

Beatrice's Hidden Arrival in Borges: Structures and Meanings of Circular Time in "Los teólogos"

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Ningún texto se lee
independientemente de la experiencia
que el lector tiene de otros textos.

Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula*

In "El encuentro en un sueño" (*Nueve ensayos dantescos*, 1982) Borges analyses Beatrice's arrival in the Earthly Paradise. Borges's fascinating interpretation of the encounter between Dante and Beatrice is not what I would like to focus on in this essay. Rather, I would like to show how the narrative structure of that passage comes back, hidden yet unaltered, in a different context among Borges's prose works. Moreover, as will be shown, comparing images and themes in Dante and Borges will allow us to clarify the hypothesis of the fallacy of circular time, argued by the Argentine writer.

I. LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE CONNECTION

In his foundational *Dante Studies* (1954-58), Charles Singleton, explaining Dante's retrospective mode of analysis, writes that it's conceivable—even though he must confess that he does not know if this has ever happened—that a confirmed atheist could come to a meaningful reading of the *Divina Commedia* through suspension of disbelief (*La poesia* 469). Borges's relationship with faith was so complex it cannot be synthesized in a few lines. However, Williamson's opinion of Borges as a skeptic who clearly leaned towards atheism seems to be correct (cf. 242). It is also interesting to note Flynn's contextualization of Williamson's opinion, when comparing it with the benefits Borges might have gained if he had followed Christianity, such as those Dante receives when he lets Beatrice guide him: "There was a difference between Dante and Borges. Dante was a Christian and could therefore draw inspiration from the belief that Beatrice could bring him to salvation. Borges was a sceptic, if not an atheist" (Flynn 149).

If we remember that the "valor religioso" (Rowlandson 73) was the least fascinating aspect of the *Commedia* for Borges, it is fair to suggest that he might be the atheist Singleton hints at, who, by suspending his disbelief, is capable of cleverly reading the *Commedia*. At best, the suspension of disbelief for a spontaneous rendition of fantasy—a necessary condition for an atheist who means to approach the Christian poem according to Singleton—was usually practiced by Borges as an essayist.¹

However, unlike Dante, Borges did not have his personal Beatrice (Hernández 177). Yet, this did not prevent him from embracing, on a mere literary level, the encounter between Dante and his praised woman, since he thought of the Florentine poet as a projection of himself, as Borges reads the *Commedia* "alla luce della sua personale elaborazione della vicenda umano-poetica di Dante e Beatrice" (Paoli, *Borges* 104).² The juxtaposition of Dante's and Borges's identities, mediated by Beatrice, is confirmed

1 "Nuestra creencia en la creencia del novelista salva todas las negligencias y fallas" (OC 675). This is a writing rule that Borges will evoke also in *William Shakespeare: Macbeth* (Prólogos): "Dijo Coleridge que la fe poética es una voluntaria suspensión de la incredulidad" (OC 1975-1985: 211).

2 "[O]n the basis of their personal interpretation of Dante and Beatrice's human and poetic affair" (my translation).

by Estela Canto, who remembered how Borges “repetía que él era Dante, que yo era Beatrice y que habría de liberarlo del infierno” (Núñez-Faraco 116).

Paoli already analyzed Borges’s identification with Dante as a writer (*Borges* 101-04). Therefore, I will not go back to matters that have already been discussed. On the contrary, I would like to show how Borges takes some narrative techniques he cleverly applied in “Los teólogos” (*El Aleph* 1949) from his reading of the encounter that brings Dante to Beatrice after a long journey. This short story is enveloped in labyrinthine erudition and in an overwhelming number of quotes, as well as expert hints at Dante’s work.

The above-mentioned textual cross-references have not yet found a place in the literary criticism of Borges’s works and they are unprecedented among scholars of Dante trained in comparative literature. In order to clearly show them, it is necessary to progress step by step, by starting with the inherent features of Beatrice’s arrival in *Purg.* XXX, which will later be recalled by Borges.

II. BEATRICE’S ARRIVAL *in mentem*

Literary criticism on Dante usually attaches little importance to the theme of time in the *Commedia*. Of course, there are contextual studies, debates on the dates of specific historical events, attempts to explain Dante’s time metaphors or more sectarian interventions.³ However, a thorough analysis of the purely philosophical configuration of time in Dante’s poetics has been sparsely debated and has been basically limited to a study of the Aristotelian notion of time as number and difference, expounded in the *Convivio*. Time, as Aristotle says in the *Physics*, is a “succession of movement involving before and after;” more precisely, it is “succession of movement in the heavens,” which according to a varying pattern disposes things here below to receive their forms (*Banquet* IV, II, 6).⁴ Even though the number

3 Cf. Agno 101-27; Aleksander 231-60; Ardisino 1-183; Cornish 139-54; Cristaldi 299-302; De Matteis 283-301; Giacalone 1-57; Jacomuzzi 151-59.

4 “Lo tempo, secondo che dice Aristotile nel quarto della Fisica, è ‘numero di movimento secondo prima e poi’, e ‘numero di movimento celestial’, lo quale dispone le cose di qua giù diversamente a ricevere alcuna informazione” (*Convivio* IV, II, 6).

of time occurrences and references is not significant in the three *Cantiche*, their symbolic meaning certainly is. In addition to the final apogee of the *Commedia* (*Par.* XXXIII) or to the temporal eternity merged in a point-like space in *Par.* XVII—which are only two of the moments Borges knew very well, and which he would famously use in the tale “El Aleph”⁵—one of the most significant manifestations of the narrative as well as symbolic function of Time in Dante is expressed in *Purg.* XXX.

The scene is set in the Earthly Paradise and the reader’s attention is directed to the divine procession that shows the progressive revelation of the *Holy Scriptures*. By going back to an observation included in the preface to St. Bonaventura’s *Breviloquium*, Singleton identifies in this passage one of the most striking expressions of Time in Dante’s poem, as the Word of God could not express itself if not in a chronological flow (*La poesia* 73). However, the revealing of the *Holy Scripture* is not the only temporal hint accompanying the divine procession in *Purg.* XXX. Another meaningful event, equally full of temporal references, is Beatrice’s arrival on the Church’s chariot.

The woman’s unveiling in front of Dante is emblematic, all the more significant if we contextualize it in the tradition of Christian thought. Indeed, Beatrice does not appear during an aseptic narrative moment. On the contrary, she comes exactly in the middle of the temporal extension represented by the procession: “Let there be a vertical line, a line of ascent in time in the upward way to God. And let there be a horizontal line, as it were, drawn across this vertical line by a procession symbolizing time. Where these lines meet, where these lines cross in the poem—there Beatrice comes—as Christ” (Singleton, *Elements* 58).

Before moving forward in the explanation of two typological traits of Beatrice’s arrival as related to time, it is useful to start showing the first parallelisms with the work by Borges that has been chosen for our analysis. If we compare the geography of time in the *Commedia* with the vertical line that represents the temporal ascent to God, it will appear that on top of the latter we find ourselves out of time, as the two extremities represent Hell and Heaven, which are, by definition, eternal, thus not located in a distinguishable chronological flow. In “Los teólogos” Borges agrees with

5 For an in-depth study of these subjects cf. Maselli, “Le reminiscenze” 73-92.

this hypothesis and shares both the essential symmetry between Hell and Heaven, as well as the lack of temporal subsistence that characterizes them: “[L]o que hay abajo es igual a lo que hay arriba, y lo que hay arriba, igual a lo que hay abajo” (OC 553). “El final de la historia sólo es referible en metáforas, ya que pasa en el reino de los cielos, donde no hay tiempo” (OC 556).

The usage of metaphorical language to narrate a story that would otherwise be impossible to tell is a usual practice for Borges. The same thing happens when, in an attempt to recall the vision of the Aleph in the short story, Borges as a character quotes apparently efficient symbols which were granted to other mystics and visionaries before him,⁶ wondering what similar figures the god will offer him, as he is convinced that every “lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos” (OC 624).

The need to avail himself of a language that refers to something different from himself allows us to match Borges's writing with a theory that has been largely accepted by scholars of Dante, Auerbach's Theory of Figura:

Figural prophecy implies the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events; yet both, looked at in this way, have something provisional and incomplete about them; they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the actual, real, and definitive event. (*Scenes* 58)

The few scholars who realized the similarities between Borges's and Auerbach's figurative mechanisms limited it to the identitarian conjunction among different characters, which is typical of Dante, and which Borges tries to imitate.⁷ In this regard, it is worth noting that in the talk held at the Coliseo Theatre in Buenos Aires, on June 1, 1977, Borges, while praising Dante's innate ability to synthesize a character's destiny in a few

6 Among these symbols, Borges alludes to the Persian Simurgh that in the essay “El Simurgh y el águila” (*Nueve ensayos dantescos*) is compared to the Eagle of Jupiter's Sky in Dante's *Paradiso*. Moreover, there is a reference to the angel with four faces pointed towards the cardinal directions as described by Ezekiel and used by Borges as a model of the atypical Aleph in “La escritura del Dios” (*El Aleph*). This is also connected with another Dantesque reference as is shown in H. Núñez-Faraco 90-113.

7 Paoli, *Percorsi* 105-106; Biancotto 19-35.

tercets, acknowledges that the search for the extreme synthesis, achieved by the Florentine poet, is unconscious, and admits having tried to emulate this complex narrative technique multiple times: “A Dante le basta un solo momento. En ese momento el personaje está definido para siempre. Dante busca ese momento central inconscientemente. Yo he querido hacer lo mismo en muchos cuentos” (*OC 1975-1985*: 213).

According to Calvino and Savater, Borges perfectly managed to emulate Dante’s synthesis in his stories.⁸ Moreover, the synthesis of man’s destiny in an absolute moment is a patent connection to Dante in “Poema conjectural” (*El otro, el mismo*, 1964)—where the events of Buonconte da Montefeltro from *Purg.* V⁹ are recalled—and with Auerbach’s *Studi su Dante* (1929): “People of his underworld realm had to offer, with their condition and attitude the total amount of themselves. They had to show in one act the essence and fate of their lives’ brief time; the earthly entelechy of each person was fused with the idea of his self” (91). However, it seems that everyone missed a connection between Borges and the figurative perspective, which is, after all, pretty evident, as it is almost an explicit—yet as impossible to know how conscious—a concise paraphrase of Auerbach’s thought, which we find in “Los teólogos”, of all places: “[I]maginaron que todo hombre es dos hombres y que el verdadero es el otro, el que está en el cielo” (*OC* 553).

The conscious deviation towards Auerbach’s contributions should not be considered erudition for its own sake, since the German scholar himself shares the above-mentioned crossing of timelines that lay the ground for Beatrice’s *kairological* appearance (*Dante* 91). Another German-speaking scholar, Balthasar, suggests, from a purely theological perspective on the *Commedia*, the now well-known diagram made up of secular and spiritual time lines crossing each other: “[N]ella *Commedia* la linea orizzontale della storia [...] viene tagliata da una verticale, che, partendo dal cielo, tocca il fondo dell’Inferno” (13-14).¹⁰ It is thus evident that in this meeting point, which recurs so often in studies that are not related, something must hide

8 Calvino 261-62; Savater 41.

9 Cf. Paoli, *Borges* 109-18.

10 “In the *Commedia* the horizontal line of history [...] is cut by a vertical one that, starting from Heaven, reaches the bottom of Hell” (my translation).

that is so unspeakably precious as to be capable of giving ineffable nobility to the matter revealed.

This leads me to explain the two exclusive traits of Beatrice's arrival, which I intentionally withheld before. Beatrice, just like Christ in His last arrival, reveals herself simultaneously at the end and in the middle of time.¹¹ What is the meaning of such a shared connection between two different temporal features?

The first between the two Time categorizations associated with Beatrice's arrival is easy to grasp, if connected to the rise of God in the Last Judgment. There is no doubt that Beatrice's appearance is related to the Last Coming of Christ, if we look at how the festive rise of the angels on the ecclesiastical chariot, who sing the *Benedictus qui venis* to the woman, is perfectly comparable to the joyous rise of the saints on Resurrection Day:

Just as the blessed, at the Final Summons,
will rise up—ready—each out of his grave,
singing, with new-clothed voices, Alleluia,

so did, ad vocem tanti senis, one
hundred of life's eternal ministers
and messengers rise from the godly chariot.

All of them cried: *Benedictus qui venis*,"

(Mandelbaum, *Purg.* XXX, 13-19)¹²

It is worth noting that even in the sequence of biblical quotes flaunted by Borges in "Los teólogos," it is possible to find a reference to the Last Judgment and the Second Coming of Christ: "[Y]a que no puede haber repeticiones, el justo debe eliminar (cometer) los actos más infames, para que estos no manchen el porvenir y para acelerar el advenimiento del reino de Jesús" (*OC* 553).

11 The time's center on the horizontal line, the time's end on the vertical line: "[T]he procession of Scripture could symbolize time itself [horizontal line]; and, as it came to a halt, could suggest time at an end [on the vertical line that ascends to God]" (Singleton, *Elements* 52).

12 "Quali i beati al novissimo bando / surgeran presti ognun di sua caverna, / la re-vestita voce alleluando, // cotali in su la divina basterna / si levar cento, ad vocem tanti senis, / ministri e messenger di vita eterna. // Tutti dicean: 'Benedictus qui venis!'" (*Purg.* XXX, 13-19).

On the contrary, it is more difficult to explain Beatrice's appearance exactly in the middle of the linear time during the divine procession. This is because it is necessary to have peculiar mental abstraction skills and the ability to detect the result of these abstractions in the paratext of this passage. The identification of a *before* and *after* implies, indeed, the acknowledgement of a *middle*, whether it is spatial or temporal. Identifying a central position along an observable segment constrains us to accept the mental categories of the *before* and *after*, between which the middle point is located. Therefore, coming to "the middle of time" is tantamount to admitting that an arrival has already happened and that another one still needs to occur.¹³ It is worth clarifying there that the reading of the thirtieth canto of the Purgatory suggested is not sufficient to explain the meaning of Beatrice's appearance in the middle of time, and plausible references in the *Commedia* itself might not be of much use either. On the contrary, in order to overcome the theoretical impasse that threatens to stall this research project, it is necessary to turn to theological works that are parallel to Dante's doctrine and that pervade it. As often happens in the exegesis of Dante's works, the contributions of Christian philosophy are key interpretative tools that allow us to reach unexpected discoveries. In this case too it is necessary to resort to the legacy of Christian saints.

In the third of the *Sermones de Tempore*, St. Bernard, who, in the sacred poem escorts Dante to the top of the *Paradiso*, claims that the arrival of Christ is *triplex*. Pertaining to a long didascalical tradition, two of these events, i.e. the first and last coming of Christ, are well known among the learned churchmen, and among the most observant believers of the Word of God. However, as St. Bernard remarks, there is an intermediate revealing as well, which is located between the first and the third arrivals in the procession, and which is less clear than the two other ones because it is hidden and secret. More than a century after St. Bernard's sermons, St. Thomas comes back to this *questio*, made popular by the saint from Chiaravalle, and in the *De Humanitate Jesu Christi* he writes: "Possumus distinguere triplicem adventum Christi: scilicet in carnem, in mentem,

13 Cf. Heidegger 28. In the opening instructions of the Italian version of *Der Begriff der Zeit* (1924), the Heidegger lecture where he defines the *kairological* features of time taking from Aristotle and St. Paul and subsequently developed in his *opus magum Sein und Zeit* (1927), Franco Volpi mentions Borges's "Nueva refutación del tiempo".

et ad iudicium: unde Bernardus: "Triplicem adventum Christi novimus" (qtd. in Singleton, *La poesia* 219-20).

Unlike St. Bernard, Thomas even gets to defining the intermediate arrival of Christ as developed *in mentem*, in opposition to the one occurring *in carnem* and *ad iudicium*, and describable as *Sanctifying Grace* for the believer who welcomes it in his prayers. A further connection between Bernard and Thomas in the analysis of the second hidden Coming is the correlation of another feature that can be associated to it. Again, in Thomas's *De Humanitate Jesu Christi* and in the third of Bernard's *Sermones*, the intermediate arrival is defined as *Sapientia* as well. Therefore, the appearance of Christ after His First Coming and before what will be His Last is the arrival of Sanctifying Grace and of Wisdom. That said, it should not be forgotten that the allegorical nomenclature of the *Commedia* allows Beatrice to be called *Sapientia* and *Gratia*.

Of course, Beatrice is not Christ. Indeed, it is the hybrid Griffin who symbolically personifies Him in the procession in *Purg.* XXX. Yet she shares some features that Christ reveals as His own in the Second Coming, which is *in mentem*, *occultus* and *investigabilis*.

By now, it is easy to understand the meaning of Beatrice's arrival in the middle of time. In a tripartite layout, made of divergent temporal coordinates, her appearance is intermediate compared to the arrival that happened in the past and the one that will happen in the future:

Bernard's three advents are [...] distinguishable on a principle of time: the first in the past, the last in the future, the middle one in the present. Yet, unlike the other two, the middle advent does not occur once only but many times; and if it be insisted that its time is in the present, then this is that ever-present which is the over-and-over-again present. When does this second advent take place? Bernard has answered the question: *when-ever* the individual soul of a Christian is prepared for it—that is, when ^{JUS} justice prevails in any soul. (Singleton, *Journey* 80)

In addition to St. Bernard and St. Thomas, Dante draws from St. Augustine the necessary attributes to describe the *triplex* arrival of Christ in Beatrice. For St. Augustine, the soul is made of three temporal dimensions, the same ones that can be detected during the three Comings of Christ: "[Y]et perchance it might be properly said, 'there be three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.'

For these three do exist in some sort, in the soul, but elsewhere do I not see them; present of things past, memory; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation” (*Confessiones* XI, 20).

Like Dante, who accepts St. Augustine’s theory of tripartite time, Borges, despite drawing from a completely different theory, considers the possibility of a progressive time when, in the talk on “El tiempo”, he proposes Plotinus’s careful analysis of the tripartite eternal time, in its three progressive dimensions: the current present, the present in the past (memory) and the present in the future (the image of our hopes) (*Borges oral* 43-44). It is worth noting that the connection between St. Augustine and Dante, who draws from him, is not only limited to the categorization of multiple shapes of the present. Borges too, indeed, considers memory and hopes as attributes of the present in the past and of the present in the future.

On the other hand, “Los teólogos” starts with an explicit reference to St. Augustine.¹⁴ As Borello underlines, in the fire started by the Huns, which destroyed palimpsests and codices, it is possible to recognize the twelfth book of the *Civitas Dei*, which recants the theory of the identical sequence of events in time (177-83).

I will take advantage of this imaginary line of textual cross-references to show how the argument developed so far—and which can be summarized in an identitarian juxtaposition (Beatrice shares some traits with Christ), happened *in mentem* and fully in the present—is validated in the tale by Borges that is under examination in this essay. Moreover, I will show how the argument developed so far might feed the numerous theories that reject the notion of circular time in Borges.

III. AURELIANO’S *in mentem* EPIPHANY

“Los teólogos” tells the story of Aureliano, coadjutor from Aquileia, and his indirect rival Juan de Panonia. The reason for the dispute is the development of the most convincing rejection of the widespread religious heresy that supported the cyclicity of time. The game of perspectives that Borges

¹⁴ Some innovative arguments about “Los teólogos” and Borges’s relationship with St. Augustine’s texts can be found in Almeida 102-06.

uses to get the reader to reject the apologists of circular time is captivating. Yet, what I am interested in analyzing are only the last lines of the story because that is where we can detect the similarities already analyzed with regards to Beatrice's arrival.

The end of the story is set in the Kingdom of God, where Aureliano, while talking to God, understands what he had always denied in life: Juan de Panonia and he, the heretic and the orthodox believer, were actually one single being. Admitting the conjunction of their identities meant accepting the fallacy of circular time, as the similarities Aureliano remarked on between his own intentions and actions and Juan's were not the result of time identically repeating itself, but of a single person's behavior.

However, what does this have to do with Beatrice and her *triplex* arrival? Where is the similarity? It is hard to hypothesize that the only similarity between Dante and Borges is the merger of two characters in one single being. As has already been said, Beatrice is not Christ, but she shares with Him some distinctive traits, while Aureliano is Juan de Panonia. Yet, the solution is not too far away.

The cross-textual relationship between what happens in *Purg.* XXX and in "Los teólogos" is the pre-condition of the identity overlap/juxtaposition, i.e. what allows Aureliano to recognize himself in Juan de Panonia and Beatrice to share with Christ his sanctifying grace and wisdom: "Aureliano supo que para la insondable divinidad, él y Juan de Panonia [...] formaban una sola persona" (OC 556).

Just as Beatrice gets hold of Christ's attributes only during the arrival *in mentem*, so Aureliano realizes that he is Juan de Panonia only *in God's mind* ("para la insondable divinidad"). It could not be any different, because we would otherwise suspect "una confusión de la mente divina" (OC 556). Blanco too reflected on the final scene of the tale: despite not believing in its similarities with the scene from *Purg.* XXX, he agrees upon the divine transcendence of Aureliano's knowledge: "[Aureliano] affiche une omniscience qui n'est pas l'omniscience conventionnelle et relative du narrateur des fictions classiques, du démiurge humain, mais l'omniscience absolue du démiurge divin" (15).

Furthermore, it's *in God's mind* that Aureliano, realizing that he is Juan de Panonia's reflection, acknowledges the fallacy of circular time, and the existence of an eternal present, like the one requested by God's Will, which

Beatrice validates through her arrival in the middle of time. What is now left to demonstrate is that Borges shared the possibility of time repeating itself in non-identical but similar cycles, like St. Bernard's current moment, which is welcomed by Dante when Beatrice reveals herself, and which comes back as present when justice prevails in the Christian soul.

IV. THE REJECTION OF CIRCULAR TIME IN BORGES

In the transcript of the talk on "El libro" we discover another tribute Borges pays to St. Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, an historical proof of the retraction of the circular time theory, felicitously expressed as *eternal return*: "[Aristóteles] [n]os dice [...] que los pitagóricos profesaban la creencia, el dogma, del eterno retorno, que muy tardíamente descubriría Nietzsche. Es decir, la idea del tiempo cíclico, que fue refutada por San Agustín en *La ciudad de Dios*" (*Borges oral* 7). By adhering to St. Augustine's skepticism towards the theory of circular time, Borges outlines three ways the eternal return can be conceived. Each of them represents an irreversible move towards calling into question the subject under examination.

The first argument is astrological. Despite acknowledging a long series of contributions, the very first source of the Eternal Return theory is associated with Platonism. Chapter XI of Plato's *Timaeus* reads:

Time then has come into being along with the universe [...] and it was made after the pattern of the eternal nature [...]; but the copy has been and is and shall be throughout all time continually. So then this was the plan and intent of God for the generation of time; the sun and the moon and five other stars which have the name of planets have been created for defining and preserving the numbers of time. (123)

Plato describes the geometrical chase of the seven bodies, balanced on their different speeds, once placed in the orbits and once their movement is triggered. The movement of the stars occurs in what Borges defines as "el cielo anterior de la doctrina / del griego" (OC 818). Once a balance in the movement is achieved and once the inconsistent accelerations are balanced out, the seven planets go back to the start of their journey, outlining what Plato describes as the perfect year.

Ever since the reception of this teaching, there have been questions especially over the possibility of an eternal repetition of countless yearly

patterns. Therefore, rather than on the effect it produced, there has been a focus on the mechanism of the movement and thus a misunderstanding of Plato's hypothesis of eternity as a moving image made up of unlimited sequences. Plato, as Borges states, recognized the image of eternity in time; he saw eternity as emanating from time and as naturally coming back to it. The future itself represents the desire to go back to the timeless source, which lies outside of time (*Borges oral* 42-50). It's the notion according to which "the highest desire in every being, and the first implanted in it by nature, is the desire to return to its first cause" as we read in Dante's *Convivio* (IV, XII, 14).¹⁵ The cyclical nature was later confirmed by folkloric beliefs over the influence stars have on people's life. If the movement in the skies is an endless twirl, then the nature of time too will be influenced by the movement of planets. This leads to a better understanding of the opening of "Los teólogos," an idea that already appeared in the essay "El tiempo circular" (*Historia de la eternidad*, 1936) as well, where Plato's year is "un curso de siglos después del cual todas las cosas recuperarán su estado anterior y Platón, en su escuela, de nuevo explicará esta doctrina" (OC 393).

The second interpretation that might be given to the notion of the eternal return refers to the most popular among its definitions, the one formulated by Nietzsche, which, for Borges, includes as much his prelude as the final decline. The eternal return reveals itself as a "fuerza limitada, desenvolviéndose en el tiempo infinito, pero incapaz de un número ilimitado de variaciones" (OC 390). Borges immediately remarks on an imbalance between the validation and the rejection of the theory, as it is possible to infer from his concise definition. While considering opposite hypotheses, he realizes that if a limited force had been able to make an unlimited number of variations, there would have been no return. On the contrary, there would have been an incessant progression towards an impossible exhaustion of the different ways the elements of reality can be combined. Moreover, Borges highlights the context in which the limited force, incapable of an unlimited number of variations, is deployed: in never-ending time. Accepting the eternal as a pre-condition for action implies threatening the validity of the theory itself. Assuming the exist-

15 "[L]o sommo desiderio di ciascuna cosa, e prima da la natura dato, è lo ritornare a lo suo principio" (*Convivio* IV, XII, 14).

tence of an endless chronological system implies rejecting the possibility that something can identically repeat itself at least twice, in a *before* and in an *after*, which are the necessary conditions for a return:

Se ha dicho que [...] el tiempo es infinito [...]. Si [...] es infinito, ¿cómo una cosa infinita puede llegar hasta ahora? Pensamos que si un tiempo es infinito, creo yo, ese tiempo infinito tiene que abarcar todos los presentes [...] ¿Por qué no decir que este momento tiene tras de sí un pasado infinito, un ayer infinito, y por qué no pensar que este pasado pasa también por este presente? (*Borges oral* 18-19)

At the end of this deductive analysis, there is only one way left to interpret “las eternas repeticiones: el menos pavoroso y melodramático, pero también el único imaginable. Quiero decir la concepción de ciclos similares, no idénticos” (OC 394).

It’s a diplomatic conclusion that Borges arrives at, as he admits the eternal progression of time and space among the elements of an infinite whole. By then integrating this perspective with Russell’s teachings,¹⁶ Borges accepts its corollary too, according to which the “conjunto infinito es aquel conjunto que puede equivaler a uno de sus conjuntos parciales” (OC 386).

For Russell, measuring time and space meant establishing an equivalence between two series. Given the equivalence $A=A^1$, and once A has been identified as carrier of a peculiar feature, then the components of the sub-group A^1 will reap the benefits of that characteristic. Therefore, if we consider any part of a spatial-temporal entity, it will have the same quantitative and qualitative features that make up the wider portion from which the smaller one has been taken to allow for the comparison. If a temporal whole is infinite, then all its internal components will be: “la cantidad precisa de puntos que hay en el universo es la que hay en un metro, o en un decímetro, o en la más honda trayectoria estelar” (OC 386-87).

It’s hard to disprove this last statement written by Borges while keeping in mind some of the most meaningful pages of *Some Problems of Philos-*

16 In “Nihon” (*La cifra*) Borges writes this about Russell: “He divisado, desde las páginas de Russell, la doctrina de los conjuntos, la Mengenlehre, que postula y explora los vastos números que no alcanzaría un hombre inmortal aunque agotara sus eternidades contando” (OC 1975-1985: 338). Borges proposes a clear explanation of Russell’s lesson about the transfinite numbers in “El tiempo” (*Borges oral*).

ophy (1911) by William James. Suggesting that a fraction of the temporal infinity is made up of an *exact number* of dots does not imply a limited quantity, since between two dots there will always be a smaller one, indefinitely.¹⁷ Through the equivalences between different Russell series, Borges acknowledges even the equivalence between the eternity of a temporal whole and the eternity of its components. We can deduce then that if the components of cyclical time that endlessly repeats itself are eternal, then their rearrangements will be eternal too, and that the claim of an eternal return is false, since even the simplest return does not exist.

Borges drew his inspiration from the fallacy of the eternal return for some of his boldest literary passages. In “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, the most successful of his idealistic tales, he writes:

En la literatura de este hemisferio [...] abundan los objetos ideales, convocados y disueltos en un momento, según las necesidades poéticas. Los determina, a veces, la mera simultaneidad. Hay objetos compuestos de dos términos, uno de carácter visual y otro auditivo [...] Esos objetos de segundo grado pueden combinarse con otros; el proceso, jmediante ciertas abreviaturas, es prácticamente infinito. (OC 435-36)

The explicit connection with Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* (1738)¹⁸ is clear. In that work, Hume states that “[t]he mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations” (I, 4, 6). Therefore, as John Stuart Mill claimed, an eternal return is conceivable but impossible.

However, it might be possible to recognize a proof, if not a validation, of the eternal return, if we think about some specific states of mind.

17 The set “X” of numbers 1 to 9 seems to be complete, but it isn’t. In fact within this set we can find also 1-1.5-2-2.5-3-3.5-... 8.5-9 and even 1-0.75-1.5-2-... and so on in an infinite sequence. Therefore it’s truly right to say that between one point and another “podemos siempre intercalar otros más, en número infinito” (OC 387).

18 “Il tema del tempo ciclico, che gli suggerirà molte pagine di versi e di racconti e più di una prosa sulla ‘confutazione’ del tempo, gli derivò, per sua confessione, dal padre che lo aveva appreso dai *Dialoghi sulla religione naturale* del filosofo scozzese Davide Hume” (Porzio 101) [“The theme of cyclical time—which will be an inspiration for Borges to write many poems and stories as well as more than one essay on the ‘confutation’ of time—came, as he confessed, from his father, who in turn had learnt it from the *Treatise of Human Nature* by the Scottish philosopher David Hume,” my translation].

Let's think about remembrance. When something that has already been thought comes back to one's mind, could this not be a return which might possibly come back at other times? This is certainly true, but not enough to justify the existence of an eternal recurrence, since remembering results from a pre-condition, triggered by the current circumstances, which bring back that specific memory. Like Time during Beatrice's second arrival, we can see here "that ever-present which is the over-and-over-again present" (Singleton, *Journey* 80). For this reason when we remember living it we do not experience the real recollection but its remembrance shape, which isn't an eternal return but a variation of the recollection:¹⁹ "[Time] è ciò che ci toglie all'improvviso tutto ciò che la vita ci offre per proiettarlo nell'inaccessibilità del passato dove solo la memoria può ritrovarlo, tanto più frustrante perché essa abbellisce retrospettivamente ciò di cui si deve constatare la perdita" (Brezzi 115).²⁰

Borges unintentionally hints at this issue in *Evaristo Carriego* (1930): "Poseo recuerdos de Carriego: recuerdos de recuerdos de otros recuerdos, cuyas mínimas desviaciones originales habrán oscuramente crecido, en cada nuevo ensayo" (OC 113). And, years after his literary debut, in "El hacedor", included in the 1960 homonymous collection: "Otro recuerdo, en el que también había una noche y una inminencia de aventura, brotó de aquél. [...] ¿Por qué le llegaban esas memorias y por qué le llegaban sin amargura, como una mera prefiguración del presente?" (OC 782). It is fair to invoke memory as temporal empiricism²¹ while invoking remem-

19 Interviewed by Burgin, Borges declared: "I think that if I recall something, for example, if today I look back on this morning, then I get an image of what I saw this morning. But if tonight, I'm thinking back on this morning, then what I'm really recalling is not the first image, but the first image in memory. So that every time I recall something, I'm not recalling it really, I'm recalling the last time I recalled it, I'm recalling my last memory of it" (42-43).

20 "Time is what suddenly deprives us of everything life gives us to throw it into the inaccessibility of the past, where only memory can retrieve it. It is all the more frustrating in that memory retrospectively embellishes what one has to acknowledge as lost" (my translation).

21 "Mi presente –o lo que era mi presente– ya es el pasado. Pero ese tiempo que pasa, no pasa enteramente. Por ejemplo, yo conversé con ustedes el viernes pasado. Podemos decir que somos otros, ya que nos han pasado muchas cosas a todos nosotros en el curso de una semana. Sin embargo, somos los mismos. Yo sé que estuve disertando aquí, que estuve tratando de razonar y de hablar aquí, y ustedes quizás recuerden haber esta-

brance as proof of the eternal return is wrong, as the “recuerdo importaría una novedad que es la negación de la tesis [of the eternal return] y que el tiempo lo iría perfeccionando” (OC 390).

Once the fallacy of the eternal return is ascertained in Borges, should temporal eternity be questioned as well? Of course, there is no need to run this risk. It is possible to acknowledge the validity of temporal eternity because of the impossibility of the eternal return, in its endless progression which does not allow for a *before* and an *after*.²² Nietzsche himself “generosamente concede que el tiempo es infinito” (OC 390). Hence Borges’s strong warning:

[S]i el tiempo es infinito para la intuición, también lo es el espacio. Nada tiene que ver esa Eternidad Anterior con el tiempo real discurrido; retrocedamos al primer segundo y notaremos que éste requiere un predecesor, y ese predecesor otro más, y así infinitamente. Para restañar ese *regressus in infinitum*, San Agustín resuelve que el primer segundo del tiempo coincide con el primer segundo de la Creación –*non in tempore sed cum tempore incepit creatio*. (OC 391)

Again, a reference to St. Augustine, linked to a notion that had been repeated multiple times,²³ specifically when Borges supports Philip Henry Gosse’s odd thesis in “La creación y P. H. Gosse” (*Otras inquisiciones*, 1952): “El primer instante del tiempo coincide con el instante de la Creación, como dicta San Agustín, pero ese primer instante comporta no sólo un infinito porvenir sino un infinito pasado. Un pasado hipotético, claro está, pero minucioso y fatal” (OC 651).

At this point, we can go back to what was being said before, i.e. the notion that the endless sequence of the components of a reality in time and space implies an equally endless re-grouping of those components, which categorically excludes a perfect return, but not a potentially similar one. The non-return indicates a denial of the *before* and *after*, while being aware

do conmigo la semana pasada. En todo caso, queda en la memoria. La memoria es individual. Nosotros estamos hechos, en buena parte, de nuestra memoria” (*Borges oral* 43).

22 For a study on the eternity in Borges linked to the Dantesque vision of time cf. Maselli, “Le vie oblique” 61-78.

23 “[P]odemos arrimarnos a lo que famosamente declaró San Agustín acerca del tiempo: ¿Qué es el tiempo? Si nadie me lo pregunta, lo sé; si tengo que decirlo a alguien, lo ignoro” (Borges, *El tamaño* 125).

of authorizing the “ubicuo río del tiempo terrenal torne a su fuente, / que es lo Eterno, y se apague en el presente, / el futuro, el ayer, lo que ahora es mío” (OC 983). What is left is merely Schopenhauer’s Presentism:

La forma de aparición de la voluntad es sólo el presente, no el pasado ni el porvenir: éstos no existen más que para el concepto y por el encadenamiento de la conciencia, sometida al principio de razón. Nadie ha vivido en el pasado, nadie vivirá en el futuro; el presente es la forma de toda vida. (OC 395)

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Therefore, it seems fair to conclude that the past and the future exist in relation to the present, and that we encounter what happens in time by crossing it. St. Bernard’s, Dante’s and Beatrice’s current moment, which comes back in the present, in the triumph of Christian justice, just as Borges’s contingency filtered through Schopenhauer’s readings are, as Heidegger wrote when commenting St. Augustine, the *feeling* of present existence and not the events that allow it to arise, because, when we measure time, we measure our perception of it.²⁴

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24 Heidegger 44.

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