



Borges and the Third Man: Toward an Interpretation of ‘Unánime noche’ in “The Circular Ruins”

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Abstract Fernández aims to show how this enigmatic phrase in the famous first sentence of “The Circular Ruins” is inextricably linked to the story’s last words. Toward this purpose, he argues—against plausible foundational interpretations of the story—for a nonfoundational reading of the text and, moreover, that Borges’s use of ‘unánime’ (one soul) can be understood as one character or one form; namely, as an archetype of “Dreamanity” that leads to a vertiginous Third Man regress.

Keywords Third Man • ‘Unánime noche’ • “The Circular Ruins” • “Archetypes”

In 1971 Jorge Luis Borges was asked about the meaning of ‘unánime noche’ (unanimous night)¹ in his short story “The Circular Ruins.” Borges answered, in his polite if not coy manner, that he chose the metaphor

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15

because he liked the novel way it sounded, but wondered whether it had any meaning at all:

Coleman: Ronald Christ has written about the remarkable translation you gave “unánime noche,” which has puzzled many a commentator, and now in English.

Borges: Well, to tell you the truth, it has puzzled me! I wrote it down because I thought it had a fine sound, hadn’t been used before. But I wonder what it really means, if it means anything.²

In this paper, I will show how this enigmatic phrase in the famous first sentence of “The Circular Ruins” is inextricably linked to the story’s last words. Toward this purpose, I shall argue—against plausible foundational interpretations of the story—for a nonfoundational reading of the text and, moreover, that Borges’s use of ‘unánime’ (one soul) can be understood as one character or one form; namely, as an archetype of “Dreamanity” that leads to a vertiginous Third Man regress.

INTRODUCTION

If Aeschylus is correct that there is no sacred bond greater than the one between a host and a guest,³ and if Henry James is right about skillful writers designing their work to entice readers into taking part in its completion,⁴ we might imagine Borges’s fictions as hospitable collaborations where the host-writer bequeaths his guest-reader the gift of a labyrinth. For some readers, perhaps the kind that James has in mind, Borges’s gift elicits a Goethean commission: “Was Du ererbt von Deinen Vätern hast, Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen,”⁵ that is, that which you have inherited from your forebears, acquire for yourself, to make it your own (my translation). A gift disregarded soon fades into oblivion, and labyrinths, too, require upkeep and fresh innovation.

We see this commission taken on by Umberto Eco in his panegyric novel to Borges by entrusting the wizened Alinardo of Grottaferrata with disseminating the idea that “The library is a great labyrinth.”⁶ However, unlike the inhospitable librarian Jorge de Burgos, whom Eco placed as the minotaur at the center of *The Name of the Rose*, rarely does a labyrinth, that is, a library, hold in residence one so marvelously suited for, and

equally comfortable in, the dual role of host and guest as the venerable Jorge Luis.

Hospitality, the kind that takes place between an author and a reader, is not a one-sided affair. There is a certain amount of positive assorting in this reciprocal, poietic partnership, and the bases for selection are as undeniably intersubjective as they are indisputably intertextual. In the Preface to *The Order of Things* we see the phenomenon of like attracting like: therein, Michel Foucault delights over Borges's predilection for mapping worlds that agitate the "ordered surfaces" of our conceptual categories.⁷ The gift that jolted Foucault is owed to Borges's capacity to create fictional worlds that challenge the supposition that the real world exhibits cohesive unity. Borges's stories convey the sense that the organization of the world is the product of capricious human legerdemain rather than what has been shaped by the regulative hands of a deific legislator. And while the radical contingency of the former may provoke feelings of existential dread, it is the belief of having knowledge in the latter that Borges exposes as the ultimate conjurer's trick.

Borges articulates the alluring canard of our knowing the ultimate order of reality in his philosophically redolent "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius":

How could the world not fall under the sway of Tlön, how could it not yield to the vast and minutely detailed evidence of an ordered planet? It would be futile to reply that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but orderly in accordance with divine laws (read: "inhuman laws") that we can never quite manage to penetrate. Tlön may well be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth forged by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men.⁸

Reality might comply with the rational ordinations of a supreme lawgiver, but the infinite distance that lies between divine transcendence and immanent reason assures that we remain in the dark on the celestial grounds for a deity's creative choices. John Updike has noted how Borges's fictions "have the close texture of arguments,"⁹ and we can detect how Borges posits that, if one's aim is to subsume things and their attributes under categories that correspond with reality, whether through cartography, encyclopedistry, philosophy, literature, and so on, one ought to consider leaving some of the classifying to the imagination.

Subsequently, when we journey into Borges's stories, we find that our point of embarkation, and, for that matter, disembarkation, is not unlike

the mysterious man's in "The Circular Ruins." When the end can be detected already in the beginning, linear sequences that can provide satisfaction to reason are erased along with reason's comfort. Subsequently, the events in Borges's fictions neither occur in medias res, for 'in the middle of things' implies a start of things, nor at any fixed Archimedean point. Borges's fictions often flout the normative aspects of Aristotle's *Poetics*, that is, the plot, the idea that good authors grant primacy to their stories' composition of events,¹⁰ and what the novelist John Gardner calls "profluence"—a causally connected series of incidents that support "the sense that things are moving, getting somewhere, flowing forward."¹¹

Borges's readers find their complacent readerly habits disrupted because, although the mechanisms of plot are always hinted, the circular flow or cyclofluence of Borges's fictions diverts the flow of narrative events by steering the readers' imagination into tributaries of perplexities, paradoxes, and aporias. Foucault's avowed, if unsettled, amusement¹² is therefore a fitting tribute to Borges's enthusiasm for welcoming his reader to join him in questioning the order of reality, and investigating whether stable Archimedean points exist.

ARCHIMEDEAN POINTS AND THE THIRD MAN

Archimedean points are fixed foundations that are required to lift, weigh, examine, and investigate something that rests on another foundation. The term derives from Archimedes's boast that if he were given an extraterrestrial immovable point, a fulcrum, and a suitable lever, he could relocate the Earth. Archimedean points are thus second-order points; they are *metafoundations* from which to do heavy work in body and in thought.

The notion of a fixed point is expressed by Carter Wheelock in "Borges' New Prose," wherein he describes Borges's fictions as presenting cosmic tales peopled with almost faceless characters who are not really people but archetypal miniatures that move about in a purely cerebral universe. They often act like mythical beings in primitive cosmologies, or like dream figures.¹³

Archetypes are original models from which similar characters are copied, and hence provide the rational underpinnings for ensuing imitations. Wheelock is right to describe Borges's characters as "archetypal miniatures" in a derivative sense, but his portrait is complicated by adding the assertion that "Borges' people live in ignorance of the secret laws, or the

secret will, which guide their destinies, and their actions are not finally their own.”¹⁴

What is problematic with Wheelock’s claim is how the idea of foundation has burrowed its way into his description of Borges’s characters. For example, in addition to the correspondence one expects to find between archetypes and their simulacra, the terms “ignorance” and “secret” are correlative of a “knowledge” that one is either without or is being kept away from, and the words “will” and “destiny” imply determinacy, whether autonomous or providential. My reservations with Wheelock’s statements stem from their smuggling in foundational points outside and beyond the reach of Borges’s “people,” and for failing to cast doubt on whether such Archimedean points like secret laws, secret wills, and hidden designs are present in Borges’s “cosmic tales.” Stripped of these foundations, much of Borges’s work may be seen as raining skepticism on the belief that reality is built upon unshakable *terra firma*. For archetypes and Archimedean points must answer to the Third Man.

The Third Man (*ho tritos anthropos*) is a term attributed to Aristotle¹⁵ that appears as an argument without its famous appellation in Plato’s *Parmenides*.¹⁶ In the dialogue, Plato holds his own theory of the Forms’ feet to the fire, as it were, by having the eponymous interlocutor walk Socrates around the observation that whenever one looks at a number of things that share the extensional membership of being large, one identifies in them a mutual character, namely, the Form of largeness. From the fact that this Form is common to all large things, one is led to conclude that there is one, and only one, archetype Form of largeness. By exerting pressure on Socrates’s Theory of Ideas, *Parmenides* demonstrates that if one considers the set consisting of the Form of largeness plus all large objects, then one will again be able to recognize a mutual character of largeness present among all members of the set, including the Form of largeness itself. Therefore, since there is a mutual character of largeness present in all the members of a set that includes the Form of largeness itself, there must be another archetype over and above the Form of largeness which gives the Form its characteristic largeness, and so on, ad infinitum.

Always an appreciative student of the history of philosophy, Borges was familiar not only with Plato’s *Parmenides*, and its metaphysical worries, but also with the reappearance of these concerns in Aristotle’s Third Man: “In the *Parmenides* Plato anticipates the argument of the third man which Aristotle will use to oppose him.”¹⁷

In “Avatars of the Tortoise” Borges conveys Aristotle’s rejoinder to the Platonic Forms by proceeding to recount and reconstruct the Stagarite’s Third Man Argument:

We are indebted to Aristotle for the divulgation and the first refutation of [Zeno’s paradoxes]. He refutes them with a perhaps disdainful brevity, but the memory of them inspires his famous argument of the third man against the Platonic doctrine, which seeks to demonstrate that two individuals who have common attributes (for example, two men) are mere temporal appearances of an eternal archetype. Aristotle asks if the many men and the Man—the temporal individuals and the Archetype—have common attributes. It is obvious that they do: they have the general attributes of humanity. In that case, states Aristotle, it will be necessary to postulate another archetype that includes them all, and then a fourth....¹⁸

Borges’s appreciation for the indefinite conclusion of the Third Man shows up not only in his essays, but also as a recurring trope in his fictions. Indeed, it is often the case that when Borges’s characters begin to formulate a view with appeal to the governance of a law, the lawful event that has been assiduously ascertained serves only to reveal another “law” that exposes the latter’s falsehood, and so on.

“Death and the Compass”¹⁹ is the quintessential Borges detective story that illustrates how the rug can be pulled from under the feet of those who think that they are on Archimedean footing. In this metaphysical caper, detective Erik Lönnrot, a “reasoning machine” who is trying to uncover the truth behind a homicide, refuses to accept the possibility that a Talmudist’s murder was committed on the “spur of the moment,” that is, he refuses to accept that it was a crime of chance.²⁰ Lönnrot attempts to solve the case by rationally following a subsequent string of murders that appear related to the original, and sets his sights on apprehending the criminal by charting the time and place of the next crime in the sequence.

The rational sleuth, proceeding by trying to place himself in the mind of the killer, eventually “succeeds” in unraveling the plot and tracks down the next murder in the series: unwittingly, his own. Borges’s detective will be done in by his enemy *Doppelgänger*, Red Scharlach, who was contriving the logically patterned murders that he hoped Lönnrot would read as necessarily connected to the first crime and thus follow irresistibly. Before delivering his *coup de grâce*, however, Scharlach adds insult to impending injury by revealing that the Talmudist’s murder, which the analytical

Lönnrot used as the first point in his logical diagram of the “evil series’ secret shape,” came about “quite by chance.”²¹ Chance and coincidence were the “secret” underpinnings of Lönnrot’s murder case, and hence provided no foundation at all. Chance and contingency do play roles in causal relations, but they do not give the rule to anything.²² Framed within the disrupting elements of Borges’s fictions, Lönnrot’s ignominious guerdon demonstrates the theme that adherence to a series of rational patterns is not only a nonstarter, but can also result in fatal *non sequiturs*.

Foundational terms like “ignorance,” “secret law” and “destiny” imply an Archimedean standpoint that is, like Lönnrot’s reasoning, resistant to the shifting sway of accident, contingency, and chance. When pushed to their radical limits, however, we find that such points are reliant upon an n-order of further points on which to stand. Like the formal archetypes of the Third Man, Archimedean points are susceptible to infinite regresses. Wheelock’s idea of there being a secret will or secret destiny guiding the actions of Borges’s characters implies a hidden order, which is challenged by Borges’s view that labyrinths are not designed by rational architects. Labyrinths, Borges avers, are fashioned by the “rigor of chess masters, not of angels.”²³ And lest one mistake the rigor of chess masters as emanating from a fixed point, Borges shakes the supposed ground for this stability in his poem “Chess:”

The player, too, is captive of caprice
 (the sentence is Omar’s) on another ground
 crisscrossed with black nights and white days.
 God moves the player, he, in turn, the piece.
 But what god beyond God begins the round
 Of dust and time and dream and agonies?²⁴

Short of being able to ascertain a Foundation for all foundations, the blueprints to Borges’s labyrinths are not patterned from a fixed source, but rather reproduce images of reality under the light of contingency. The abyssal stories spun out of Borges’s Daedalian imagination are not constructed to show us a way out of the labyrinth (the goal of rational thinkers), but are set up as a way into it²⁵ so that we may marvel with its architect at a wealth of uncertainties and puzzlements: “If I am rich in anything, it is perplexities, not in certainties.... I merely wish to share those perplexities with you.”²⁶

To posit an Archimedean point or foundation in Borges's stories is to commit, as coined by Gilbert Ryle, a category mistake²⁷ by foisting the rules of one logical space (Borges's writings as author; his plans and designs) over the "logic" of another space (the self-contained world of Borges's fantastic fictions).²⁸ Pace Wheelock's description of Borges's characters, the "people" or "archetypal miniatures" that populate the *Borgesmos*, as it were, are without hope of lifting or scrutinizing the Archimedean "secrets," "laws," and foundations of their worlds – they might possess the lever, but they lack the immovable point.

In the following sections, I will juxtapose Borges's "The Circular Ruins" with Julio Cortázar's "The Night Face Up." *Ex facie*, the stories appear very similar, but I will show that they help to distinguish foundational and nonfoundational fiction within the genre of ficción fantástica.

FOUNDATIONAL AND NONFOUNDATIONAL FICTION

In terms of intensity, style, parsimony, and philosophical fecundity, "The Circular Ruins"²⁹ is perhaps the crowning achievement of Borges's speculative fictions. In *The Lesson of the Master*, Norman Thomas di Giovanni describes an evening with Borges, where, after reading his own translation of "The Circular Ruins," the *Maestro* shed tears in reminiscence of the power of his own storytelling.³⁰ "The Circular Ruins" begins with the introduction of a mysterious man "from one of those infinite villages that lie upriver"³¹ who, unnoticed in the "unanimous night," disembarks from his canoe at the shore of a fluvial beach. The man travels inland by making his way through thorny bushes, but does not feel the cuts on his flesh made from sharp barbs. The image recalls the Greek pre-Socratic belief that finds its most sanguine expression in Nietzsche, namely, the joyous Dionysian view that "suffering" is a necessary condition of "human existence."³² However, the disembarked man is unlikely to partake in bacchanalian revelry because he does not feel pain, which has an ontological, epistemological, and empirical quality, that is, you know it when you feel it. Thus, we can envision that the mysterious man, who lacks the sensory capacity to feel pain, is not only without corporeal substance, but is also standing on shaky ontological, epistemological, and empirical ground.

It is worthwhile to note that while philosophers have long used literary devices in and for the sake of their philosophies, Borges uses philosophy for the sake of his literary devices.³³ Borges's stories and essays often refer to philosophical positions almost as if they were the characters or topics in

his writings—indeed, as virtual protagonists. For example, in “Pascal’s Sphere” he writes that “Perhaps universal history is the history of a few metaphors,”³⁴ and in the story “Deutsches Requiem” the narrator tells us that “It has been said that all [human beings] are born either Aristotelians or Platonists Down through the centuries and latitudes, the names change, the dialects, the faces, but not the eternal antagonists.”³⁵ Spinoza’s basic ontology of things makes a provocative, if not entertaining cameo in the famously self-reflective “Borges and I.”³⁶ And we can find many other memorable references to the philosophies of, inter alios, Schopenhauer and Berkeley in the mirrors, gardens, and lotteries that fill Borges’s biblioscape. As I’ve stated, Borges uses philosophy for the sake of his literary devices.³⁷ In “The Circular Ruins,” the central metaphor, and, I argue, the main protagonist, are representations of Plato’s Theory of Forms that leads to a Third Man.

What follows the mysterious man’s disembarkation is Borges’s masterly reworking of the dream-within-a-dream motif to expose its susceptibility to a terrifying cascade of the infinite. After settling-in at the circular ruins, the mysterious man decides that he wants to dream another man into existence and impose him upon reality.³⁸ Initially the man’s dreams are chaotic, “a little later, they became dialectical.”³⁹ Borges’s auctorial use of dialectic in “The Circular Ruins” is interesting on account of its Platonic sense: for example, in the Socratic art of dialectical reasoning (*elenchus*), which is associated with midwifery (*maieutic*). In the *Theaetetus*, the eponymous interlocutor merits Socrates’s method of dialectic for its ability to deliver *offspring of the soul*.⁴⁰ Subsequently, for Plato’s Socrates, *maieutic* and dialectic are one—it is a capacity to distinguish reality from mere appearance. By adopting dialectical thinking into his dream-making, Borges is telling us that the mysterious man is attempting to deliver an “offspring of the soul” from the substratum of dreams: ultimately, from an Apollonian dream logic that will not succeed in reconciling thought and reality.

The mysterious man’s desire to dream another man into reality might be interpreted as following Nietzsche’s Apollonian description of how every human being, following the *principium individuationis*, is a complete artist in the poietic world of dreams. The *principium individuationis* resists the sense of being dissolved into oneness by asserting a sense of one’s individuality and selfhood.⁴¹ However, as we have seen, the mysterious man’s selfhood is already in question following his painless ascent from the river, and Borges adds that “if someone had asked him his own

name, or inquired into any feature of his life till then, he would not have been able to answer.”⁴² Faced with struggle and disappointment in trying to achieve his goal, the mysterious man finds guidance from the instructions of a “manifold god” (*multiple dios*, which also connotes one of several copies) whose “earthly name was Fire.”⁴³ With the deity’s help, the mysterious man completes his maieutic goal and completes his creation, but takes pains to shield his creature, his “son,” from his dream-being. The mysterious man’s triumph, however, is not permanent. The Apollonian dream project is exposed as but only an illusion. He becomes aware that there is a magician in a temple to the North who is capable of walking through fire without harm. The mysterious man fears that this magician is his son, and that his fire-walking will reveal what he has kept hidden from him, namely, the secret that his son is not a real man, but only a projection of his father’s dreams.

These are the mysterious man’s thoughts when he himself is enclosed by fire in the circular ruins and, believing his own death imminent, decides to give up the ghost, as it were, by walking into the flames. However, like his earlier encounter with the thorny brush, the fire does not hurt his flesh, which sets the stage for Borges’s memorable conclusion: “With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him.”⁴⁴ The mysterious man, who only we, Borges’s readers, saw come ashore from those “infinite villages that lie upriver,” that is, from the land of dreams, found that his journey was lighted all along by *ignis fatuus*, the misleading fire that illuminated the illusion of his reality. The “secret” that the mysterious man worked to keep from his son was but a facsimile of the “reality” he so shockingly discovered.

With consideration to the story’s memorable conclusion, George R. McMurray understands “The Circular Ruins” as depicting the theme “that reality is a dream,”⁴⁵ and thus ends on a foundational point, namely, the Archimedean dreamer, the looming “someone else.” Gene H. Bell-Villada interprets the story as suggesting “an external world modified by one man’s dreamings,”⁴⁶ and Efraín Kristal appears to accept a foundational reading of “the Circular Ruins” by proposing that the man “is a product of someone else’s dream and that the dream may be coming to an end.”⁴⁷ A plausible defense of these interpretations can be built around the words in Borges’s ending, namely, the textual evidence of there being “someone else” dreaming the mysterious man. Accordingly, it would appear that Borges’s reader and Borges’s humiliated protagonist

get in on the same “secret” by simultaneously arriving at a foundational, Archimedean point upon which to grasp the irony at the story’s conclusion. And yet as persuasive as much of these interpretations are, there are enough lapses and inconsistencies to demand detailed criticism. In the sections that follow I will argue against these interpretations by showing how Julio Cortázar’s “The Night Face Up”⁴⁸ stands as an exemplar of such foundational analyses, which cannot be said of Borges’s “The Circular Ruins.”

CORTÁZAR’S FIXED DREAMER

Like “The Circular Ruins,” “The Night Face Up” takes up the dichotomy and ambiguity between dreams and reality, but with very different results. Cortázar’s tale is a classic in its own right, and begins with an account of a young man who gets into a motorcycle accident, is taken to a hospital, and, while recovering from his injuries, slips in and out of consciousness. Cortázar clues us in to the ambiguity between dream and reality by describing the onset of his protagonist’s unconsciousness as “it was like falling asleep all at once.”⁴⁹ The injured motorcyclist oscillates between consciousness and unconsciousness while experiencing a series of recurring dreams. In these dreams, he is a young Moteca Indian trying to evade capture from Aztec warriors and avoid becoming a blood sacrifice to the Sun god in the “war of the blossom.”⁵⁰

In his dreams as a Motecan, the motorcyclist notices unusually vivid features, for example, his dreams are “full of smells, and he never dreamt smells.”⁵¹ The back and forth between dream and reality continues in the story until the Motecan finds himself supine, fixed, and fastened to a frame of death. Cortázar’s masterly conclusion eliminates all doubt as to which was the dream and which was the reality:

He managed to close his eyelids again, although he knew now he was not going to wake up, that he was awake, that the marvelous dream had been the other, absurd as all dreams are—a dream in which he was going through the strange avenues of an astonishing city, with green and red lights that burned without fire or smoke, on an enormous metal insect that whirred away between his legs. In the infinite lie of the dream, they had also picked him up off the ground, someone had approached him also with a knife in his hand, approached him who was lying face up, face up with his eyes closed between the bonfires on the steps.⁵²

The young Motecan will dream no more. In a nightmarish reversal, Cortázar presents the motorcycle, the accident, and the hospital convalescence as the Motecan's dream, and his attempted elusion from, and gruesome murder by, the Aztecs as the lurid reality.

As we can see, "The Night Face Up" shares topical similarities with "The Circular Ruins." The authors employ the illusory world of dreams as themes in their stories, and their protagonists experience a "death" of some kind. However, the stories exhibit ample dissimilarities. In Cortázar's story, there is a patent bifurcation between the dream world and the real world. Although the reader is not quite sure which is which until the end, the grand guignol of the dénouement allows us to see the partitioning of appearance and reality from a fixed, Archimedean foundation, viz. the young, enframed Motecan. In contradistinction to Cortázar's story, Borges's "The Circular Ruins" does not posit a foundational, Archimedean point of a fixed dreamer.

DREAMANITY

In *The Literature of Exhaustion*, John Stark considers the irony at the end of "The Circular Ruins" and writes:

The story offers more than a shrewd preparation for a trick ending. The circularity of the ruins, undoubtedly important because Borges mentions it in the title, provides a hint as to this fiction's basic meaning. Like the fearful sphere in its circularity and its status as the only obviously real thing in the universe, this ruin represents infinity. The plot of the fiction represents the same thing because the dreamer dreaming a dreamer begins an infinite regress.⁵³

Stark points out that any fixing of the mysterious man's terrifying revelation at the end of "The Circular Ruins" is suspect and counterfeit, but I disagree with his interpretation of the infinite regress of dreamers and dreamees beginning at any set point: "the dreamer dreaming a dreamer *begins an infinite regress*" (my italics). Circularity implies neither a beginning nor an end: just as there is no beginning or end point in a circle, there also are no such points in Borges's story. On my reading, the principal theme of "The Circular Ruins" is not that reality is a dream (although this is certainly a theme), but rather that the "someone else" dreaming the mysterious man is a Third Man, which, far from being on the verge of

waking up from his slumbers, leads instead to an even more terrifying regress and progress of dreamers and dreamees. If we accept the idea that “The Circular Ruins” ends with the mysterious man realizing that he was being dreamed by another man, Borges’s story seems to classify the dreamers into a triadic set of dreaming men. This set consists of the mysterious man, his son, and the mysterious man’s dreamer, *e.g.*, the following “dreamers’ set:” {mysterious man’s dreamer, mysterious man, mysterious man’s son}. While this closed set seems plausible given that “someone else” was dreaming the mysterious man, the external stand—or perhaps dream-point of a single dreamer—suggests an Archimedean perspective that, as I have argued, is susceptible to a Third Man Regress.

For example, note that the common character (feature, attribute) which is shared by the mysterious man and his son is that they are dreaming and being dreamed by another. Recall that in Aristotle’s Third Man Argument, because the mutual characteristic of “manness,” that is, humanity, is present in all members of the set of manness, including the Form of manness itself, there must be another Form of manness over and above the Form of manness which gives the Form its distinctive character, and so on, *ad infinitum*. In “The Circular Ruins,” the mysterious man and his son share the characteristic of, if you will, dreamanity; that is, they both are dream men. But why should this common, if not unanimous character of dreamanity end at the relationship between the man and his son? Should we not suppose that the mysterious man’s dreamer has as much illusory being as the two other dream men? The mysterious man is himself a creation; one who owes his phantasmal existence to the one dreaming him. Hence, just as the mysterious man’s failure to impose his son on reality exposed his own ontological privation, the mysterious man’s dreamer also seems to lack the power to dream a real man into existence. Subsequently, the “someone else” dreaming the mysterious man can be viewed as equally deficient of reality, and so on through a doubly infinite series of dreamers and dreamees.

Subsequently, my sense is that the conclusion to Borges’s story does not posit the fixed point of a “someone else” failing to dream a man into reality. Rather, the conclusion posits the “unanimous” characteristic of dreamanity: that the mysterious man’s dreamer is himself being dreamed by another, and that man’s dreamer is being dreamed by another, and so on to those “infinite villages,” both north and south, that Borges projected into his story at the outset.

UNÁNIME NOCHE, THE NIGHT OF ONE CHARACTER

I have argued that the terrifying conclusion of “The Circular Ruins” does not lead to a fixed, Archimedean, solitary dreamer, but to a doubly infinite regress of dreamers and dreamees. Toward this end, I have contrasted foundational readings of Borges’s story with my own nonfoundational interpretation of the text, and I put forward an argument that identifies dreamanity as the single and undiversified character that the members of the “dreamers’ set” have in common. Subsequently, it seems plausible that the enigmatic phrase “unánime noche,” which Borges treats with ambiguity, can be interpreted as the ‘night of one character;’ namely, as the shared form of dreamanity, and it is this *archetype*, without beginning or end, that leads to the vertiginous, terrifying revelation of the Third Man.

NOTES

1. Peter Hulme and Gordon Brotherston touch on the notorious difficulties translators have faced with the phrase “unánime noche,” or “unanimous night.” The authors understand the phrase as “an effective if slightly forced metaphor” and as “perfectly comprehensible”; however, they do not explain why the metaphor is so effective and comprehensible. My task here is to fill in these gaps. See “A partial history of traduction: Borges in English,” in *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, ed. Elinor Shaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 2: 325.
2. See Ronald Christ, Alexander Coleman, and Norman Thomas di Giovanni, “Borges at NYU,” in *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*, ed. Richard Burgin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 123.
3. This is the ancient Greek concept of *xenia*. See Aeschylus, “The Libation Bearers,” in *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 208.
4. Henry James, “The Writer Makes the Reader,” in *Theory of Fiction*, ed., James E. Miller, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972): “In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters. When he makes him ill, that is, indifferent, he does no work; the writer does all. When he makes him interested, then the reader does quite the labour” (321).
5. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part I*, trans. Peter Salm (New York: Bantam, 1985), 54. The most direct translation of Goethe’s message in these lines is given by the inimitable Jaroslav Pelikan: “What you have as heritage, now take as task, for thus you will make it your own.” See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Faust the Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 28.

6. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 158.
7. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), xv. Foucault is jolted by the irrationally exuberant extensional memberships categorized in the so-called Chinese Encyclopedia. See “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” in *Jorge Luis Borges, Other Inquisitions 1937–1952*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000 [1964]), 103.
8. Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” in *Jorge Luis Borges: Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 81.
9. John Updike, “The Author as Librarian,” in *The New Yorker* 41 (October 30, 1965): 223.
10. Aristotle, “Poetics,” in *The Basic Work of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 15–35.
11. John Gardner, *On Becoming a Novelist* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 9.
12. Foucault, *The Order of Things*: “That passage from Borges kept me laughing a long time, though not without a certain uneasiness that I found hard to shake off” (xvii).
13. Carter Wheelock, “Borges’ New Prose,” in *Jorge Luis Borges: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 106.
14. *Ibid.*, my italics.
15. Aristotle’s references to the Third Man Argument (TMA) can be found in scattered and underdeveloped forms in “Metaphysics” in *The Basic Work of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 990b17, 1039a2, 1059b8, and 1079a13. For a comprehensive treatment of the TMA, see Gail Fine’s notable monograph *On Ideas: Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato’s Theory of Forms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
16. Plato, *Parmenides in Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper, trans. Lombardo and Bell (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), [131e-132b], 365–66.
17. Borges, “Note on Whitman,” in *Other Inquisitions*, 71, n 3.
18. “Avatars of the Tortoise,” in *Other Inquisitions*, 110–11.
19. Borges, “Death and the Compass,” in *Collected Fictions*. The title’s reference to a “compass” is a play on ambiguity, and conveys a double entendre: on the one hand, it refers to the compass-and-straightedge style of geometrical reason which dooms the protagonist; on the other hand, it is an instrument used as a tool for navigation (brújula), with a 360° circular design. Borges uses these dual aspects to emphasize the hazards of the former and the labyrinthian implications of the latter.

20. "Death and the Compass," 148.
21. *Ibid.*, 155.
22. This is why Aristotle writes that there can be no science of the accidental. See "Metaphysics" in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 1026b–1027a20.
23. Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," 81.
24. Borges, "Chess," in *Jorge Luis Borges: A Personal Anthology* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 76.
25. See Donald Yates, "A Colloquy with Jorge Luis Borges," in *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*: "When you are reading a book, if you don't find your way inside it, then everything is useless" (162).
26. See Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1967–1968* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2.
27. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, [1949]), 15–16.
28. Paul de Man writes that fiction is degraded if readers need to refer it to "a reality from which it has forever taken leave." See Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 17.
29. "The Circular Ruins," in *Collected Fictions*, 96–100.
30. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, *The Lesson of the Master: On Borges and His Work* (London: Continuum Books, 2003), 179.
31. "The Circular Ruins," 96, my italics. That the mysterious man descended from an "infinite" village already suggests a regressive series.
32. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1990), 136.
33. See "An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges," in *Philosophy and Literature* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1977): 339: "I have used the philosophers' ideas for my own private literary purposes."
34. Borges, "Pascal's Sphere," in *Other Inquisitions*, 6.
35. Borges, "Deutsches Requiem," in *Collected Fictions*, 233.
36. Borges, "Borges and I," in *Collected Fictions*, 324.
37. See "An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges," *Philosophy and Literature* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1977): 339.
38. "The Circular Ruins," 97.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Plato, *Theaetetus in Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), 150b–151.
41. See Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Books, 1956), 1: 20–24.

42. "The Circular Ruins," 97.
43. *Ibid.*, 99.
44. *Ibid.*, 100.
45. See George R. McMurray, *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), 68.
46. See Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Borges and His Fictions: A Guide to His Mind and Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 56.
47. See Efraín Kristal, *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 121.
48. Julio Cortázar, "The Night Face Up," in *Blow-Up and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967).
49. "The Night Face Up," 67.
50. *Ibid.*, 66.
51. *Ibid.*, 69.
52. *Ibid.*, 76.
53. John Stark, *The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, Barth* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1974).

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