

THE MIRACULOUS SECRET
Visions and Riddles in Nietzsche, Borges, and
Abad

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By way of preface, I will beg for your mercy. This essay is as yet unfinished. Ideas that should stand at the beginning are not summoned until the end; conclusions precede their premises; and things, generally speaking, fall apart; the center, if there is one, cannot hold. At times, words and phrases—or worse—are grafted from great writers with absolutely no acknowledgment.

By way of introduction, I will intone the last lines of Borges' essay "Circular Time" from 1941: "In times of ascendancy, the conjecture that man's existence is a constant, unvarying quantity can sadden or irritate us; in times of decline (such as the present), it holds out the assurance that no ignominy, no calamity, no dictator, can impoverish us" (228).¹

¹ All quotations of and references to the non-fiction essays of Borges are made by way of the Weinberger edition of 1999.

I

Coming to be and perishing — Borges is born on August 24, 1899; Nietzsche dies on August 25, 1900; and McTaggart writes in 1908 his timeless essay “The Unreality of Time,” in which he posits two distinct temporal series. The one, which he dubs the “A series,” consists in one-place relations: “*x* is past,” “*y* is present,” and “*z* is future.” The other, the “B series,” consists in two-place relations: “*x* is earlier than *y*,” “*y* is later than *z*.” The B-series is abstract and eternal. If the birth of Borges is earlier than the death of Nietzsche, then it is always so, no matter what time it is now. (The truth values of propositions expressing A-series relations, by contrast, are beholden to the now.) Thus, argues McTaggart, the B-series cannot account for change in the world. Real change requires that an event move from future to present to past *simpliciter*. Without change, there is no time, since time is nothing more than the measure of change.

McTaggart’s terrible genius lies in this observation: the A-series is inexplicable, which, to the philosophical mind, is death. And if the A-series is refuted, so is change. And upon the death of change follows the death of time. I do not know whether Borges read McTaggart’s essay. That he did not is as inconceivable as the divinity of Christ. Yet McTaggart’s name is never invoked.

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Vision of a riddle — “In the course of a life dedicated to belles-lettres and, occasionally, to the perplexities of metaphysics, I have glimpsed or foreseen a refutation of time, one in which I

myself do not believe, but which tends to visit me at night and in the hours of weary twilight with the illusory force of a truism. This refutation is to be found, in one form or another, in all of my books." (Borges, "A New Refutation of Time," 318)

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Empedocles at the library — I remember vividly the moment in the Reading Room of the New York Public Library when I first understood with perfect clarity the doctrine of Empedocles, the great philosopher-poet of Presocratic Greece who, legend has it, cast himself into a live volcano to prove his immortality. I had been studying McTaggart's essay "The Unreality of Time" when I stumbled fortuitously upon a surviving line from Empedocles' poem (composed in the epic hexameter of the period), which, in English, translates to something like the following: "insofar as they never cease always interchanging, in this way they are always, unchanging in a circle." Here is the thought dissected. If time is a circle, then every moment both precedes and succeeds itself. No moment ever moves absolutely from future to past. To translate into the technical dialect of McTaggart: the A-series is destroyed, and so, too, change. Time exists as the skeletal remains of the B-series, but it does not flow. This, I realized, is how Empedocles brokers a truce between Heraclitus and the Eleatics. Nature, robed in a river of illusion, stands, statuesque, on the stage; she can neither strut nor fret. Her hour is one moment; that moment is eternity.

It is not generally acknowledged that Empedocles structures time itself as a circle. Thus far I have kept it a secret, from embarrassment as much as anything. The doctrine is

bizarre and fantastical, almost childish. How can we take it seriously? How can anyone take *me* seriously for writing about it? And yet, after all these years—ten, I think, or maybe twelve—I haven't stopped thinking about it.

I am standing in a side aisle staring listlessly at the shelf in front of me. On it stands a volume on healing rituals among the peoples of the Philippine Archipelago and a botanical encyclopedia.

* * *

Initiation — Have you heard the story of “The Secret Miracle”?¹ A Czech of Jewish extraction, one Jaromir Hladik, is captured by a Nazi commander named Julius Rothe and sentenced to death by firing squad. In an episode reminiscent of Meursault's captivity in Camus' *L'Étranger*, Hladik obsesses over visions of his death.

...Hladik never wearied of picturing to himself those circumstances. Absurdly, he tried to foresee every variation. He anticipated the process endlessly, from the sleepless dawn to the mysterious discharge of the rifles. Long before the day that Julius Rothe had set, Hladik died hundreds of deaths—standing in courtyards whose shapes and angles ran the entire gamut of geometry, shot down by soldiers of changing faces and varying numbers who sometimes took aim at him from afar, sometimes from quite near. He faced his imaginary executions with true fear, perhaps with true courage. Each enactment lasted several

¹ All quotations of and references to the short stories of Borges are made by way of the Hurley edition of 1998.

seconds; when the circle was closed, Hladik would return, unendingly, to the shivering eve of his death. (158)

This Sisyphean effort of imagination comes naturally to Hladik, who is a writer. He has published articles on Boehme, Ibn Ezra, and Fludd; a translation of the *Sefer Yetsirah*; and a two-volume work entitled *A Vindication of Eternity*. (Here I will interject: the content of this last work matches in its fundamentals the arguments in Borges' essay "A New Refutation of Time".) Hladik's attitude toward these texts is mostly one of regret. At the time of his capture, he is at work on a verse drama that, he hopes, will redeem him from the literary sins of his past.

That verse drama, entitled *The Enemies*, is a tragedy. Its plot is of less concern than the intensity of Hladik's desire to be finished.

He had finished the first act and one or the other scene of the third; the metrical nature of the play allowed him to go over it continually, correcting the hexameters, without a manuscript. It occurred to him that he still had two acts to go, yet very soon he was to die. In the darkness he spoke to God. *If, he prayed, I do somehow exist, if I am not one of Thy repetitions or errata, then I exist as the author of The Enemies. In order to complete that play, which can justify me and justify Thee as well, I need one more year. Grant me those days, Thou who art the centuries and time itself.* (160)

God grants him this wish in a dream, but the timing of its fulfillment is unexpected. Hladik goes to the site of his execution. As the sergeant gives the command to fire, time stops for all but Hladik.

He sets to work on his tragedy. The particulars of his process are rendered with some precision.

[T]he fact that he had to learn each hexameter as he added it imposed upon him a providential strictness, unsuspected by those who essay and then forget vague provisional paragraphs. He did not work for prosperity, nor did he work for God, whose literary preferences were largely unknown to him. Painstakingly, motionlessly, secretly, he forged in time his grand invisible labyrinth. He redid the third act twice. He struck out one and another overly obvious symbol—the repeated chimings of the clock, the music. No detail was irksome to him. He cut, condensed, expanded. In some cases he decided the original version should stand. (162)

As Hladik finishes the last line of *The Enemies*, time resumes. The shots are fired; he is felled.

* * *

Identification — “Once this identity is postulated, we may ask: Are not these identical moments the same moment? Is not one single repeated terminal point enough to disrupt and confound the series in time? Are the enthusiasts who devote themselves to a line of Shakespeare not literally Shakespeare?” (Borges, “A New Refutation of Time,” 323)

* * *

Recurrent riddle — Borges, in his essay “The Doctrine of Cycles,” discerns a riddle in Nietzsche’s writing: when Nietzsche proclaims himself the prophet of the Eternal Recurrence, claiming sole ownership of the doctrine, does he fail to

understand that his ostensible discovery is nothing more than a recovery? That he shares the Recurrence with Pythagoras, Plato, Heraclitus, Empedocles, the Stoics and countless others, Nietzsche the philologist and high priest of Presocratic philosophy cannot be unaware. And yet he betrays no awareness. By way of explanation, I adduce the following three hypotheses. According to the first, articulated by Borges (119), Nietzsche's claim to discovery is a rhetorical feint. The second extrapolates from Nietzsche's well documented physical and psychological infirmity. He is mad. (Borges is either too polite or too ashamed to voice this possibility.) The third is more elegant and also more absurd: Nietzsche, when he thinks the Eternal Recurrence, is indistinguishable from his progenitors.

* * *

A symmetry/A mystery — Borges' essay "A New Refutation of Time" is as remarkable in its structure as it is in its argument. It is not really *an* essay but rather *two* essays yoked together by a short preface. The first essay is in fact an early but recognizable version of the second, which has been heavily revised. Borges explains: "I have deliberately refrained from making the two into one, deciding that two similar texts could enhance the reader's comprehension of such an unwieldy subject" (317). I do not know anyone who takes this statement at face value. Borges' true intentions remain a mystery, but mysteries abound in Borges, especially in this essay. Here is another: on several occasions, Borges is adamant that his refutation of time has been refuted. He never tells us how or by whom.

* * *

Respectability — Contemporary Nietzsche scholarship has a problem, the problem of Eternal Recurrence. For those who seek to interpret Nietzsche as a positivist or naturalist about morality and epistemology, the doctrine is an embarrassment. It is a myth at best, a deranged fantasy at worst. But Nietzsche was quite clearly very proud of it, and very serious. How can we reinterpret the Eternal Recurrence so that it is “respectable?” Some philosophers interpret the doctrine as an “existential thought experiment.”¹ Others choose to minimize or ignore its importance.² The Eternal Recurrence is one of Nietzsche’s eccentricities, a sin against logic that needs our forgiveness, not our conspiracy.

* * *

Deus ex machina — If we take the ending to “The Secret Miracle” at face value, then Borges is guilty of the same crime against drama and good taste that dragged down the reputation of the Athenian Euripides. Resolution is achieved, and the tragic character of the story muted, by the miraculous intervention of a god. One difference, I suppose, is that Euripides’ gods were actors in the full sense. They made appearances and pronouncements, helped by mechanical hoists that hung them

¹ E.g., Magnus 1978.

² E.g., Leiter 2002.

high over the heads of the mortals below. But where is Borges' god? Where is the evidence of his activity?

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ἦι δὲ διαλλάσσοντα διαμπερὲς οὐδαμὰ λήγει,
ταύτηι δ' αἰὲν ἔασιν ἀκίνητοι κατὰ κύκλον. (25/17.12-13)¹

¹ Citations of Empedocles are made by way of the conventions established in Inwood, according to which the fragment number in Inwood's edition is separated from the Diels-Kranz number by a forward slash.

II

Of dwarves and gravity —

“Halt, dwarf” I said. “I! Or You! But I am the stronger of the two—you do not know my abysmal thought! *That*—you could not endure!”

Then something happened which lightened me: for the dwarf, the curious one, sprang from my shoulder! And he squatted on a stone in front of me. But a gateway stood just where we halted.

“Look at this gateway! Dwarf!” I continued: “it has two faces. Two roads come together here: no one has yet followed either to its end.

“This long lane backwards: it continues for an eternity. And that long lane forward—that is another eternity.

They are opposed to one another, these roads; they offend each other face to face—and it is here, at this gateway, that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: ‘Moment.’

“But should one follow them further—and ever further and further on, do you think, dwarf, that these roads would be eternally opposed?” —

“Everything straight lies,” murmured the dwarf, contemptuously. “All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle.”

“You spirit of gravity!” I said angrily, “do not take it too lightly! Or I shall leave you squatting where you are, lamefoot—and I carried you *high*!

“Behold,” I continued, “this moment! From this gateway Moment a long, eternal lane runs *backward*: behind us lies an eternity.

“Must not all things that *can* run already have run along that lane? Must not all things that *can* happen already have happened, been done, and passed by?

“And if everything has been here before: what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway already also—have been?

“And are not all things bound together in such a way that this moment draws all coming things after it? *Therefore*—itself too?

“So, for all things that *can* run: also in this long lane *forward*—it *must* once more run!

“And this slow spider which creeps in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and you and I in this gateway whispering together, whispering of eternal things—must we not all have been here before?

“—And must we not return and run in that other lane out before us, that long weird lane—must we not eternally return?”—

(Nietzsche, from “On the Vision and the Riddle,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

* * *

Of imps and entropy —

Yeah, the Imp!

He or She or It

That we carry

Or that carries us.

Ach! Who this porter be?

It or Me?

Now I know,

The mind's the Imp

Beyond ken and capture

Of the body's organs.

The laws of thermodynamics,

O, vibrant, insuperable!

The first law is,

"You'll never win,"

The second,

"You'll always lose,"

And the third,

"You'll never get there" —

Aiee! These laws ever hold,
 But ze Imp's a siren,
Endless the temptings,
 Endless the questings!

Aye! Unavailing all guile,
 All cunning.

("Ze Imp," Abad 2014, 7)

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The flesh is weak — "Nietzsche appeals to energy; the second law of thermodynamics declares that some energetic processes are irreversible. Heat and light are no more than forms of energy. It suffices to project a light onto a black surface to convert it into heat. Heat, however, will never return to the form of light. This inoffensive or insipid-seeming proof annuls the 'circular labyrinth' of the Eternal Recurrence." (Borges, "The Doctrine of Cycles," 121-2)

* * *

A line divided — Zeno of Elea, student of Parmenides, is famous for a series of paradoxes designed to show (we think) that

motion is, as a concept, incoherent. Perhaps the most well-known, because the simplest and therefore most disconcerting, is the so-called paradox of the divided line (DK 29 A25).¹ Suppose you aim to walk somewhere—across the room, say, or to the store. You'll never get there. For before you can arrive at the point on the other side of the room, you must pass through the point halfway. Before you can arrive at the point halfway, you must pass through the point that is half of that again. And so on *ad infinitum*. You must travel through an infinite number of intervals in order to reach the other side. But you are not infinite.

Every year I ask my students to explain to me the paradoxes of Zeno. Every year they fail, muddling through their presentations while performing truly impressive feats of misunderstanding. Finally, I realized that they do not *want* to understand them. The thought is too horrible to bear.

* * *

A heroic theory of sets — “Cantor destroys the foundations of Nietzsche’s hypothesis. He asserts the perfect infinity of the number of points in the universe, or even in one meter of the universe, or a fraction of that meter.... The clash between Cantor’s lovely game and Zarathustra’s lovely game is fatal to Zarathustra. If the universe consists of an infinite number of terms, it is rigorously capable of an infinite number of

¹ Citations of and references to fragments of Zeno and other Presocratic philosophers (excluding Empedocles) are made by way of the conventional formula giving the chapter, section letter, and fragment number in the Diels-Kranz edition.

combinations—and the need for a Recurrence is done away with. There remains its mere possibility, which can be calculated as zero.” (Borges, “The Doctrine of Cycles,” 116-17)

* * *

Vindication — Neil Turok, Director of the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, has developed an alternative to the consensus *ex nihilo* model of the Big Bang (Turok 2014). Turok’s picture of the cosmos postulates an eternal recurrence of explosions and expansions. In other words, Borges is wrong about the physics of the Eternal Recurrence. It is not just possible; it may be actual. But this fails to answer a deeper question: if Borges is so persuaded by his battery of physical and metaphysical arguments that the Eternal Recurrence is nonsense, then why does it recur eternally in his writing? Why this fascination with a broken, useless artifact of intellectual history?

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ταύτηι δ’ αἰὲν ἔασιν ἀκίνητοι κατὰ κύκλον. (25/17.12-13)

III

The plot of The Enemies — “Then the third and last act begins. Little by little, incoherences multiply; actors come back on stage who had apparently been discarded by the plot; for one instant, the man that Römerstadt killed returns. Someone points out that the hour has grown no later....” (Borges, “The Secret Miracle,” 159)

* * *

The incoherences multiply —

“Only what I feel, what I think now,
may be the living “I” —nothing other,
or at best, a pale cast, figments adrift,
vocables without life, no bone
where the world’s flesh tingles.

(Carousing tonight in Café Carebana,
friends all, well met, and a singer lost
to our speech...Pass the bottle, kaibigan,
Am a little sad, all her songs are English,
Ay! How subtly our souls are colonized.)

And so? Is that
the now-living or past-present caught
in clumsy parenthesis? By any style,
its wording is in a similar case: my world
encased in words that ceaselessly
take it for a ride toward a meaning they ceaselessly feign."

(From "A Cycle," *Abad* 2014, 18)

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Circular delirium — At the close of his essay "The Doctrine of Cycles," Borges articulates what he deems the most devastating objection to the Eternal Recurrence. "If Zarathustra's hypothesis is accepted," he writes, "I do not understand how two identical processes keep from agglomerating into one" (122). That is, if time is simply a measure of change, and change is determined by the events contained in successive moments, and these moments repeat in a periodic pattern, then time is not cyclical but perfectly circular. It is not just that in a million, or a billion, years we will all be gathered round just as we are now. Rather, it will *be* now, this moment, without qualification. Every moment occurs exactly once, and for eternity. This is perhaps intelligible in abstraction; we can mouth the words. But even the musings of a madman can be mouthed.

* * *

A case of blindness — Borges the writer, one is tempted to say, is beyond reproach, even if Borges the person, the citizen of Argentina who was so slow to criticize political abuses in his native country, can be criticized for a certain bourgeois indifference. One can contest the convenient distinction between a man and writer, of course, just as one can speculate on the motives for his indifference. The Argentine physicist and novelist Ernesto Sábato, a contemporary of Borges and a harsh critic of the junta that terrorized Argentina between 1976 and 1983, had this to say about the old conjurer: “From Borges’ fear of the bitter reality of existence spring two simultaneous and complementary attitudes: to play games in an inverted world, and to adhere to a Platonic theory, an intellectual theory par excellence” (James 2007, 67).

* * *

Entropic gravity — There is a theory in modern physics that describes gravity as an entropic force—not a fundamental interaction mediated by a quantum field theory and a gauge particle (like photons for the electromagnetic force, and gluons for the strong nuclear force), but a probabilistic consequence of physical systems’ tendency to increase their entropy. Gravity is not a fundamental interaction, but an emergent phenomenon that arises from the statistical behavior of microscopic degrees of freedom encoded on a holographic screen.

* * *

And yet, and yet — “To deny temporal succession, to deny the self, to deny the astronomical universe, appear to be acts of desperation and are secret consolations. Our destiny (unlike the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not terrifying because it is unreal; it is terrifying because it is irreversible and iron-bound. Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.” (Borges, “A New Refutation of Time,” 332)

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Identical enemies — “Kubin has now gone mad, and believes himself to be Römerstadt....” (Borges, “The Secret Miracle,” 159)

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Coping mechanisms —

“The poems come thick and fast today. I cannot cope. Poem after poem, half-words—and without words still.

I hardly cope. I am not sure I'm blessed, but my faith holds. I write words and words on "spindrift pages." Words that are blessed, words that are accursed."

(From "The Nothing that Speaks," Abad 2014, 10)

* * *

Einstein's insanity— "Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." I would add: the only thing more insane is doing the same thing over and over again with no expectation of difference. A final note: there is no evidence that Einstein said any such thing.

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Corpse revival — "A New Refutation of Time," published in its "final" form in 1947, incorporates an early essay of Borges from 1928, "Sentirse in Muerte," or "Feeling in Death." Borges would later remark in an interview that "Feeling in Death" was the best thing he had written up to that point in his career, perhaps one of the best things he had ever written. It featured in an obscure collection called *The Language of the Argentines* but is no longer published on its own. It lives on only through the later essay. In the same interview, Borges admits casually that he looks forward to death: "I think of death as oblivion. I am hungering and thirsting after oblivion. I do not want to be remembered; and—this is most important—I am tired of being myself. In fact,

I am tired of being an ego, an "I"; and I suppose that when I'm dust and ashes, then I'll be nothing. I'm looking forward to that prospect. But of course I won't be able to enjoy it because I won't be there" (Burgin 1998, 125).

* * *

Martyrdom — "I—this other of me and the same, exposed as roisterer without word, traitor without speech, parasite—I was, I am myself reeling, unreeling. My head rolls upon my own ground. And the words, the words that flood my ground, their tenses loose—mutter of lips unseen, slither of eyes!

O infinite decapitation!

Then it passes. It ceases of its own accord. I am myself again, this other and the same." (From "The Nothing that Speaks," Abad 2014, 11)

* * *

Alternate endings — What would have happened had Hladik never finished? Would he still have died? Would God have pulled the plug on his tragedy half-written? Is it possible that he could have written and rewritten indefinitely, eternally? And the reverse, generalized: is it possible for a writer ever to finish a work?

* * *

How it feels to be dead — “I stood looking at that simple scene. I thought, no doubt aloud: ‘This is the same as it was thirty years ago....’ I guessed at the date: a recent time in other countries, but already remote in this changing part of the world. Perhaps a bird was singing and I felt for him a small, bird-size affection; but most probably the only noise in this vertiginous silence was the equally timeless sound of the crickets. The easy thought *I am somewhere in the 1800s* ceased to be a few careless words and became profoundly real. I felt dead, I felt I was an abstract perceiver of the world, struck by an undefined fear imbued with science, or the supreme clarity of metaphysics. No, I did not believe I had traversed the presumed waters of Time; rather I suspected that I possessed the reticent or absent meaning of the inconceivable word *eternity*.” (Borges, “Feeling in Death” from “A New Refutation of Time,” 325)

* * *

Returning to art — “A test of this would be to consider that the experience of these discoveries—or their proper organ—is as of memory. What precedes certain discoveries is a necessity to *return* to a work, in fact or in memory as to unfinished business. And this may be neutral as between re-reading and re-seeing. Then one recalls that one sense of philosophy takes memory as its organ of knowledge. An outstanding question is then: What sends us back to a piece or a passage?—as though it is not finished with us. In the opening pages of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge takes as his first measure of the worth of a poem the fact that we return to it. Knowing that not just any way of

returning will constitute such a measure (say, one in order to prepare for tomorrow's lesson, or to look up an illustration for a thing one already knows), he adds that the return is to be made 'with the greatest pleasure.' But he is not there concerned to characterize the nature of this pleasure, nor our need of it. The trouble with speaking of this returning as a *remembering* is that it provides access to something we haven't first known and then *forgotten*. Suppose we say that the experience is one of *having to remember*. Then one thinks of Wordsworth's rehearsal (in Book VIII of the *Prelude*) of the motive, and resolution, to know of good and evil, 'not as for the mind's delight but for her safety' — the feminine cast registering the mind's need for protection, but the masculine drift showing knowledge that such safety is not achieved through protection, but in action. Evidently Wordsworth is not speaking merely of his past, but of the motive, and resolution, to write — write poetry of such ambitions as the poem he is now writing, and thus give to action the body of the past joined with the soul of the present. And why should the need that sends us back to art be disconnected from the necessity upon which the artist goes for it?" (Cavell 2002, 314)

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ἦι δὲ διαλλάσσοντα διαμπερὲς οὐδαμὰ λήγει,
ταύτηι δ' αἰὲν ἔασιν ἀκίνητοι κατὰ κύκλον. (25/17.12-13)

* * *

By way of conclusion, I will apologize for the repetitive and derivative character of this essay. Its failure reflects our great tragedy, namely, that we are cursed with the ambition for infinite thought and blessed with a finite time in which to realize it. Thought is wasted on us. We are nothing if not waste.

By way of epilogue, I will confess that I do not remember the moment I understood Empedocles' doctrine of circular time. I know only that, at some point, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Indeed, the online catalog of the New York Public Library has no record of the books I mentioned; nor does the Library have any record of my visit. This seems like the appropriate place (or is it time?) to give the last lines of Borges' summary of Hladik's tragedy, *The Enemies*: "The play has not taken place. It is the circular delirium that Kubin endlessly experiences and re-experiences" ("The Secret Miracle," 160).

Appendix

We return eternally to the Eternal Return.

By “we” I mean Empedocles, Nietzsche, Borges, even Abad, and myself. And others. Everybody. I am curious to know why this is so, especially in light of the general implausibility of the hypothesis. Nietzsche believed that it was a dangerous thought that only few could truly countenance. I do not disagree, which is to say, I do not entirely agree. I set aside the various physical refutations of the Eternal Recurrence. These depend on current tastes in cosmology, which are eternally changing. I put great stock, however, in Borges’ realization, which belongs not only to Borges, that literal recurrence is a refutation of time itself. I do not think that Nietzsche realized this, that his magnificent vision, which was supposed to force us to embrace the here and now and reject the eschatological, failed. That is, it left this life, a life of time and change, a mere illusion; reality is timeless and transcendent, as it is for St. Augustine and Plato. More on Plato in a moment.

I have sensed in Borges the same disillusionment, but also the same obsession, with Nietzsche and the Eternal Recurrence. Borges does not lie when he says the refutation of time at the hands of recurrence permeates his writing. This is especially true of his work from the 1930s and 1940s, in the midst and immediate aftermath of the Third Reich. Borges does not tire of giving reasons for rejecting the Eternal Recurrence. And yet he seems to accept it in some form. How?

I hope that you will have divined by now at least some dim outline of an answer. The miraculous secret of “The Secret Miracle” is that God does not grant Hladik the time he desires; art does. Or rather, Hladik himself does, as creator. Borges converts the Eternal Recurrence into a poetics. The poet, the

writer, is the name we give to one sort of person who spins in perpetual orbit around the sun of some great idea that he cannot get past. His writing is the product of an attempt to fully comprehend this idea. His constant thinking and rethinking, his never-ending vision and revision, confound his identity by confounding time itself. By virtue of his eternal return to this idea, his moments of consciousness become indistinguishable, and so past and future become meaningless. He is timeless, and he is not himself. He is at once nothing and everyone who has ever knelt before the same altar of thought. He is, from a clinical perspective, quite mad, and, figuratively speaking, or perhaps not so figuratively, quite dead.

There is a beauty in this poetics of recurrence, but it is a dark and terrible beauty. We should ask what it is that Hladik gains by his act of creation. I think the answers to that question are as numerous as they are unverifiable, but I would hazard that one of his incentives is escape. If this is correct, then it is also sad. Faced with Nazi terror and the certainty of his destruction—we will all be destroyed someday by our own personal Nazis—Hladik escapes. Borges escapes. He writes not for God or for others, but only for himself. For his own madness, for his own death. And so the words of his contemporary, Sábato, ring chillingly true. This is a game for Borges, a Platonic game that offers escape from that most impenetrable of prisons, the self.

I detect the same tendencies in Abad. He has been called Romantic by his critics,¹ but that is to say no more than that he is

¹ I refer in particular to J. Neil C. Garcia's remarks at the symposium-tribute to Abad, "Imagination's Way," for which I had the distinct pleasure of being present. The paper was subsequently published in *Kritika Kultura* 26. The allegation to which I refer occurs in the final paragraph (Garcia 2016, 769).

Platonic, for most of the Romantics thought they were Platonists. As for Plato, artistic creation for Abad is a form of inspiration and madness—he has to “cope” with it—and it is without doubt a loss of, even the death of, the “I” of the self. It is, I think, the timeless, intangible touch of the transcendent. But Abad, fortunately, is not Borges. I do not find in him the same pessimism or escapism that haunts the Argentine. There is a healthy skepticism, to be sure; Abad laments the futility of poetic language, which purposes somehow to retrieve the past, to “re-present” it to the present, specious as it is. But at all times the purpose of poetry is to speak life and, to whatever extent possible, allow others to live and relive that life. The poet has a duty for Abad that he does not have for Borges: to put as much poetry into the world as possible, to saturate it with sublime thought and profound feeling, to write and rewrite until it is worthy of reading and rereading.

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