, and when Burgin replied in the negative, Borges declared rather imperiously, "Well, no reason why you should."<sup>1</sup>

Therefore imagine my surprise when I read the implicit praise accorded to Lovecraft by Borges's inclusion of him in his *Introduction to American Literature*, originally published in Buenos Aires in 1967 and reissued in English translation by the University Press of Kentucky four years later. Based upon the lectures Borges gave when he was Professor of English and American literature at the University of Buenos Aires, this work might better be considered in the genre made popular by Isaac D'Israeli's *Curiosities of Literature* (1834), a favorite source book for Poe, or classified with odd anthologies such as Borges's own *Book of Imaginary Beings*, since it is as much a cabinet of strange and dissonant facts as it is a primer of American literature. As one of his own students commented about the original lectures, "The problem is that Borges sometimes chooses what is most important for Borges and not what is most important in that literature."<sup>2</sup>

Of Sherwood Anderson we learn, for example, that "He was married four times; for many years he was at one and the same time editor of a Republican and a Democratic newspaper in Marion, Virginia."<sup>3</sup> Almost every page confirms Borges's love for the parodic, the lugubrious, the serendipitous, and the absurd. In the penultimate chapter (number 13) on "The Detective Story, Science Fiction, and the Far West," Lovecraft is accorded as much space as had been previously allotted to E. A. Robinson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Robert Penn Warren. Borges writes:

Howard Philips [*sic*] Lovecraft (1890–1937) was born in Providence, Rhode Island. Very sensitive and of delicate health, he was educated by his widowed mother and aunts. Like Hawthorne he enjoyed solitude, and although he worked during the day, he did so with the shades lowered.

In 1924 he married and moved to Brooklyn; in 1929 he was divorced and returned to Providence, where he went back to his life of solitude. He died of cancer. He detested the present and professed a fondness for the eighteenth century.

Science attracted him: his first article had to do with astronomy. He published but a single book during his lifetime; after his death his friends brought together in book form the considerable body of his work, which had been dispersed in anthologies and magazines. He studiously imitated the style of Poe

with its sonorities and pathos, and he wrote co[s]mic nightmares [*orig.*: “pesadillas cosmicas”]. In his stories one meets beings from remote planets and from ancient or future epochs who dwell in human bodies to study the universe, or, conversely, souls of our time who during sleep explore monstrous worlds, distant in time and space. Among his works we shall recall “The Color from Space,” [*sic*] “The Dunwich Horror,” and “The Rats in the Wall.” [*sic*]

He also left a voluminous correspondence. To Poe’s influence upon him one should also add that of the visionary storyteller Arthur Machen.<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious from this summary that Borges had read not only some of Lovecraft’s major works (“The Shadow out of Time” in particular) but also an account of his life and a modicum of criticism about him. This fact is confirmed by Paul Theroux, who in a 1978 conversation with Borges “about horror stories in general” elicited the perverse revelation that “I like Lovecraft’s horror stories. His plots are very good, but his style is atrocious. I once dedicated a story to him.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, Borges’s attitude toward Lovecraft can only be described in terms of a syndrome of attraction-repulsion, an aesthetic of extreme polarities or a metaphysics of paradox, similar to the *Mysterium tremendum* as described by Rudolf Otto.<sup>6</sup> Both horns of this dilemma demand their own special polishing.

## I

Let us begin with the attractions and congruencies. Given Borges’s own love of mirror reflections—his doubling and extension of himself beyond the mere duality of a parable like “Borges and I”—we should not be surprised to find some pertinent connections between the Argentine sophisticate and the American provincial. Borges, too, published in scattered journals and ephemeral periodicals; he, too, was “collected” by assiduous and dedicated friends and disciples, though luckily during his lifetime and not after (the first three volumes of his *Collected Works* were published in 1954 by Emece in Buenos Aires). Like Lovecraft, as a youth he fed his loneliness on the works of Poe, the *Arabian Nights*, and classical mythology. Just as Lovecraft produced “The Poem of Ulysses, or the New Odyssey” at the age of eight, so did Borges “set down in quite bad English a kind of handbook on Greek mythology, no doubt cribbed from Lemprière,” when he was six or seven.<sup>7</sup> Both men were dedicated nativists and local colorists, though Borges flirted with internationalism after having fallen in with the literary group called the *Ultraists* when in Spain from 1919 to 1921. Then he produced poems which, in their stripped-down search

for pure and uncluttered metaphor, modern critics like Ronald J. Christ have classified with the imagism of Ezra Pound or the amygism of Amy Lowell. Yet as he writes in his “Autobiographical Essay”:

We returned to Buenos Aires on the *Reina Victoria Eugenia* toward the end of March, 1921. It came to me as a surprise, after living in so many European cities—after so many memories of Geneva, Zurich, Nîmes, Córdoba, and Lisbon—to find that my native town had grown, and that it was now a very large, sprawling, and almost endless city of low buildings with flat roofs, stretching west toward what geographers and literary hands call the pampa. It was more than a homecoming; it was a rediscovery. I was able to see Buenos Aires keenly and eagerly because I had been away from it for a long time. Had I never gone abroad, I wonder whether I would ever have seen it with the peculiar shock and glow that it now gave me. The city—not the whole city, of course, but a few places in it that became emotionally significant to me—inspired the poems of my first published book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*.<sup>8</sup>

Lovecraft did not have the opportunity of exploring literary Europe, but his disastrous “New York Exile” of 1924–26 prompted him to reaffirm his own fervor for Providence as he never had before. To Borges, the endless sprawl of Buenos Aires was a magical chessboard or labyrinth of human possibility that stretched out to the infinity of the west, and the horizon of the pampa beckoned to a vanishing point of myth, mystery, and legend. To Lovecraft, the city of Providence huddled protectively on the banks of its bay and underground rivers, forming a nest or a shell that in phenomenological terms drilled downward into the mysterious eighteenth-century past rather than opening outward toward an infinite future. He wrote his aunt, Lillian Clark, that he had “never mentally dwelt anywhere else,” and made his letter to her of 29 March 1926 into a personal manifesto:

To all intents & purposes I am more naturally isolated from mankind than Nathaniel Hawthorne himself, who dwelt alone in the midst of crowds, & whom Salem knew only after he died. Therefore, it may be taken as axiomatic that the people of a place matter absolutely nothing to me except as components of the general landscape and scenery. . . . My life lies not among *people* but among *scenes*—my local affections are not personal, but topographical & architectural. No one in Providence—family aside—has any especial bond of interest with me, but for that matter no one in Cambridge or anywhere else has, either. The question is that of which roofs & chimneys & doorways & trees & street vistas I love the best; which hills & woods, which woods & meadows, which farm-

houses & views of distant white steeples in green valleys. I am always an outsider—to all scenes and all people—but outsiders have their sentimental preferences in visual environment. I will be dogmatic only to the extent of saying that it is *New England* I *must* have—in some form or other. Providence is part of me—I *am* Providence. . . . Providence would always be at the back of my head as a goal to be worked toward—an ultimate Paradise to be regain'd at last.<sup>9</sup>

“I am Providence” is the inscription on the tombstone erected over Lovecraft’s grave in the Phillips family plot at Swan Point Cemetery by a number of his contemporary disciples. Lovecraft’s poem “Providence” of 1924 conveys his sense of the city as a Castle of Indolence or Palace of Sleeping Beauty that has been mercifully cut off from the rapids of time and become a sacred spring, a living doorway to the past:

Stone bridges spanning languid streams,  
Houses perch'd on the hill,  
And courts where mysteries and dreams  
The brooding spirit fill.

Steep alley steps by vines conceal'd,  
Where small-paned windows glow  
At twilight on the bit of field  
That chance has left below.

My Providence! What airy hosts  
Turn still thy gilded vanes;  
What winds of elf that with grey ghosts  
People thine ancient lanes! (*AT* 303)

All this local color *sfumato* is masterfully conveyed in the picturesque descriptions that grace such Providence-based stories as *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and “The Haunter of the Dark,” for as Winfield Townley Scott was the first to point out, Lovecraft “renewed with variations a particular tradition which Hawthorne and such lesser writers as Mary Wilkins Freeman long before made native.”<sup>10</sup> Yet Borges, too, can discover a similar “haunted regionalism” in the dining-room cellar of a house in Calle Garay, where the mad poet Carlos Argentino Daneri secrets the Aleph. This “microcosm of alchemists and cabalists” outwardly appears to Borges as “a small iridescent sphere, of almost intolerable brilliance.” As he writes:

At first I thought it rotary; then I understood that this movement was an illusion produced by the vertiginous sights it enclosed. The Aleph's diameter must have been about two or three centimeters, but Cosmic Space was in it, without diminution of size. Each object (the mirror's glass, for instance) was infinite objects, for I clearly saw it from all points in the universe.<sup>11</sup>

In "The Hunter of the Dark," Lovecraft's Robert Blake is characteristically even more detailed about the Shining Trapezohedron, that "egg-shaped or irregularly spherical object some four inches through" that he finds in the tower-room of the deserted cathedral on Providence's Federal Hill. Lovecraft writes:

The four-inch seeming sphere turned out to be a nearly black, red-striated polyhedron with many irregular flat surfaces; either a very remarkable crystal of some sort, or an artificial object of carved and highly polished mineral matter. It did not touch the bottom of the box, but was held suspended by means of a metal band around its centre, with seven queerly designed supports extending horizontally to angles of the box's inner wall near the top. This stone, once exposed, exerted upon Blake an almost alarming fascination. He could scarcely tear his eyes from it, and as he looked at its glistening surfaces he almost fancied it was transparent, with half-formed worlds of wonder within. Into his mind floated pictures of alien orbs with great stone towers, and other orbs with titan mountains and no mark of life, and still remoter spaces where only a stirring in vague blacknesses told of the presence of consciousness and will. (*DH* 102)

Lovecraft's Trapezohedron seems to partake also of the quality of Borges's "Zahir," that demonic coin which is only the mutable physical token of "beings or things which possess the terrible property of being unforgettable, and whose image finally drives one mad." But it is significant that Lovecraft's cult-object is black rather than iridescent, and even more telling that it vouchsafes a vision of other worlds rather than the complex real one which Borges sees multiplied to the highest power. For horror in Borges is an intensified reality, while horror in Lovecraft is an alternative reality. Words fail Borges because language is too limited to express this reality, while words fail Lovecraft because language is alien to the reality being expressed. Hence Lovecraft's unpronounceable names and untranslatable chants, his "Cthulhu" and "R'lyeh," are rivaled only, perhaps, by Borges's own tongue-twisting "Tlön." Both authors attempt to convey the visions that their gazing-globes afford them, one through a cataloguing of facts that reduces language to a poor, inadequate *anthology* of reality (Borges) and the other by expanding language poetically to construct a forbidden *arcantum* of this partial other reality (Lovecraft). Of course, Borges's very concept

of the Aleph derives from the alchemical search for a Grand Arcanum, a Great Solvent, a Philosopher's Stone, but Borges is also a student of the Kabbalah who within the frame of the story assumes that God and Reality are one and the same, that to see or decipher God is to see or decipher all reality. But to experience such a vision is to be blasted by excess of brightness, since, as Scripture warns us, none sees God and lives. Borges cannot express what he sees because it is "ineffable," while Lovecraft will not express what he sees because it is "unspeakable."

As Borges writes:

I arrive, now, at the ineffable center of my story. And there begins my despair as a writer. All language is an alphabet of symbols whose use presupposes a past shared by all the other interlocutors. How, then, transmit to others the infinite Aleph, which my fearful mind scarcely encompasses? The mystics, in similar situations, are lavish with emblems: to signify the divinity, a Persian speaks of a bird that in some way is all birds; Alanus de Insulis speaks of a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere; Ezekiel of an angel with four faces who looks simultaneously to the Orient and the Occident, to the North and the South. (Not vainly do I recall these inconceivable analogies; they bear some relation to the Aleph.) Perhaps the gods would not be against my finding an equivalent image, but then this report would be contaminated with literature, with falsehood. For the rest, the central problem is unsolvable: the enumeration, even if only partial, of an infinite complex.<sup>12</sup>

Once the riddle is solved, delight vanishes; Isis Unveiled is Isis Dead. That language can never match the labyrinth of reality is Borges's (and our) salvation, because to really comprehend reality—fully, totally, omnisciently—is to destroy both it and the self. Hence the horror, for Borges, of a freak like "Funes the Memorious," whose infallible memory converts him into a human computer or videotape machine. "With no effort, he had learned English, French, Portuguese and Latin. I suspect, however, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, almost immediate in their presence."<sup>13</sup> To Borges, to live is to think; to think is to pose riddles; to pose riddles is to create fictions; to create fictions is to delight oneself and others. There is no more deadly (read "boring") thing than a riddle solved, a paradox exploded, a labyrinth penetrated, a code deciphered. Thus the instantaneous deciphering of reality, through means of the Aleph, is tantamount to both decide and suicide. Carlos Argentino Daneri, who uses the Aleph as the chief aid to his composi-

tion of an epic poem entitled *The Earth*, the purpose of which is to “put into verse the entire history of the planet,” is as infinitely boring as his poem is infinitely tedious.

One skein of Borges’s “Aleph” is therefore a biting satire on the progress of dullness among certain contemporary poets in particular and academic pedantry in general (the New Criticism degenerating into the New Cretinism); but it is also a cautionary tale about the blessed insolubility of reality itself—a miniature working out of the Faust legend. As such the story affirms the value of ambiguity and paradox as it also defends the human necessity of a limited, sequential point of view. God may be both Alpha and Omega, but if the first letter of an alphabet (especially a “sacred” one) can be made to stand for all the letters of the alphabet, the result can only be profanation, madness, and psychic death.

We can to some extent understand the outrage of the Yellow Emperor in Borges’s “Parable of the Palace”<sup>14</sup> when his multiple world of gardens and towers is destroyed by a poet who impiously sums it all up in a text (thankfully lost) that may have consisted of but one spare line of verse or even a single word. The Aleph is an omniscient mirror, a logical impossibility that is best left in its rightful realm of Platonic speculation. Like the Holy Grail, it provides a goal to be groped toward rather than an end to be grasped. Or it is a mathematical function, an equation that, when plotted, curves parabolically toward a limit without ever touching it. As a mirror containing and subsuming all other mirrors, the Aleph thus becomes a constituting metaphor for art itself, a stimulus and a challenge to “the maker,” who must convince and dazzle without sacrificing the inherent mystery of things. As Borges himself comments, “My chief problem in writing the story lay in what Walt Whitman had very successfully achieved—the setting down of a limited catalog of endless things. The task, as is evident, is impossible, for such chaotic enumeration can only be simulated, and every apparent haphazard element has to be linked to its neighbor either by association or by contrast.”<sup>15</sup> To see the Aleph is to abandon the critical faculty, the problem-solving or riddle-solving gift, since the problem or the riddle is both solved and dissolved in the Aleph. Borges writes:

In that gigantic instant I saw millions of delightful and atrocious acts; none astonished me more than the fact that all of them together occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency. What my eyes saw was simultaneous: what I shall transcribe is successive. Nevertheless, I shall cull something of it all . . . I saw the heavy-laden sea; I saw the dawn and the dusk; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silver-plated cobweb at the center of a



black pyramid; I saw a tattered labyrinth (it was London); I saw interminable eyes looking at me as if in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on the planet and none reflected me; in an inner patio in the Calle Soler I saw the same paving tile I had seen thirty years before in the entranceway to a house in the town of Fray Bentos; I saw clusters of grapes, snow, tobacco, veins of metal; steam . . . I saw the earth in the Aleph and in the earth the Aleph once more and the earth in the Aleph; I saw my face and my viscera; I saw your face and felt vertigo and cried because my eyes had seen that conjectural and secret object whose name men usurp but which no man has gazed on: the inconceivable universe.<sup>16</sup>

In an inconceivable universe that has become fully conceivable, there are no more books to be read, no more riddles to be formulated, no more stories to write; indeed, like Funes or Carlos Argentino Daneri, the only literary activity possible is pure mimesis. The self itself becomes nothing more than a mirror, but Borges luckily escapes this boring fate:

In the street, on the Constitución stairs, in the subway, all the faces struck me as familiar. I feared that not a single thing was left to cause me surprise; I was afraid I would never be quit of the impression that I had “returned.” Happily, at the end of a few nights of insomnia, forgetfulness worked in me again.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the “moral” of “The Aleph” is best summed up in T. S. Eliot’s observation in *Four Quartets* (“Burnt Norton”) that “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.” We need to sleep and we need to dream; the danger of ideal objects such as the Aleph and the Zahir is that once concretized they make life all insomnia (i.e., “Funes”) or all forgetfulness. As the narrator of “The Zahir” soliloquizes:

According to the teachings of the Idealists, the words “live” and “dream” are rigorously synonymous. From thousands of images I shall pass to one; from a highly complex dream to a dream of utter simplicity. Others will dream that I am mad; I shall dream of the Zahir. When all men of earth think, day and night, of the Zahir, which will be a dream and which a reality—the earth or the Zahir?<sup>18</sup>

The Zahir and the Aleph cannibalize reality by simplifying the complex, and are ultimately mind-eaters. The consuming horror of Lovecraft’s metaphysic is not a mirrored reality but a dualistic one, another world of demons and half-gods that exists simultaneously alongside our own. Robert Blake in “The Haunter of the Dark” is also entranced by the vision of a mystery that entices because it confers power, but the power derives from another dimension rather than from a multiple perspective:

Before he realised it, he was looking at the stone again, and letting its curious influence call up a nebulous pageantry in his mind. He saw processions of robed, hooded figures whose outlines were not human, and looked on endless leagues of desert lined with carved, sky-reaching monoliths. He saw towers and walls in nighted depths under the sea, and vortices of space where wisps of black mist floated before thin shimmerings of cold purple haze. And beyond all else he glimpsed an infinite gulf of darkness, where solid and semi-solid forms were known only by their windy stirrings, and cloudy patterns of force seemed to superimpose order on chaos and hold forth a key to all the paradoxes and arcana of the worlds we know. (*DH* 104)

Lovecraft writes a tone poem of galloping Gothic sentences to evoke his other reality, while Borges's catalogue in "The Aleph" has the terseness of a series of imagist *aperyus* rather than the Whitmanesque sweep he admires in his "Commentaries": "I saw a sunset in Querétaro which seemed to reflect the color of a rose in Bengal."<sup>19</sup> Here Borges's *Ultraist* roots resurface, just as we can sense Poe and the entire Dark Romantic tradition working behind Lovecraft's extravagant cadences. Since Borges is dealing with the infinite combinations and permutations of a measurable reality, however, his Aleph remains a one-way affair, a looking glass that the observer can see through but not go through, as in Lewis Carroll. Lovecraft's Shining Trapezohedron is unfortunately a peep hole between reality and some other world whose beings can use it as an escape route as well as a periscope. This diamond lens à la Fitz-James O'Brien is literally a breach in the dike between sanity and madness, in which a sublime sense of domination can suddenly be supplanted by the shrinking horror of demonic possession:

Then all at once the spell was broken by an access of gnawing, indeterminate panic fear. Blake choked and turned away from the stone, conscious of some formless alien presence close to him and watching him with horrible intentness. He felt entangled with something—something which was not in the stone, but which had looked through it at him—something which would ceaselessly follow him with a cognition that was not physical sight. (*DH* 104)

Borges's fissionable reality contends with Lovecraft's entangled one, where alien forms and alien dimensions such as "the colour out of space" are like extraterrestrial microbes—Andromeda strains—that must be isolated, contained, and finally extirpated. But Borges, too, must "restore" reality at the end of his tale, since the Aleph itself partakes of this alien quality. In his "Commentaries" Borges writes that "In the world of the *Arabian Nights*, such things as magic

lamps and rings are left lying about and nobody cares; in our skeptical world, we have to tidy up any alarming out-of-the-way element. Thus, at the end of "The Aleph," the house has to be pulled down and the shining sphere destroyed with it."<sup>20</sup> Thus at the end of "The Haunter of the Dark," the Shining Trapezohedron is thrown "into the deepest channel of Narragansett Bay," while Robert Blake is destroyed by what seems to be a blast of lightning. In reality—that is, Lovecraft's other reality—Blake is seized by the being he has unleashed through his manipulation of the magic glass in the tower, and which (like the mystics mentioned by Borges in "The Aleph") he can signify only by broken if not "lavish" emblems—"I see it—coming here—hell-wind—titan blur—black wings—Yog-Sothoth save me—the three-lobed burning eye . . ." (*DH* 115).

## II

Although the triangle with the lidless eye is one of the figures used by the German cobbler-mystic Jacob Behmen (1575–1624) in his *Aurora* (1612), there is no possibility that the skeptical Lovecraft ever read or even would have entertained reading such work. Yet J. M. Cohen has argued convincingly that Borges's idea for the Aleph itself came from a passage in Behmen's biography in turn quoted by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>21</sup> This fact leads me back to the main point, problem, or—to use Borgesian terms—riddle of this paper: the congruency of realities in Lovecraft and Borges. Why should we be reminded of Borges when reading Lovecraft, and why must Borges have been reminded of himself, or one of his selves, when reading Lovecraft? I have noted certain biographical similarities between the North American and the South American, but these are at best incidental. As Anthony Kerrigan comments, "Borges has almost absolute affinities."<sup>22</sup> Both men may be local colorists, but Borges is much more drawn to the low-life of the pampa and the brutal exploits of the gaucho. To be sure, there is a violent militaristic strain in the Providence writer that caused him fanatically to defend Aryan supremacy and to think of himself as a "nearly six-foot, chalk-white Nordic type, the type of the master conqueror and man of action." Upon America's entrance into World War I, he was ignominiously hustled back from the Providence recruiting station by relatives who brandished his tell-tale certificate of feeble health. Borges, too, writes proudly of his battle-hungry ancestors but adds with more insight that "So, on both sides of my family, I have military forbears; this may account for my yearning after that epic destiny which my gods denied me, no doubt wisely."<sup>23</sup> Yet we can never conceive of Lovecraft writing a dialect gang-

ster tale such as Borges's "Streetcorner Man" (1933), and, in spite of H. P. Lovecraft's trope toward encyclopedic verbosity in his letters, neither can we imagine him pursuing theological and philosophical definitions with as much enthusiasm as Borges does in his "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal" or "The Mirror of Enigmas." More fruitful is the fact that both men were born in the 1890s (Lovecraft in 1890, Borges in 1899) and that they continued in their own ways the literary traditions of the decade of their birth: Aestheticism and Decadence.<sup>24</sup> Poe is a major influence on their works, and as Lovecraft wrote: "Poe is beyond anything this age can produce, and is so far America's sole contribution to the general current or world literature. He is the father of most of the redeeming features of decadent literature, and differs from the actual decadents in that they have failed to comprehend the magnificent and ultra-human point of view on which his unique creations are based" (*SL* 1.173). Borges, too, praises Poe for "his love of beauty and his fantastic invention,"<sup>25</sup> seeing him as an Aesthete and the inventor of the detective story.

If Poe is in some sense a literary "father" to both Lovecraft and Borges, we have the case of two brothers who were separated in childhood and grew up under drastically differing influences and conditions that affected the maturation of their common bloodline. In spite of his access to a fine library of English classics, Borges was also nourished by the rich traditions of European, especially Continental, literature, where Poe was always respectable and where a taste for the grotesque and the arabesque is a valuable literary gift. For example, the polyglot Borges read Gustav Meyrink's horror classic *The Golem* in the original German when he was still in his teens,<sup>26</sup> while Lovecraft only discovered the novel in 1935, calling it "the most magnificent weird thing I've come across in aeons!" and recognizing that "As a study in lurking, insidious *regional* horror it has scarcely a peer—doing for the antient, crumbling Prague ghetto what I unsuccessfully strove to do for rotting Newburyport in "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (*SL* 5.138). Lovecraft grew up in a literary environment that was, by contrast to Borges's largess of reading and publishing, an economy of scarcity; he had few friends who shared his interests, and no professional journals like the prestigious *Sur* to publish his effusions. It was only through the private printings of the amateur press that he was allowed any outlet for his work, and later he had to suffer the appearance of his art in pulp periodicals bearing lurid covers like *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories*. Lovecraft's case illustrates the lament of earlier writers such as Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville that there was simply no place in American society for a professional man of letters. Lovecraft turned this negative into a

positive, however, by becoming a great amateur, cultivating a sense of *noblesse oblige*, and preserving his precarious status by thinking of himself as a connoisseur, a dabbler, or a virtuoso. As such, he was an autodidactic Decadent or Aesthete, fighting against both anti-intellectual (folk) and elite (avant-garde) currents, along with his closest friends and correspondents Samuel Loveman, Clark Ashton Smith, and Frank Belknap Long. Like Poe, Lovecraft had to invent or reinvent his chosen genre rather than inherit, modify, or place himself within it. Only later would Lovecraft find the time to confirm his own origins through working up the scholarly treatise he called "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (1925–27). It is this primitivist quality of Lovecraft's fantastic invention that provides the greatest stylistic contrast to Borges's more fluid, learned, and elegant production. If Borges is a Puvis De Chavannes, rendering his fantasies in paler tints and more sophisticated tones, Lovecraft is a Douanier Rousseau, meticulously covering his canvasses with psychedelic colors, oneroscopic vegetation, and night-stalking monsters.

The approach of genre, like the approach of biography, fails in linking Borges with Lovecraft precisely because it is too closely bound to time and space. There are simply too many gaps, though we can trace a material intersection occurring thirty years after Lovecraft's death. The general category of "Fantastic Literature" provides a medium for relationship, but it does not provide a *cause* any more than does the fact that Lovecraft and Borges both read Poe, Wells, the *Arabian Nights*, and Greek mythology. Therefore I should like to turn to another means of interconnection, an acasual one first formulated by Carl Gustav Jung, which he called the principle of synchronicity. Jung writes:

My preoccupation with the psychology of unconscious processes long ago compelled me to look about for another principle of explanation, because the causality principle seemed to me inadequate to explain certain remarkable phenomena of the psychology of the unconscious. Thus I found that there are psychic parallelisms which cannot be related to each other causally, but which may be connected through another principle, namely the contingency of events. This connection of events seemed to me essentially given by the fact of their relative simultaneity, hence the term "synchronistic." It seems, indeed, as though time, far from being an abstraction, is a concrete continuum which contains qualities or basic conditions that manifest themselves simultaneously in different places through parallelisms that cannot be explained causally, as, for example, in cases of the simultaneous occurrence of identical thoughts, symbols, or psychic states.<sup>27</sup>

The idea of a roughly simultaneous occurrence of identical thoughts, symbols, and psychic states would seem to be a more fruitful way of considering the parallels between Lovecraft's Shining Trapezohedron and Borges's Aleph than aimlessly tracing them to Behmen or to the alchemical concept of the Philosopher's Stone, which Borges knew well and which Lovecraft knew only superficially at best. Lovecraft and Borges participate in the creation of synchronistic worlds governed by intriguingly similar patterns of myth, and this is no better illustrated than by a comparison of the deserted city in Borges's tale "The Immortal" (a story which Ronald Christ has called the "culmination" of his art) to the Cyclopean Antarctic domain of the Old Ones in Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* and the buried Australian megalopolis of the Great Race in "The Shadow out of Time." Borges's tale is a redoing of the legend of the Wandering Jew and a moral parable about the unnatural curse of perpetual life. As he writes in his "Commentaries" about a story with a similar theme: "Since our only proof of personal death is statistical, and inasmuch as a new generation of deathless men may be already on its way, I have for years lived in fear of never dying. Such an idea as immortality would, of course, be unbearable."<sup>28</sup> To live forever is to have the opportunity to solve every riddle and so suffer the death-in-life of infinite boredom. In "The Immortal," Borges's questor-victim is a Roman tribune of the reign of Diocletian who seeks and finds a sacred river that "cleanses" men of death. First, however, Cartaphilus (in legend Pilate's doorkeeper, guilty of striking the Redeemer, and the name he takes in his latest incarnation as a Smyrna antique dealer) must suffer a symbolic death by descending into a cave and wandering in a labyrinth. Thus he undergoes a mystery initiation similar to the ancient rites of Eleusis, which also conferred immortality—in the form of union with the goddess—on the believer. Borges writes:

I have read that the City was founded on a stone plateau. This plateau, comparable to a high cliff, was no less arduous than the walls. In vain I fatigued myself: the black base did not disclose the slightest irregularity, the invariable walls seemed not to admit a single door. The force of the sun obliged me to seek refuge in a cave; in the rear was a pit, in the pit a stairway which sank down abysmally into the darkness below. I went down; through a chaos of sordid galleries I reached a vast circular chamber, scarcely visible. There were nine doors in this cellar; eight led to a labyrinth that treacherously returned to the same chamber; the ninth (though another labyrinth) led to a second circular chamber equal to the first. I do not know the total number of these chambers; my misfortune and anxiety multiplied them. The silence was hostile and almost perfect; there was no sound in this deep stone network save that of a subterranean wind, whose

cause I could not discover; noiselessly, tiny streams of rusty water disappeared between the crevices. Horribly, I became habituated to this doubtful world; I found it incredible that there could be anything but cellars with nine doors and long branched-out cellars; I do not know how long I must have walked beneath the ground; I know that I once confused, in the same nostalgia, the atrocious city of the barbarians and my native city, amid the clusters.<sup>29</sup>

In Lovecraft's "The Shadow out of Time," his erstwhile "immortal," Professor Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, must also descend into a labyrinth in order to reach the city of his commingled dreams and nightmares:

I seemed to move almost automatically, as if in the clutch of some compelling fate. Pocketing my torch, and struggling with a strength that I had not thought I possessed, I wrenched aside first one titan fragment of stone and then another, till there welled up a strong draught whose dampness contrasted oddly with the desert's dry air. A black rift began to yawn, and at length—when I had pushed away every fragment small enough to budge—the leprous moonlight blazed on an aperture of ample width to admit me.

I drew out my torch and cast a brilliant beam into the opening. Below me was a chaos of tumbled masonry, sloping roughly down toward the north at an angle of about forty-five degrees, and evidently the result of some bygone collapse from above. Between its surface and the ground level was a gulf of impenetrable blackness at whose upper edge were signs of gigantic, stress-heaved vaulting. At this point, it appeared, the desert's sands lay directly upon a floor of some titan structure of earth's youth—how preserved through aeons of geologic convulsion I could not then and cannot now even attempt to guess.

In retrospect, the barest idea of a sudden, lone descent into such a doubtful abyss—and at a time when one's whereabouts were unknown to any living soul—seems like the utter apex of insanity. Perhaps it was—yet that night I embarked without hesitancy upon such a descent. (*DH* 415)

While Cartaphilus dismisses his confusing "nostalgia" of past and present as a symptom of his exhaustion, Peaslee's horror is that the deeper he descends, the more familiar the labyrinth seems to be. This is because he has already encountered these corridors not simply in a "stream of cryptic lore" but in his dreams, which are in turn based upon a terrible reality. This reality is founded on the power of mental transmigration practiced by the builders of the city, a "Great Race" who have the ability to project themselves into other bodies and to appropriate other minds, obviating the coordinates of time and space. The origin of this race is extraterrestrial; hence the uncanny perfection of their architecture, art, and scholarship. Peaslee has actually dwelt in one of their bodies, for

five years, while his own shell has been occupied by an inquisitive alien. “I was wholly and horribly oriented,” he declares, for mere nostalgia has been replaced by Platonic reminiscence made devastatingly real:

The particular structure I was in was known to me. Known, too, was its place in that terrible elder city of dream. That I could visit unerringly any point in that structure or in that city which had escaped the changes and devastations of uncounted ages, I realised with hideous and instinctive certainty. What in heaven’s name could all this mean? How had I come to know what I knew? And what awful reality could lie behind those antique tales of the beings who had dwelt in this labyrinth of primordial stone?

Words can convey only fractionally the welter of dread and bewilderment which ate at my spirit. I knew this place. I knew what lay below me, and what had lain overhead before the myriad towering stories had fallen to dust and debris and the desert. No need now, I thought with a shudder, to keep that faint blur of moonlight in view. (*DH* 417)

In *At the Mountains of Madness*, the city itself is a “stupendous stone labyrinth” situated on a high plateau protected by a wall of towering mountains. Like the citadel of the Great Race, its blasphemous architecture presumes a non-human or prehuman origin, for once again Lovecraft’s other reality is alien to anything we can imagine. Yet it is significant that Lovecraft’s modern explorers, who continue the quest first outlined in Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), are armed with cameras that allow them to photograph “carefully” every detail of this ruined and alien stronghold. For as Richard Burgin observes, the camera is a kind of “permanent mirror,” and as Borges admitted to him, “Because I’m afraid of mirrors, maybe I’m afraid of cameras.”<sup>30</sup>

The half-mile walk downhill to the actual city, with the upper wind shrieking vainly and savagely through the skyward peaks in the background, was something of which the smallest details will always remain engraved on my mind. Only in fantastic nightmares could any human beings but Danforth and me conceive such optical effects. Between us and the churning vapours of the west lay that monstrous tangle of dark stone towers, its outré and incredible forms impressing us afresh at every new angle of vision. It was a mirage in solid stone, and were it not for the photographs I would still doubt that such a thing could be. The general type of masonry was identical with that of the rampart we had examined; but the extravagant shapes which this masonry took in its urban manifestations were past all description.

Even the pictures illustrate only one or two phases of its infinite bizarrerie, endless variety, preternatural massiveness, and utterly alien exoticism. There were



geometrical forms for which an Euclid would scarcely find a name—cones of all degrees of irregularity and truncation; terraces of every sort of provocative disproportion; shafts with odd bulbous enlargements; broken columns in curious groups; and five-pointed or five-ridged arrangements of mad grotesqueness. As we drew nearer we could see beneath certain transparent parts of the ice-sheet, and detect some of the tubular stone bridges that connected the crazily sprinkled structures at various heights. Of orderly streets there seemed to be none, the only broad open swath being a mile to the left, where the ancient river had doubtless flowed through the town into the mountains. (*MM* 50–51)

Lovecraft paradoxically sees his Other Reality with photographic clarity; even the minds of his observers are converted into sensitive plates on which are etched or burned the unrelenting details of his alien worlds. As in “The Shadow out of Time,” scenes are explored by the aid of powerful electric light (Professor Peaslee does not lose his “torch” until his final flight from the underground city). In a fragment from a lengthy description of the mural sculptures discovered in the Antarctic labyrinth, we can see how Lovecraft’s extraterrestrial “realism” can become almost microscopic:

The arabesque tracery consisted altogether of depressed lines whose depth on unweathered walls varied from one to two inches. When cartouches with dot-groups appeared—evidently as inscriptions in some unknown and primordial language and alphabet—the depression of the smooth surface was perhaps an inch and a half, and of the dots perhaps a half-inch more. The pictorial bands were in counter-sunk low relief, their background being depressed about two inches from the original wall surface. In some specimens marks of a former coloration could be detected, though for the most part the untold aeons had disintegrated and banished any pigments which may have been applied. (*MM* 57)

The report is as matter-of-fact and as precise as an archaeological survey, though the narrator adds that “Certain touches here and there gave vague hints of latent symbols and stimuli which another mental and emotional background, and a fuller or different sensory equipment, might have made of profound and poignant significance to us.” In contrast, Borges’s description of the ruined city of the immortals partakes of a misty quality that suffuses its own half-lights and atmospheric dimness about the scene. This is appropriate for an author who has described the onset of gradual blindness as “a slow, summer twilight,”<sup>31</sup> but also indicates an aesthetic consciousness that is more attuned to nuance, suggestion, and “romance.” Indeed, as Ronald Christ has noted,<sup>32</sup> Borges would seem to owe a good deal of what detail he does include to Piranesi’s fa-

mous series of engravings depicting labyrinthine prisons with titanic, fugal staircases and huge, vaulted rooms. Borges writes:

To the impression of enormous antiquity others were added: that of the interminable, that of the atrocious, that of the complexly senseless. I had crossed a labyrinth, but the nitid City of the Immortals filled me with fright and repugnance. A labyrinth is a structure compounded to confuse men; its architecture, rich in symmetries, is subordinated to that end. In the palace I imperfectly explored, the architecture lacked any such finality. It abounded in deadened corridors, high unattainable windows, portentous doors which led to a cell or pit, incredible inverted staircases, whose steps and balustrades hung downwards. Other stairways, clinging airily to the side of a monumental wall, would die without leading anywhere, after making two or three turns in the lofty darkness of the cupolas. I do not know if all the examples I have enumerated are literal; I know that for many years they infested my Nightmares; I am no longer able to know if such and such a detail is a transcription of reality or of the forms which unhinged my nights.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand Lovecraft's characters see absolutely and remember absolutely; they never know the bliss of forgetfulness, and are in danger of confusing phantasmagoric hallucination with actual experience. Lovecraft is like the Richard Upton Pickman in his own famous tale, "Pickman's Model," of whom the narrator remarks:

It was not any mere artist's interpretation that we saw; it was pandemonium itself, crystal clear in stark objectivity. That was it, by heaven! The man was not a *fantaisiste* or romanticist at all—he did not try to give us the churning, prismatic ephemera of dreams, but coldly and sardonically reflected some stable, mechanistic, and well-established horror-world which he saw fully, brilliantly, squarely, and unflinchingly. God knows what that world can have been, or where he ever glimpsed the blasphemous shapes that loped and trotted and crawled through it; but whatever the baffling source of his images, one thing was plain. Pickman was in every sense—in conception and in execution—a thorough, painstaking, and almost scientific *realist*. (DH 21)

Borges always deals with reality, but he deals with it daringly as a romanticist or a *fantaisiste*; Lovecraft dares to deal with an other reality, but he deals with it matter-of-factly as a scientist or a realist. Again, there is no mystery about Lovecraft's source for this technique, since we know exactly from what and where that "stable, mechanistic, and well-established horror-world" derived. It was the world of his nightmares, which were not at all churning, pris-

matic, or ephemeral but rather incredibly precise, detailed, and literalistic. As Lovecraft wrote to Willis Conover on 10 January 1937, only two months before his own death:

You surely are quite a dreamer—and it’s curious (to me) how quickly your new experiences and correspondents get translated into visions. . . . My own dreams usually go back very far in time, and it takes a long while for any new experience or scene or acquaintance to get worked into them. At least  $\frac{3}{4}$  of them are laid at my birthplace, where I haven’t lived since 1904, and involve those who were living in those days. But the real scenes frequently merge into unknown and fantastic realms, and include landscapes and architectural vistas which could scarcely be on this planet. At times I also have *historical* dreams—with a setting in various remote periods. (*SL* 5.384–85)

For specimens of Lovecraft’s photographically surreal dream-experiences, the interested reader may consult *Selected Letters* 1.113–16, where Lovecraft details apocalyptic visions of the destruction of Providence and a mysterious bas-relief found in one of the city’s museums, and *Selected Letters* 2.199–201, for a trolley-car journey piloted by a motorman whose face “was a mere white cone tapering to one blood-red tentacle.” Not all his dreams were characterized by such “scope, vividness, & mnemonick persistence,” of course, but many were used as the basis for his weird tales. His art was in some sense largely the literal transcription of actual oneiric adventures. On 22 October 1933, he wrote to Clark Ashton Smith of what the editors of *Selected Letters* identify as a source for “The Shadow out of Time.” Lovecraft told Smith:

. . . about a year ago I dreamt I waked on a slab of unknown substance in a great vaulted hall, dimly and obscurely lit, and full of similar slabs bearing sheeted objects whose proportions were obviously *not human*. From every detail I gathered the horrible notion *that I could be nowhere on this planet*. I also felt that my own body was like those of the other sheeted shapes. But I waked up in very truth at this juncture, so that no *story* was even begun! (*SL* 4.290)

Lovecraft’s letters and his amazing ability to dwell on his childhood with almost total recall suggest that he was a living example of Borges’s mythical “Funes the Memorious,” save that while Funes continually engaged in an instant replay of reality, Lovecraft in his fiction reconstructed the minutest details of his nightmare explorations of non-terrestrial realities. The fact that Lovecraft truly experienced, rather than fabricated, this kind of vision leads him, I believe, to construct the peculiar myth cycle that rules his entire fictional world.

Borges's *Cartaphilus* verges on the creation of this same myth, more fantastic than the idea of immortality itself, when he contemplates the irrationality of the City of the Immortals:

Rather than by any other trait of this incredible monument, I was held by the extreme age of its fabrication. I felt that it was older than mankind, than the earth. This manifest antiquity (though in some way terrible to the eyes) seemed to me in keeping with the work of immortal builders. At first cautiously, later indifferently, at last desperately, I wandered up the stairs and along the pavements of the inextricable palace. (Afterwards I learned that the width and height of the steps were not constant, a fact which made me understand the singular fatigue they produced.) "This palace is a fabrication of the gods," I thought at the beginning. I explored the uninhabited interiors and corrected myself: "The gods who built it have died." I noted its peculiarities and said: "The gods who built it were mad."<sup>34</sup>

*Cartaphilus* here progresses through three stages of religious belief that might be termed Platonic, Nietzschean, and Lovecraftian. The last phase—a belief in the madness of the gods—is the key to Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos of maimed, deformed, and deranged deities. This mythos is Lovecraft's codification of what his character Robert Blake of "The Haunter of the Dark" calls "the ancient legends of Ultimate Chaos, at whose centre sprawls the blind idiot god Azathoth, Lord of All Things, encircled by his flopping horde of mindless and amorphous dancers, and lulled by the thin monotonous piping of a daemonic flute held in nameless paws" (*DH* 110). It is not so much the shape of this mythology that is important to an understanding of the fictional realities of Lovecraft and Borges, but rather the impact of it. As Professor Peaslee puts it,

If the thing did happen, then man must be prepared to accept notions of the cosmos, and of his own place in the seething vortex of time, whose merest mention is paralyzing. He must, too, be on guard against a specific, lurking peril which, though it will never engulf the whole race, may impose monstrous and unguessable horrors upon certain venturesome members of it. (*DH* 368)

This is what Lovecraft means by "the shadow out of time," the shadow of another race of beings that diminishes and well-nigh dismisses the status of man and all his works. The evidence that convinces Peaslee of this fact is his discovery of a history of his time in his own handwriting stored in the immense library accumulated by the Great Race. But as he also notes, this history "was assigned a specific place in the vaults of the lowest or vertebrate level—the sec-

tion devoted to the cultures of mankind and of the furry and reptilian races immediately preceding it in terrestrial dominance” (*DH* 397). Similarly, Borges’s Cartaphilus is forced to conclude that (if real):

“This City (I thought) is so horrible that its mere existence and perdurance, though in the midst of a secret desert, contaminates the past and the future and in some way even jeopardizes the stars. As long as it lasts, no one in the world can be strong or happy.” I do not want to describe it; a chaos of heterogeneous words, the body of a tiger or a bull in which teeth, organs and heads monstrously pullulate in mutual conjunction and hatred can (perhaps) be approximate images.<sup>35</sup>

The City of the Immortals, the city of the Great Race, and the city of the Old Ones are synchronistic symbols, all inversions of the sacred city of dreams that can be found throughout the history of myth and folklore. This ideal metropolis is Camelot, El Dorado, or the Emerald City of Baum’s *Wizard of Oz*; it offers adventure, wealth, fulfillment, or peace, depending on the goals of the seeker who enters its gates. To Borges the most immediate manifestation of the sacred city of dreams is Buenos Aires, with what his sister Norah called its “slightly melancholy gardens and old houses”;<sup>36</sup> to Lovecraft it is Providence, for as he wrote on 21 April 1927 to Donald Wandrei:

There is somewhere, my fancy fabulises, a marvellous city of ancient streets & hills & gardens & marble terraces, wherein I once lived happy eternities, & to which I must return if ever I am to have content. . . . Of this cryptic and glorious city—this primal & archaic place of splendour in Atlantis or Cockaigne or the Hesperides—many towns of earth hold vague & elusive symbols that peep furtively out at certain moments, only to disappear again. (*SL* 2.126)

Yet to Borges the sacred city of dreams is part of a tangible universe, since his reality contains within itself the possibilities of infinite transmutation and permutation. As he writes of a dead friend in “To Leopoldo Lugones,” “tomorrow I too will have died, and our times will intermingle and chronology will be lost in a sphere of symbols.”<sup>37</sup> Borges needs no other worlds to explore; “Reality” and its sphere of symbols is more than sufficient, and it is the intensification of this sphere that bewilders, astounds, fascinates, and horrifies. In his tales and sketches, the philosophical opposition between reality and unreality, rather than Lovecraft’s constant warfare between reality and alternative reality, provides the main material for fantasy, since in Borges’s universe, things will metamorphose of and by themselves without any help from alien gods or colors out of space.

Speaking of the images of the cross, the lasso, and the arrow in a sketch called “Mutations,” he wonders, “Why should I marvel at them, when there is not a single thing on earth that oblivion does not erase or memory change, and when no one knows into what images he himself will be transmuted in the future.”<sup>38</sup> Just as speculative scientists have postulated an ineradicable tendency toward sequential grouping or clustering that is built into the fabric of nature, so does Borges believe in the overweening power of fabulation, a spontaneous principle of myth-making and fictionizing. Riddling, dreaming, and speculating mix with and modify reality, but they do not replace it. Like the ancient Gnostics, to whom he owes so much, Borges fears a mirror because of its power of unholy reproduction and intensification, its creation of another world which could conceivably usurp—as Lovecraft’s mad, maimed gods attempt to usurp—the world as we know it. As he writes in “The Draped Mirrors”:

As a child, I felt before large mirrors that same horror of a spectral duplication or multiplication of reality. Their infallible and continuous functioning, their pursuit of my actions, their cosmic pantomime, were uncanny then, whenever it began to grow dark. One of my persistent prayers to God and my guardian angel was that I not dream about mirrors. I know I watched them with misgivings. Sometimes I feared they might begin to deviate from reality; other times I was afraid of seeing there my own face, disfigured by strange calamities.<sup>39</sup>

All Lovecraft’s characters, and Lovecraft himself, dream of mirrors in this way; they enter looking glasses that have the power of looking back at them, as Robert Blake of “The Haunter of the Dark” discovers by means of the Shining Trapezohedron, while the decayed narrator of “The Outsider” realizes he is a rotting horror only after he has “stretched out my fingers to the abomination within that great gilded frame; stretched out my fingers and touched *a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass*” (DH 52). As early as the age of seventeen, Borges had become fascinated by Gnostic writings,<sup>40</sup> and in his story-essay “The Theologians,” he discusses this “tempestuous heresy” which held that the world as we know it was created by a Demiurge or Fabricator, while the true God was a *deus absconditus*, a hidden or absentee one. He writes that these Gnostic heresiarchs “often went from mortification and severity to crime; some communities tolerated thievery; others homicide; others, sodomy, incest and bestiality. All were blasphemous; they cursed not only the Christian God but also the arcane divinities of their own pantheon. They contrived sacred books whose disappearance is lamented by scholars.”<sup>41</sup> In fact the Gnostics were divided into two camps, the Hellenistic and the Oriental, the former of

whom detested the world and practiced austerity, asceticism, and rigid discipline, while the latter group wholly and fully committed themselves to terrestrial pleasures. Seen in this light, Borges is an Oriental Gnostic who delights in the sensual, glittering, and alluring puzzle of reality, while Lovecraft is the Hellenistic Gnostic who finds reality so unbearable that he attempts to escape its chains of space and time by seeking the higher knowledge (literally, the *gnosis*) of a totally transmudane universe. Lovecraft does this through what Borges calls his fictional “comic nightmares” and his actual oneiric experience. As Lovecraft wrote to Clark Ashton Smith on 29 November 1930:

I am still obsessed by the notion that one of the most extremely powerful of all tales would be an utterly realistic thing dealing with the sensations of a man deposited without a great amount of warning on another world. The one fatal weakness of nearly all interplanetary tales is that they almost completely ignore this factor of the situation. To my mind, the stupendous wave of emotion—incredulity, lostness, wonder, stark terror—incident to this supreme dislocation from man’s immemorially fixed background would be so colossal a thing as almost to dwarf any events which might happen to a celestial traveller. I yet mean to write a tale whose one supreme climax shall be the hero’s discovery, after many torturing & ambiguous doubts, that he *is* on another world. (*SL* 3.238)

Just as it is easy to confuse the conflicting yet congruous Gnostic camps without a fully detailed theological and heresiarchic road map in hand, so does the mythic world of Borges resemble uncannily the mythic world of Lovecraft. Both worlds of fabulation are synchronistic in the sense that both are modern responses—like Gnosticism—to a gnawing sense of detachment, anomie, displacement, and outsideness.<sup>42</sup> But while Borges approaches Lovecraft’s radical dualism, a dualism not of real and ideal but of real and other-real (since Lovecraft’s alternative reality is usually horrifying rather than pleasurable), he must ultimately reject it for a determined monism. To Borges, history, theology, philosophy, biography, legend, and fiction are all *one*, and to admit another reality constructed by mad gods would be to destroy both the sovereignty and the delight of the human imagination. The image in the mirror must remain a reflection, not a tangible, measurable world, lest, like the Zahir or the Aleph (combinations of what in “The Theologians” Borges identifies as the main Gnostic symbols, the mirror and the obolus) it become just as real as or even more real than what we already know. “We accept reality easily,” Borges writes in “The Immortal,” “perhaps because we intuit that nothing is real.”<sup>43</sup> Thus the possibility of the surreality of mad gods and their mad city must be

explained away. Cartaphilus discovers (much to his relief) that the barbarians who dwelled in pits scooped out of the ground outside the City of the Immortals are the immortals themselves. As Borges writes:

Everything was elucidated for me that day. The troglodytes were the Immortals; the rivulet of sandy water, the River sought by the horseman. As for the city whose renown had spread as far as the Ganges, it was some nine centuries since the Immortals had razed it. With the relics of its ruins they erected, in the same place, the mad city I had traversed: a kind of parody or inversion and also temple of the irrational gods who govern the world and of whom we know nothing, save that they do not resemble man. This establishment was the last symbol to which the Immortals condescended; it marks a stage at which, judging that all undertakings are in vain, they determined to live in thought, in pure speculation. They erected their structure, forgot it and went to dwell in the caves. Absorbed in thought, they hardly perceived the physical world.<sup>44</sup>

### III

Lovecraft and Borges are both skeptics, disbelievers, and aesthetes; yet Borges accepts, indeed celebrates, reality while Lovecraft abandons it for the city of dream and the dream of cities “outside of SPACE, outside of TIME.” Borges is a modern Gnostic who is willing to commit himself to the puzzle of the world and leave the gods to themselves, since they are ultimately unknowable: this is a mark of his essential humanism. Lovecraft was, as he often admitted, an inhumanist, because he hated the visible universe and had within himself the means of exploring Gnostic realms of forbidden knowledge that were closed to men of ordinary dreams and ordinary desires. The world of his nightmares was not comic to him, since it was as frighteningly real as his daily existence was shabby and boresome. Given a choice, he would have opted for life with the Old Ones or the Great Race, just as his admired avatar Edgar Allan Poe preferred a “Dream-land” filled with:

Bottomless vales, and boundless floods,  
And chasms, and caves, and Titan woods,  
With forms that no man can discover  
For the dews that drip all over . . .<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the library of the Great Race in which Professor Peaslee works as a temporary scribe is one of Lovecraft’s images of paradise. The library is built to endure forever, to outlast man as a species and even to survive the transmigra-



tion of the beings who constructed it. Borges, who worked as a lowly municipal librarian and was later elevated to the Directorship of the National Library of Argentina, uses the same image for parody and satire in "The Library of Babel." Substituting a sterile but perfect library for the figure of the universe as a finely crafted watch made famous by William Paley in his *Evidences of Christianity* (1794), Borges does not assume the existence of a Librarian God as Paley assumed the existence of a Watch-Maker God. Rather, the library is the universe precisely as we know and yet do not know it, and the narrator is reduced to a Kafkaesque bookworm whose vision of an apocalyptic future seems very close to Lovecraft's prolix observations about the decline of the west, the rise of barbarism, and the inevitable obliteration of mankind:

The methodical task of writing distracts me from the present state of men. The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms. I know of districts in which the young men prostrate themselves before books and kiss their pages in a barbarous manner, but they do not know how to decipher a single letter. Epidemics, heretical conflicts, peregrinations which inevitably degenerate into banditry, have decimated the population. I believe I have mentioned the suicides, more and more frequent with the years. Perhaps my old age and fearfulness deceive me, but I suspect that the human species—the unique species—is about to be extinguished, but the Library will endure: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret.<sup>46</sup>

For Borges this is cold comfort, but for Lovecraft it is a consummation devoutly to be wished. Yet Lovecraft remains one of Borges's "Precursors," in the sense that Borges redefines that word in his essay "Kafka and His Precursors." Here he writes that "In the critics' vocabulary, the word 'precursor' is indispensable, but it should be cleansed of all connotations of polemics or rivalry. The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future."<sup>47</sup> Lovecraft died in March 1937, and the tales of Borges I have considered here were all written after that date, since he did not even begin to create fantasies until after the mysterious blow to the head he suffered on Christmas Eve of 1938. But through Jung's principle of synchronicity Lovecraft still *participates* in Borges's fictional world as much as he anticipates or approximates it. Lovecraft and his alternative reality provide the missing term in the complex of Borges's elegant proofs and sophisticated ciphers, for with his compelling but inhumanly detailed dream-visions, the provincial Lovecraft demonstrates the very threat to imagi-

nation that haunts Borges's consciousness. In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" Borges again illustrates this threat graphically. A secret society of committed idealists, similar to the founders of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, which itself was based upon a fictional hoax, creates over a number of generations an entire alternative world, a planet called Tlön with its own special laws, languages, physics, and metaphysics. If in "The Library of Babel" the universe becomes a gigantic set of open stacks, now a multi-volumed encyclopedia in turn becomes a universe, self-contained and dangerously alluring. As Borges says when he discovers just one of the tomes of this gigantic work:

Now I held in my hands a vast methodical fragment of an unknown planet's entire history, with its architecture and its playing cards, with the dread of its mythologies and the murmur of its languages, with its emperors and its seas, with its minerals and its birds and its fish, with its algebra and its fire, with its theological and metaphysical controversy. And all of it articulated, coherent, with no visible doctrinal intent or tone of parody.<sup>48</sup>

Lovecraft began the construction of just such an alternative world with the creation of his Cthulhu Mythos, itself the gift of his otherworldly imagination. He refined it, extended it, and codified it more and more the longer he lived, while its use spread quickly among his friends, disciples, and fellow-writers. Latter-day fantasists have continued to contribute new gods, new legends, and new heroes to its bulk. But as Borges warns, the danger of such a self-enclosed and self-perpetuating system is that it has the power of gobbling up reality itself. Reality is chancy, messy, and unpredictable, while "Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men."<sup>49</sup> As always, Borges prefers the unsolved and unsolvable riddle, which implies what William James called an "open universe," to an elaborate crossword that can only lead to the cul de sac of what the American philosopher termed a "block universe." But because of its tyrannical order, the fantastic world of Tlön gradually "intrudes" upon the untidy world of reality until that world crumbles and disintegrates:

Already the schools have been invaded by the (conjectural) "primitive language" of Tlön; already the teaching of a harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has wiped out the one which governed in my childhood; already a fictitious past occupies in our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty—not even that it is false. Numismatology, pharmacology and archaeology have been reformed. I understand that biology and mathematics also await their avatars . . . A scattered dynasty of solitary men

has changed the face of the world. Their task continues. If our forecasts are not in error, a hundred years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of the Second Encyclopedia of Tlön.

Then English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön.<sup>50</sup>

When he first read Lovecraft's life, Borges must have been amused to learn that the Providence writer had contrived a fanciful "History of the *Necronomicon*" to complement one of the fictitious books he devised as part of the Cthulhu Mythos. Borges himself often toyed with the hoax of a mythical volume, as in his speculative review of the non-existent *Approach to al-Mu'tasim* "by the Bombay barrister Mir Bahudur Ali."<sup>51</sup> But one wonders how, as a literary historian as well as fabulist, he might have reacted to the fact that in 1973, *The Necronomicon* was published with an introduction by L. Sprague de Camp, Lovecraft's biographer, and that it is now widely disseminated in libraries here and abroad.<sup>52</sup>

#### Notes

1. Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), 63. These interviews began on 21 November 1967 and continued for several months.
2. Ronald J. Christ, quoting from the French periodical *L'Herne* in *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 43–44. It is interesting to note that *L'Herne* devoted one entire issue to Borges (1964) and another to HPL (1969).
3. Borges, *An Introduction to American Literature*, ed. and trans. L. Clark Keating and Robert O. Evans (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 47.
4. *Ibid.*, 83–84
5. Paul Theroux, *The Old Patagonian Express: By Train through the Americas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 376. The story in question is "There Are More Things" (in *The Book of Sand*).
6. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958). For Otto's relevance to HPL see my *Roots of Horror in the Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft* (Elizabethtown, NY: Dragon Press, 1977).
7. Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–1969*, ed. and trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970), 211.
8. *Ibid.*, 223–24.
9. HPL to Lillian D. Clark, 29 March 1926, *Letters from New York*, p. 289.
10. Winfield Townley Scott, "His Own Most Fantastic Creation: Howard Phillips Lovecraft," in *Exiles and Fabrications* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 52.

11. Borges, "The Aleph," *A Personal Anthology*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 150.
12. *A Personal Anthology*, 149–50.
13. Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 66.
14. *A Personal Anthology*, 87–88.
15. *The Aleph*, 264.
16. *Ibid.*, 150–51.
17. *Ibid.*, 152.
18. *Labyrinths*, 164.
19. *A Personal Anthology*, 150–51.
20. *The Aleph*, 263.
21. J. M. Cohen, *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 81.
22. Anthony Kerrigan, "Borges/Unamuno," *Prose for Borges*, ed. Charles Newman and Mary Kinzie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 238.
23. "An Autobiographical Essay," 208.
24. See my *H. P. Lovecraft: New England Decadent* (Albuquerque, NM: Silver Scarab Press, 1979).
25. *An Introduction to American Literature*, 20.
26. "An Autobiographical Essay," 216.
27. Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé (New York: Vintage, 1965), 400. For a full statement of Jung's theory, see his *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* in *The Structure of Dynamics of the Psyche* (New York: Pantheon, 1960), Volume 8 of *The Collected Works*. For a suggestive explanation and interpretation of this theory, see Ira Progoff's *Jung, Synchronicity and Human Experience* (New York: The Julian Press, 1973). Jung's idea that the constellation of an archetype produces meaningful co-occurrences that violate the ordinary boundaries of time and space is paralleled by the plot of HPL's "The Call of Cthulhu," where correlations among dream-states, occult activities, artistic endeavors, and scholarly researches portend the opening up of "terrifying vistas of reality"; i.e., the intrusion of archetypal numinosity on ordinary human consciousness.
28. *The Aleph*, 280.
29. *Labyrinths*, 109–10.
30. *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*, 18.
31. "An Autobiographical Essay," 250.
32. *The Narrow Act*, 200–202.
33. *Labyrinths*, 110–11.

34. *Ibid.*, 110.
35. *Ibid.*, 111.
36. Victoria O. Campo, "Norah Borges on Her Brother: An Unpublished Interview," *Prose for Borges*, 395.
37. Borges, *Dreamtigers*, trans. Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland, introduction by Miguel Enguidanos (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 21.
38. *Dreamtigers*, 41.
39. *Ibid.*, 27.
40. Borges's scholarly treatment of Gnosticism, "Vindication of the False Basilides," appeared in his collection *Discusión* (1932). See Martin S. Tabb, *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Twayne, 1970), 72–73. On his familiarity with the Kabbalah, see Jaime Alazraki, "Borges and the Kabbalah," *Prose for Borges*, 184–211. Alazraki's discussion of the doctrine of the Ibbur, or transmigration of souls, is relevant to the main premise of HPL's "The Shadow out of Time."
41. *Labyrinths*, 122–23.
42. See Hans Jonas's epilogue on "Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism" in *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 320–40.
43. *Labyrinths*, 113.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Poe, *Poems*, ed. T. O. Mabbott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 344.
46. *Labyrinths*, 58.
47. *Ibid.*, 201.
48. *Ibid.*, 7.
49. *Ibid.*, 17–18.
50. *Ibid.*, 18.
51. *The Aleph*, 45.
52. *Al Azif* (The *Necronomicon* by Abdul Alhazred, with a Preface by L. Sprague de Camp, Philadelphia: Owlswick Press, 1973). The *Necronomicon* also appears in the hoaxing index entitled "homage to Borges" which John Hollander contrived for the appreciative volume, *Prose for Borges* (413).

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