

Jorge Luis Borges and the Nothingness of the Self

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Introduction

In his preface to the *Labyrinths* collection of the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, Andre Maurois observes that “the deep confrontation of literature and life... is not only the central problem of all literature but also that of all human experience: the problem of illusion and reality.”¹ One of the biggest illusions we have to contend with is our sense of self. A number of thinkers down the ages - from the Buddha to today’s philosophers and scientists – appear to support this notion that the self is illusory. We seem, nevertheless, to need the self – illusion or not – to help us comprehend reality, to provide us with a consistent narrative about ourselves and the world. In the midst of creating and maintaining a self, we as individuals aim moreover to project a certain image of our self, and this gives rise to a psychological feedback loop. To present a particular view of the self we behave in a specific manner and play certain roles in an attempt to influence how others think of us as a person. But our interaction with others too influences in turn how our self takes shape. The American sociologist, Robert Ezra Park, notes that “the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask,” and thought this is “no mere historical accident... it is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role.”²

In this article, I aim to show how Borges uses his cognizance of these thoughts on selfhood to explore the “central problem of literature” that Maurois highlights and how in the process projects to the reader his

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¹ In Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin Australia, 2011 [1962]), p. 21.

² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Group, 1984 [1959]), p. 30.

idea of reality. I argue also that the self that Borges tries to present in his work may nevertheless not be always congruent with the self he may have wanted to convey. This is because his quest is influenced by a number of factors, not least the fact that the self-creation process is affected by our interplay with the external world.

This article begins with, in the first two sections, a rather high-level overview of the thoughts of philosophers, scientists and sociologists about the nature of the self. A short synopsis of the concepts of selfhood that seem common to the views of these thinkers is then offered in the next section. The subsequent sections expand on these concepts in the context of Borges' oeuvre to explain how he uses his knowledge of these ideas in presenting his view of reality. In the last section I aim to examine how the gap between language and reality – another limitation of the self-machinery – is reflected in Borges' work.

The self: what do philosophers and scientists think?

Perhaps one of the earliest thinkers to examine the nature of the self was Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, who lived around the fifth century BCE. According to the Buddha's 'no self' (*anatta* in Pali) view, a person consists of a body and four attributes corresponding to different cognitive functions. Buddhism does not however consider the self as bringing together these psychological elements. Nor does Buddhism identify the self with any *one* of these characteristics. This is because, as the Oxford philosopher and orientalist, Jan Westerhoff, clarifies, these attributes are always in a state of flux whereas we look upon the self as being unchanging and continuous. Westerhoff points out that this does not imply however that talk of the self or persons having a separate identity is meaningless. Having a concept of the self does have its use: it allows us "conceptualize... [and] locate ourselves in the world."³ Westerhoff compares the self to the mouse which allows us to locate ourselves on the computer screen. The self, it would therefore seem, is merely superimposed on our body and cognitive constituents purely as a practical necessity and, as the Buddha viewed it, "has nothing more than a strictly nominal existence."⁴

Experimental psychologist, Bruce Hood, reflects the Buddha's denial of a separate identity of the self when noting that "we should be

³ Jan Westerhoff, *Reality: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 70.

⁴ Westerhoff, *Reality*, p. 70.

sceptical that each of us is the coherent, integrated entity we assume we are.”⁵ Hood compares the self-illusion to an illusory figure such as a Kanizsa pattern that evokes an object whose edges are generated purely by the surrounding context. We may realise it is a trick of the mind but, as Hood points out, we may not realise that it is our brain which is “actually generating the neural activation as if the illusory shape was really there.” Such an argument could, some would claim, be offered also in respect of all perceptual activity. But the difference here, Hood clarifies, is that perception is based on real objects combined with physical irregularities. But what makes experiencing the self different is that it “does not exist independently of my brain alone that is having the experience.”⁶

Hood concurs with the notion that the self is nonetheless a practical necessity by viewing “the self illusion [as] an inescapable experience we need for interacting with others and the world, and [therefore] we cannot... abandon or ignore its influence.” Similar ideas, Hood points out, are to be found also in the writings of both David Hume and Baruch Spinoza. Perhaps more significantly, he adds that now “good psychological and physiological evidence” is becoming available as empirical support for these ideas.⁷

Neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran also points out that more scientific evidence can be offered to support the contention of philosophers and other thinkers that the self is illusory. “After extensive training in Western medicine and more than fifteen years of research on neurological patients and visual illusions,” he has “come to realise that there is much truth to this view.”⁸ Ramachandran thinks the reason why the idea of a single ‘I’ or ‘self’ residing in our brains could be an illusion is that there may in fact be a “host of unconscious zombies who exist in peaceful harmony along with the ‘person’ inside your body!”⁹ Ramachandran too agrees nevertheless with the view that a sense of self is needed to better organize our lives.¹⁰

⁵ Bruce Hood, ‘What is the self illusion?: An Interview with Sam Harris’, *Psychology Today*, at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-self-illusion/201205/what-is-the-self-illusion>. Accessed 19/7/2016.

⁶ Hood, ‘What is the self illusion?’

⁷ Hood, ‘What is the self illusion?’

⁸ V. S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain: Human Nature and the Architecture of the Mind* (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006 [1998]), p. 227.

⁹ Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, p. 228.

¹⁰ Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, p. 272.

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The philosopher Daniel Dennett offers the analogy of paper money to explain the usefulness of the self. The paper on which the money is printed does not have any inherent value. It derives value from the concepts or social conventions – as a tool for exchange of assets, for instance – associated with it. But, whatever their shortcomings, the use of recognised currencies makes economies work smoothly and efficiently.¹¹ Oxford philosopher, Derek Parfit, while considering the self illusion links the Buddhist view of the self having only a ‘nominal existence’ (similar to paper money) to his exposition of the ‘Bundle Theory’ about what constitutes a person. The Bundle Theory firstly explains the unity of consciousness (which underlies our sense of self) as a series of related events or moments. Each series is held together by a set of causal relations akin to a bundle tied together with a string. And, each series of these thoughts and sensations equate to what we call one life. Secondly, there are no such things as a person who is “believed to be more than this... [who] is distinct from brains and bodies, and the various kinds of mental states and events.”¹² Parfit considers the Buddha as the first proponent of the Bundle Theory of the self. Parfit argues that when Buddhists concede that persons have nominal existence, they imply that “persons are merely combinations of other elements.”¹³ Only what can exist on its own as a separate being has what Buddhism calls ‘actual existence’. Thanks however to the apparent persistence of this notion of a self, some may still argue that we are more than our cognitive functions and psychological events and that we do possess ‘actual existence’. The Bundle Theory concedes this position but claims we are constrained to hold on to that fallacious idea because we are unable to break the confines of our grammar and language when thinking of the self.¹⁴

Scottish philosopher David Hume also thought that our selves may not have existence apart from our mental events. “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other... I never can catch *myself* at any time without a

¹¹ Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (London: Penguin Group, 1993 [1991]), p. 24.

¹² Derek Parfit, ‘Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons’, in *Mindwaves: Thoughts on Intelligence, Identity and Consciousness*, eds Colin Blakemore and Susan Greenfield (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989 [1987]), p. 20.

¹³ Parfit, ‘Divided Minds’, p. 21.

¹⁴ Parfit, ‘Divided Minds’, p. 21.

perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.”¹⁵ Hume was aware too that although these perceptions are so momentary and observed (with echoes of the Bundle Theory of identity) “I am a bundle of different perceptions... [I still have] some idea of personal identity, and that must be accounted for.”¹⁶ Hume offers an explanation of how this idea arises by stating that it happens “because of the... resemblance or causal connection within the chain of my perception... and memory extends this idea past my immediate perceptions.”¹⁷

The causal connections between perceptions that Hume talked about, together with memory, exhibit a concord that is characteristic of a seemingly unified consciousness. As Ramachandran points out, “the most obvious fact of existence is your sense of being a single, unified self ‘in charge’ of your destiny.”¹⁸ This apparent unity is a feature of the account of a single continuing self that we spin to ourselves. These stories “issue forth, [moreover] as *if* from a single source,” Daniel Dennett points out, “[and] their effect on any audience is to... posit a unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are...”¹⁹

Both philosophers and neuroscientists have wondered about what makes up this unity of consciousness and have noted that we experience it both at a particular point in time and over time. The first kind of experience, called synchronic unity, refers to how we experience different perceptions simultaneously. The other kind of experience, diachronic unity, is that of a unified consciousness over time.²⁰ Both these categories of experience seem to relate to how we maintain our identity as a person: firstly, a unified ‘I’ appears to be aware of a synchronic unity when we experience a number of different perceptions at the same single point in time. (I am listening to music while reading the paper and I can also hear traffic noise in the background.) We also preserve, alongside this, a sense of unity over time. (I could assert, for example: “I have been married to the same person for twenty years.”) Dennett thinks that the self illusion

¹⁵ In James Fieser, ‘David Hume (1711—1776)’, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/hume/#SH3e>. Accessed 19/7/2016.

¹⁶ In Fieser, ‘David Hume’.

¹⁷ In Fieser, ‘David Hume’.

¹⁸ Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, p. 83.

¹⁹ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, p. 418.

²⁰ Andrew Brook and Paul Raymont, ‘The Unity of Consciousness’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=consciousness-unity>. Accessed 19/7/2016.

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provides a “center of narrative gravity” which despite being “yet another abstraction... [functions] as the ‘owner of record’ of whatever items and features [including our experiences in time and over time that] are lying about unclaimed.”²¹

The fact that this unity of consciousness – especially across time – is fundamental for all cognitive abilities has been noted by many different thinkers over a long period of time. Immanuel Kant, for instance, thought that diachronic unity is a requirement for even such a rudimentary operation as counting mentally.²² In recent times, Thomas Metzinger, the German philosopher, has argued that the self – as a vehicle for preserving this unity – has by being “a very, very specific kind of representational structure... proved to be adaptive, biologically successful.”²³ Ramachandran affirms this view when he observes that “the self may indeed be a useful biological construct based on specific brain mechanisms – a set of organizing principles that allows us to function more efficiently...” He indicates additionally that many authors (including the late physician and neurologist Oliver Sacks) have greatly admired the “remarkable endurance of the self... amid the vicissitudes of life.”²⁴

The self: what do the sociologists think?

The Canadian-American sociologist, Erving Goffman, appears to concur with the thinkers we reviewed above on their notion of the self as illusory. Goffman expressed the view that the self “is not an organic thing that has a specific location,” in his book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*.²⁵ While taking a dramaturgical perspective in this book, Goffman expresses the view that when we participate in social interactions (or “performances” as Goffman calls them) we reveal “the very structure of the self.” A self does not spring from the person but rather “from the whole scene of action... A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character...”²⁶ In his analysis, Goffman lays more emphasis thus on the influence of the external world in

²¹ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, p. 418.

²² Brook and Raymond, ‘The Unity of Consciousness’.

²³ In Susan Blackmore, *Conversations on Consciousness: What the Best Minds Think About the Brain, Free Will, and What It Means To Be Human* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 151.

²⁴ Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, p. 272.

²⁵ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 245.

²⁶ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, pp. 244-245.

shaping the self, rather than those factors – such as values and beliefs – that may be considered endemic to the person. The person, Goffman observes, “and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung...”²⁷ The reason why social interaction is such a significant factor in shaping the self is this: every time we interact with someone both participants are trying to derive the highest benefit from the encounter and attempting to impose (as Michael Dirda explains in a review of Goffman’s body of work) “their claim to what reality is.”²⁸

In laying importance on the role of society in the construction of the self, Goffman’s views are similar to that of George Herbert Mead, the American social theorist. Mead believed that the self begins to develop when a person plays a role in a social environment. Mead considered ‘roles’ (as Mitchell Aboulafia, a professor of philosophy at Manhattan College, elucidates) as an individual’s actions and responses to that of others in the social group. Mead held however that merely emulating others and their mannerism has little effect on the self-making process. He therefore felt that the development of the self needs to be more ‘cognitive’. To explain this, Mead introduced the neologism *the generalized other* which he defines as “the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self.”²⁹ This unity of self is realised when the individual views a given social activity from the perspective of all the members of the social group and identifies the behaviour considered appropriate in different social settings.³⁰ A certain similarity can be perceived between Mead’s ‘generalized other’ and Goffman’s use of the term ‘audience’ – one of the many theatrical metaphors that the latter uses in his exploration of the self – as they both stress the importance of the social group with which an individual interacts.

While both Mead and Goffman talk about how the social group influences the self-making undertaking, Goffman does not completely discount the fact that the individual too tries to impose his or her view of reality. He distinguishes furthermore between the two parts of a person that are revealed in a social situation: the individual is first viewed as a

²⁷ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 245.

²⁸ Michael Dirda, ‘Waiting for Goffman’, *Lapham’s Quarterly*, at <http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/city/waiting-goffman>. Accessed 19/7/2016.

²⁹ In Mitchell Aboulafia, ‘George Herbert Mead’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mead/>. Accessed 19/7/2016.

³⁰ Aboulafia, ‘George Herbert Mead’.

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“performer... a harried fabrication of impressions involved in the all-too-human task of staging a performance.”³¹ But the individual tries also to evoke a “character” which is “some kind of image, usually creditable, which the individual... attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him.”³²

Goffman uses the term “impression management” to refer to how the “individual knowingly or unknowingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a concept of himself is an important part.”³³ A significant component of this concept is the desire to project the impression to the external world that they, the individual, “are living up to the many standards by which they... are judged.”³⁴ Consequently, the individual “implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them.”³⁵ But, as much as the individual tries to influence the perception of his audience – and is the one who will gain or lose from the performance – “the self itself does not derive from its possessor,” Goffman maintains, “[but is] a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented...”³⁶

When we perform and play roles, there can be no assurance that the process will either be easy or be devoid of mishaps. As Goffman observes, “the whole machinery of self-production is cumbersome.”³⁷ This is because an actor can lose control over how much he or she wishes to reveal to the audience, and what and how much to hide, by (inadvertently or not) neglecting to respect the boundaries of what Goffman refers to as the “social establishment”. Erving Goffman employs this term to denote “any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place.”³⁸ These boundaries also represent those separating the ‘front’ from ‘backstage’. By ‘front’ Goffman means “that part of the individual’s performance which [defines] the situation for [the audience].” Front is denoted by “the expressive equipment of a standard kind... employed by the individual during his performance.”³⁹ Backstage,

³¹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 244.

³² Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 244.

³³ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, pp. 234-235.

³⁴ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 243.

³⁵ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 28.

³⁶ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, pp. 244-245.

³⁷ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 245.

³⁸ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 231.

³⁹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 32.

on the other hand, is where the actor can unwind and can serve as “a place of escape and refuge,” as Dirda notes, “[and is] essential to our lives.”⁴⁰ It is where the actors can use unseemly language, openly criticise each other’s performances and transgress other social niceties. When applied to a social setting, these faux pas occur when people – as Goffman observed in his essay on “Role Distance” – “wear... inappropriate clothes... arrive... late for an appointment, become a trifle overheated in argument...”⁴¹ The smooth flow of the performance – and the impression that the actor wants to create on the audience – is disrupted however when the actor fails to be conscious of these dividing lines.

It is apparent from this account that certain common ideas about the self underscore the thoughts of the philosophers, scientists and sociologists we have reviewed so far. These include firstly the belief that the self is illusory and that it may be fallacious to view the self as a unifying thread of mental events. Secondly, our self-awareness, which is driven by an apparent unity of consciousness, may need to be seen instead as merely a series of related events or a succession of mental states. Thirdly, despite being conscious of its unsound foundations, we appear impelled nonetheless to maintain an ongoing narrative called the self in our minds, a chronicle that we treat as a repository for past events and future plans and which helps orient ourselves in the world. Lastly, it would seem that our relationship with the external world has a lot of say in how this self-building project evolves. I will now, in the next four sections, analyse Borges’ work in terms of these concepts of selfhood and how he uses this knowledge to present his worldview to the reader.

The self in Borges: The self is illusory

In his introduction to the *Labyrinths*, Borges’ translator, James E Irby, notes that Borges once claimed that “the problematical nature of the world, of knowledge, of time, of the self” was both his essential theme and important literary device⁴² This concern with the uncertain nature of the self – which may trigger an enquiry also into the nature of time, the world and definitions of knowledge – is reflected in the opening words of one of Borges’ early essays, ‘Nothingness of Personality’. Under the heading

⁴⁰ Dirda, ‘Waiting for Goffman’.

⁴¹ Dirda, ‘Waiting for Goffman’.

⁴² Borges, *Labyrinths*, pp. 18-19.

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'Intention', Borges declares that he proposes "to prove that personality is a mirage maintained by conceit and custom, without metaphysical foundation or visceral reality. I want to apply to literature the consequences that issue from these premises..."⁴³ W. H. Bossart, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at University of California Davis, points out that Borges evinces this intention elsewhere too. In both the 'Essay on Leon' and the short story 'The Theologians' (in which God is unable to tell Aurelian from John of Pannonia) Borges refers to what Bossart describes as "the metaphysical unreality of the individual self."⁴⁴

In his parable 'Everything and Nothing' too Borges asserts that no one – this includes Shakespeare and even God, let alone mere mortals – escapes from the illusory nature of the self. This parable is about an actor who is so skilful that "others would not discover his condition as no one," someone without substance. But when the act is finished hard reality returns and it reminds him yet again that he is no one. He is empty inside, "a dream dreamt by no one."⁴⁵ Hounded by this skirmish between shifting identities, the protagonist commences writing fables that articulate his imaginings. The thoughts of the characters in his plays reflect the conflict and confusion within the mind of the author. For instance, Iago (it is, as Borges reveals towards the end, William Shakespeare whom this parable is about) claims "I am not what I am" and Richard III affirms that he too performs, in a similar vein, the part of many. As he lies dying (towards the end of the parable), the Bard tells God that, "I who have been so many men in vain want to be one and myself". To this, God responds, "Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one."⁴⁶

By the time he wrote 'Everything and Nothing' Borges' mind, according to Norman Thomas di Giovanni, was full of Hindu and Buddhist thought and he was ready to let his new philosophical ideas influence his

⁴³ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen et al. (London: Penguin Group, 2001[1999]), p. 3.

⁴⁴ W.H. Bossart, *Borges and Philosophy: Self, Time and Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), p. 142.

⁴⁵ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 284.

⁴⁶ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 285.

writing.⁴⁷ These ideas would include the Eastern mystical thought that the individual self is seen as illusory when viewed as separate from Brahman, which is the only reality. As di Giovanni explains, “Shankara [the Hindu philosopher and theologian from the eighth century CE] worked out two levels of truth – the ordinary level and the higher level of transcendent truth, in which it is held that the world is not real.”⁴⁸ As we saw earlier, Buddhists too distinguish between ‘nominal existence’ attributed to selves which are merely combinations of elements and ‘actual existence’ which applies to an entity which can exist by itself. The influence of these thoughts is evinced in Borges’ ‘The Dialogues of Ascetic and King’, which is peppered with similar ideas from both East and West to highlight “a dark opposition of symbols... in which the ascetic may in some way equal or surpass the infinite king.”⁴⁹ One version of these dialogues is that between Milinda the king and Nagasena, “the bearer of the torch of truth.”⁵⁰ When the king asks Nagasena his name, the latter replies that “names are mere conventions that do not define permanent subjects” and possess only the ‘nominal existence’ that philosophers talk about. Nagasena adds that just as “the King’s chariot is neither its wheels nor its body... so man is not matter, form, perception, ideas, instinct, or consciousness.”⁵¹

While the dialogue between Milinda and the ascetic is about ‘nominal existence’, Borges calls attention to the related Eastern mystical notion of ‘actual existence’ by noting (in ‘From Someone to Nobody’) that “Shankara teaches that all mankind, in a deep sleep, is the universe, is God...”⁵² as we are also part of Brahman, the ultimate reality. Norman Thomas di Giovanni adds that “the concept of self in [Borges’ poem] ‘The Watcher’ too approaches this view.”⁵³ The Watcher ends with the following two lines:

The door to suicide is open, but theologians assert that, in the subsequent
Shadows of the other kingdom, there will I be, waiting for myself.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Norman Thomas di Giovanni, *The Lesson of the Master: On Borges and His Work* (London: Continuum, 2003[1988]), p. 85.

⁴⁸ di Giovanni, *Lesson of the Master*, p. 84.

⁴⁹ Borges, *Total Library*, p. 382.

⁵⁰ Borges, *Total Library*, p. 383.

⁵¹ Borges, *Total Library*, p. 383.

⁵² Borges, *Total Library*, p. 342.

⁵³ di Giovanni, *Lesson of the Master*, p. 84.

⁵⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman, trans. Willis Barnstone et al. (New York: Penguin Group, 1999), p. 325.

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As di Giovanni tells us, here Borges seems to be offering two expositions of the self. One of these is the “I” with its earthly concerns and the other which is “on some disembodied, spiritual level.”⁵⁵ But the bitter tone of ‘The Watcher’ suggests too, di Giovanni feels, “Borges’s struggle to reconcile the drudgery of being Mr Borges... [experiencing the dichotomy between] the physical world with a loss of life and attainment of transcendental truth.”⁵⁶

Perhaps his awareness and belief that only a transcendent truth has reality whereas the everyday world is insubstantial gives Borges the courage to not be afraid of mortality and conversely not seek immortality at an individual level. Borges in his 1978 lecture on ‘Immortality’ wondered:

We could say that immortality is necessary – not the personal, but this other immortality. For example, each time that someone loves an enemy, the immortality of Christ appears. In that moment, he is Christ. Each time we repeat a line by Dante or Shakespeare, we are, in some way, that instant when Dante or Shakespeare created that line. Immortality is in the memory of others and in the works we leave behind. What does it matter if that work is done?⁵⁷

The self as a succession of mental states

Yet, we do seem impelled to somehow impute a sense of continuity to our notions of the self. But, if what we can experience are solely our perceptions (as Hume observed), does this self really exist or is it like a Heraclitean river of flux? Borges alludes to this conundrum when he writes that “I, as I write this, am only a certainty that seeks out the words that [will] compel your attention. That proposition and a few muscular sensations... constitute my current I.”⁵⁸ This seems to resonate also with what Hume thought. J. M. Coetzee too refers to this resonance when observing that the “ideas on which [Borges’] ‘Pierre Menard’ [from ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*’] is built can be found in David Hume (the past, including the age of Cervantes, has no existence except as a succession of mental states).”⁵⁹

The Bundle Theory of identity we looked at earlier also offers views similar to that of Hume on perceptions. We saw how Buddhism views the

⁵⁵ di Giovanni, *Lesson of the Master*, p. 84.

⁵⁶ di Giovanni, *Lesson of the Master*, p. 86.

⁵⁷ Borges, *Total Library*, p. 490.

⁵⁸ Borges, *Total Library*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* (London: Sacker & Warburg, 2001), pp. 168-169.

role of the self as a unifying thread of our mental properties as a fallacy. What we have instead is a series of moments, experiences and their memories all tied up together like a bundle. Jorge Luis Borges touches upon this idea when in 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' he states:

The metaphysicians of Tlön [reject] the impossible addition of the present and of all past moments. Neither is it licit to use the plural 'past moments', since it supposes another impossible operation... One of the schools of Tlön goes so far as to negate time: it reasons that the present is indefinite, that the future has no reality other than as a present hope, that the past has no reality other than as a present memory.⁶⁰

In a note to the above passage in 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', Borges notes that Bertrand Russell argued that "the planet has been created a few minutes ago, furnished with a humanity that 'remembers' an illusory past."⁶¹ The Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa (who used more than seventy-five literary alter egos) too reflected this idea of the world being created anew every moment by saying: "Each moment I feel as if I've just been born/Into an endlessly new world."⁶²

The nexus between time and the momentary of nature of the self is echoed also in the following lines from Borges' poem 'The Instant':

The present is singular. It is memory
that sets up time. Both succession and error
come with the routine of the clock. A year
is no less vanity than is history.⁶³

The self as a necessary abstraction

Why and how do we maintain this narrative of a self, which Jan Westerhoff compares to a "thread running through every single one of a string of pearls"?⁶⁴ We seem compelled to sustain this illusion however make-believe in nature it may be. Despite his "intention" (as noted earlier) to "prove that personality is a mirage," Borges realises that such a "thread" is a necessity as otherwise a life without the notion of a self will lead to darkness. He writes, in 'A New Refutation of Time':

And yet, and yet... Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations.

⁶⁰ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 34.

⁶¹ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 34.

⁶² Galen Strawson, 'I am not a story', *Aeon Magazine*, at <https://aeon.co/essays/let-s-ditch-the-dangerous-idea-that-life-is-a-story>. Accessed 21/7/2016.

⁶³ Borges, *Selected Poems*, p. 215.

⁶⁴ Westerhoff, *Reality*, p. 65.

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Our destiny... is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. Time is the substance I am made of.⁶⁵

What Borges appears to imply here is because we need a self to provide a scaffolding for our memories and explain time to ourselves, in doing otherwise – namely, “denying the self” and “denying temporal succession” – we will risk madness. Borges thinks that Schopenhauer too affirmed this belief when he notes (In ‘Nothingness of Personality’) that “Schopenhauer [opines] that the self is a point whose immobility is useful for discerning, by contrast, the heavy-laden flight of time. This opinion translates the self into a... logical imperative...”⁶⁶

While I am prey to time’s flux, I need the self to provide that immobile point. Even so, I am aware that, while time consumes me, I am part also of a higher reality – what the Buddha referred to as ‘actual existence’ and Shankara looked upon as the higher level of truth. This truth is exquisitely expressed in Borges’ oft-quoted words: “Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.”⁶⁷ Bossart thinks that what Borges makes manifest here not only echoes the teachings of Spinoza (besides Eastern mystical thought) but also connects with the idea that there is no well-defined space between fiction and reality. There is too the “submersion of the individual in [time’s] whirlpool,” Bossart writes.⁶⁸ But (Bossart adds) time is also “an unstable material. And perhaps its source lies in me; perhaps from my shadow surge the days, fatal and illusory.”⁶⁹

Social interaction and the self-making process

The American philosopher and psychologist, William James, examined the self in two ways. There is the ‘I’ which represents my awareness of the present moment. There is then the ‘me’ which looks at the bigger picture, as it were, of who I am, my history and my plans for the future.⁷⁰ James looked upon these two aspects, as Aboulafia explains, as a “relationship

⁶⁵ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 269.

⁶⁶ Borges, *Total Library*, p. 9.

⁶⁷ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 269.

⁶⁸ Bossart, *Borges and Philosophy*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Bossart, *Borges and Philosophy*, p. 8.

⁷⁰ Hood, ‘What is the self illusion?’

between ‘parts’ of the stream of consciousness.”⁷¹ Sociologist, George Herbert Mead, held the similar view that we experience a “running current of awareness” owing to this relationship between the ‘I’ and ‘me’. “The action with reference to the others calls responses in the individual... there is then another ‘me’ criticizing, approving, suggesting, and consciously planning...”⁷²

It would therefore appear that in the absence of a clearly identifiable organ called the self, we feel not only the need to create a fulcrum for our mental lives, (what Daniel Dennett calls our “center of narrative gravity”⁷³) but tend also to populate that story with a multiplicity of characters. Borges notes in his essay ‘From Someone to Nobody’ that “to be something is inexorably not to be all the other things; the confused intuition of this truth has induced mankind to imagine that being nothing is more than being something and is, in some way, to be everything.”⁷⁴ Elsewhere too, Borges exhibits a penchant for using similar motifs of a person seeking more than one self. In his afterword to *The Book of Sand* collection he remarks that the short story, ‘The Other’, “once more takes up the old theme of the double,” and goes on to enumerate various terms used to denote the double, such as the wraith, fetch and doppelganger.⁷⁵ Borges links our concerns about the existence of a self on the one hand with the need, on the other, to grapple with multiple selves when he writes in ‘Borges and I’ that “I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognise myself less in his books than in many others...”⁷⁶

These thoughts of Borges point to how these multiple selves are defined and shaped by both our values and aspirations and also by the external world. Stanford Professor of Philosophy, John Perry, uses the concept of the “motivating cognitive complex” to describe the interplay of our beliefs and desires and how we express them.⁷⁷ If I intend to take a particular action A, as Perry explains, my beliefs and desires are firstly

⁷¹ Aboulafia, ‘George Herbert Mead’.

⁷² Aboulafia, ‘George Herbert Mead’.

⁷³ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, p. 418.

⁷⁴ Borges, *Total Library*, pp. 342-343.

⁷⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Sand and Shakespeare’s Memory*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin Group, 2001 [1998]), p. 94.

⁷⁶ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 282.

⁷⁷ John Perry, “‘Borges and I’ and ‘I’”, *The Amherst Lecture in Philosophy 2*, at www.amherstlecture.org/perry2007. Accessed 21/7/2016.

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what cause that action. Secondly, I also use the same beliefs and desires to rationalise that action. Our motivating cognitive complexes do not, however, form a coherent whole. Keeping this in mind, Perry looks upon 'Borges and I' as "not simply a personification of an inaccurate public person, but one part of a not totally coherent self-concept."⁷⁸ Perry reasons that what the author has written, together with the opinions of his critics, has developed a persona that may not be wholly accurate. "And yet the author is constantly exposed to it, in the same ways that everyone else is, and cannot avoid it."⁷⁹ The story is then, in a sense, about two selves corresponding, Perry notes, "to two self-conceptions, two overlapping but significantly different complex of desires, ambitions and intentions... each taking control in turn..."⁸⁰

A reason for Borges' apparent inability to maintain the ideal of a "totally coherent self-concept" may be that our self-machinery is influenced considerably by social interaction. Daniel Dennett equates the self to a "fiction created by... my brain acting in concert with my parents and friends."⁸¹ As Robert Ezra Park observed, "we come into the world as individuals, achieve character and become persons."⁸² William James too held that "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him."⁸³ The self thus becomes the sum total of several identities (son, friend, husband, father, boss, employee, etc.) besides being shaped by our values, aspirations, beliefs and desires. In his afterword to *The Aleph* collection, Borges writes, "A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms... and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face..."⁸⁴ (Andrew Hurley, one of Borges' translators, notes that "this has often been cited as the perfect description of the phenomenon Borges/'Borges'"⁸⁵)

How exactly does the external world influence this self-making process? In social interaction, as we anticipate benefits from the external

⁷⁸ Perry, 'Borges and I'.

⁷⁹ Perry, 'Borges and I'.

⁸⁰ Perry, 'Borges and I'.

⁸¹ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, p. 429.

⁸² Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 30.

⁸³ Aboulafia, 'George Herbert Mead'.

⁸⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph, Including the Prose Fictions from 'The Maker'*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin Group, 2000 [1998]), p. 183.

⁸⁵ Borges, *The Aleph*, p. 191.

world, we try to imagine what others expect of us. We do this by taking on the perspective of Mead's 'generalized other' which we came across earlier. This involves learning not only other members' responses but also their actions and behaviour which can then be taken in. Erving Goffman uses the example of a raw recruit to the army to illustrate this. The recruit initially follows orders mainly to avoid punishment; but he later accepts army etiquette without any fears but in order to satisfy his own aspiration of becoming a well-accepted and respected member of the group.⁸⁶

Goffman labels as 'front', as we saw earlier, the equipment that a person employs as part of their social activity. This front consists furthermore of two parts: the 'setting' and the 'scenic aspect'.⁸⁷ While both these terms may refer to the props that surround a person, the former denotes immobile objects whereas the latter could move around with the performer. The setting may include, for instance, such things as the furniture in a room and its décor while scenic aspects may refer to say membership of exclusive clubs. By surrounding ourselves with these accoutrements, we subliminally influence the perception of others around us as part of 'impression management', Goffman tells us. Coetzee points out how Jorge Luis Borges may foster such impressions by, for instance, using his Englishness and part-Jewish ancestry as part of his "self-fashioning." Coetzee adds that Borges might have used his "rather hypothetical Sephardic" roots to explain his interests in the Kabbalah and also to project himself as an outsider to Western culture.⁸⁸ Borges himself alludes also to our need, when we interact with others (or even other selves), to present what Goffman calls a 'performance' as part of the process of assuming a "social identity" we looked at earlier. He does this in 'Borges and I' when he tells us that "the one called Borges" shares his liking for hourglasses and maps "in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor," as translated from the Spanish by James E. Irby.⁸⁹ This phrase indicates an even closer nexus with one playing a role when in di Giovanni's translation it reads as "in a showy way that turns them into stagy mannerisms."⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 31.

⁸⁷ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, pp. 32-33.

⁸⁸ Coetzee, *Stranger Shores*, p. 167.

⁸⁹ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 282.

⁹⁰ di Giovanni, *Lesson of the Master*, p. 77.

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While Borges may divulge – in the course of this “self-fashioning” – a few personal features selectively as part of his role-playing, he – like any other actor – may also choose to deliberately suppress exposing other information of a private kind. James Woodall, in his biography of Borges, cites the Borges’ *Dreamtigers* collection as a typical example of “Borges both concealing and revealing himself.”⁹¹ Borges describing Homer going blind in ‘The Maker’ (*El Hacedor*) illustrates this. Borges says of Homer: “Little by little, the beautiful universe left him behind: ... the night was emptied of stars...”⁹² While this description is that of Homer’s blindness, “the mask here,” as Woodall sees it, “is a thin one. We know this is Borges talking.”⁹³

Be that as it may, there could still be moments when an actor’s mask drops off completely and may reveal another person or self underneath. Goffman calls such events – where an actor fails occasionally to sustain a persona – as “definitional disruptions.”⁹⁴ This could happen despite the actor having until then been quite adept at juggling his multiple personae. (In ‘Borges and I’, for instance, “the private and public men are,” di Giovanni observes, “on reasonable terms.”⁹⁵ In a similar vein, the two men in Borges’ ‘The Other’ share an inability to whistle. Consequently, “what the man was whistling – or trying to whistle” triggers a shock of recognition in the narrator.⁹⁶) Even a little too much congruence between identities can pose problems at times.

The narrator in ‘The Other’ acknowledges later with a hint of resignation or futility: “We were too alike... and that makes conversation hard...no point in giving advice...”⁹⁷ Erving Goffman refers to such pitfalls when, as noted earlier, he views the self-making process as “cumbersome”⁹⁸ and looks upon the actor as being “engaged in a difficult, treacherous task.”⁹⁹ These difficulties are caused by our being unable to maintain unflagging correspondence between the image we wish to project

⁹¹ James Woodall, *The Man in the Mirror of the Book: A Life of Jorge Luis Borges* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), p. 188.

⁹² Borges, *Selected Poems*, p. 71.

⁹³ Woodall, *Man in the Mirror*, p. 188.

⁹⁴ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, pp. 24-25.

⁹⁵ di Giovanni, *Lesson of the Master*, p. 79.

⁹⁶ Borges, *Book of Sand*, pp. 3-4.

⁹⁷ Borges, *Book of Sand*, p. 9.

⁹⁸ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 245.

⁹⁹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 228.

and what we may actually achieve – or, a need to observe separation between – in Goffman’s dramaturgical lingo – the front and backstage. This failure results in a disparity, as Goffman puts it, between “the expression that [an actor] *gives*, and the expression he *gives off*.”¹⁰⁰ He defines the former as communication in the normal sense while ‘gives off’ refers to “the non-verbal, presumably unintentional kind...”¹⁰¹ With his analysis of these nuances and the perils they pose, Goffman reminds us – as Michael Dirda observes – that “urban living transforms all of us not just into actors but often into broken-hearted clowns.”¹⁰² In the end, the only recourse an actor may have for avoiding such “definitional disruptions” is to employ what Goffman calls “preventive practices” by using fictive tools to compensate for these “discrediting occurrences”¹⁰³ or lack of verisimilitude. Borges appears to resort to such action when, in a number of his stories, he incorporates real persons – his friend and collaborator Bioy Caesars, for example, in ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ – or actual historical events within the narrative in order to blur distinctions between fact and fiction.

Lastly, what significantly hampers these ‘performances’ is that getting inside someone else’s mind is no easy task – even if it is just another facet of one’s own identity in the context of multiple selves. A problem that an actor encounters here is, as Goffman highlights, that of “ambivalence about oneself and one’s audience.”¹⁰⁴ ‘Averroës’s Search’ by Borges is, for instance, about the difficulty Averroës faces in trying to translate Aristotle’s works without understanding what a play was as the theatre had never been part of his cultural background. “The primary message of [this story] is that,” Bossart points out, “there is no context neutral standpoint from which one can consider the data of experience ‘objectively’ or as they are ‘in themselves’.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 14.

¹⁰¹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 16.

¹⁰² Dirda, ‘Waiting for Goffman’.

¹⁰³ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, pp. 24-25.

¹⁰⁴ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 230.

¹⁰⁵ Bossart, *Borges and Philosophy*, p. 13.

The gap between language and reality

While commenting on one of Francisco de Quevedo's sonnets, Borges remarks, "I shall not say that it is a transcription of reality, for reality is not verbal..."¹⁰⁶

Borges reiterates this idea of language being an inadequate proxy for reality when in 'The Library of Babel' he examines the efficacy of the library being a metaphor for the universe. The narrator of this story recalls:

At that time it was... hoped that a clarification of humanity's basic mysteries... might be found... if the language of philosophers is not sufficient, the multiform Library will have produced the unprecedented language required... [But] for four centuries now men have exhausted the hexagons... Obviously, no one expects to discover anything.¹⁰⁷

While the library is expected to hold all knowledge, Bossart notes, "yet its incessant light is insufficient." Bossart adduces a number of reasons for this. The search for the Book is unending, with clues that remain elusive. It is not possible moreover to clearly deduce a book's content from its title. Lastly – perhaps more worryingly – "the order of the library is born of chance, and [so] books may [even] be a source of distortion."¹⁰⁸

Robert Scholes, Emeritus Professor in English and Comparative Literature at Brown University, thinks that a recognition of the "opposition between language and reality, the unbridgeable gap between them, is fundamental to the Borgesian vision," and is "a persistent theme in [Borges'] critical work."¹⁰⁹ This awareness gives rise in fact, Coetzee feels, to a "sense of dread [which] is metaphysical... [and is infused with the] collapse of all structures of meaning, including language itself... [and the fact that the] very self that sparks has no real existence."¹¹⁰ In other words, what exacerbates the task of trying to define a self to ourselves – and our place in the world – is this: In order to deal with an illusory self we resort to language, which we hope will garner meaning. But then we realise we have to contend also with this unbridgeable gap between language and reality.

Borges tells us that Pierre Menard "did not want to compose another *Quixote* – which is easy – but the *Quixote itself*." He avows in this quest "to go on being Pierre Menard and reach the *Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard."¹¹¹ He later confesses the difficulty associated with "the mysterious duty of reconstructing literally [Cervantes'] spontaneous work." Menard adds that his task is made impossible because "it is not in vain that three hundred years have gone by, filled with exceedingly complex events. Among them, to mention only

¹⁰⁶ In Robert Scholes, 'The Reality of Borges', *The Iowa Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1977), pp. 12-25.

¹⁰⁷ Borges, *Labyrinths*, pp. 82-83.

¹⁰⁸ Bossart, *Borges and Philosophy*, p. 114.

¹⁰⁹ Scholes, 'Reality of Borges'.

¹¹⁰ Coetzee, *Stranger Shores*, p. 173.

¹¹¹ Borges, *Labyrinths*, pp. 65-66.

one, is the *Quixote* itself.”¹¹² We saw earlier how Averroës is caught within the clutches of culture. Here, Pierre Menard is unable to transcend the tentacles of time. The passage of time would inevitably prevent Menard from composing, as he wishes to, “the *Quixote itself*” because Menard, like every one of us, is part of a distinct literary tradition (as evinced by his literary achievements), as Bossart points out.¹¹³ Menard “is as tied to his time as [for example] Flaubert,” as Scholes observes, and cannot “avoid the curse of temporality.”¹¹⁴ As Menard seems to realise, the passage of time and events of history, among other things, change language and transform its meaning. Hence, “in order to interpret [language],” Scholes argues, “we must locate it in a frame of reference which is ineluctably temporal and cultural.”¹¹⁵ Keeping in mind these limitations of language, Borges believed – according to his biographer Edwin Williamson – that “fiction did not... hold up a mirror to reality.” The role of fiction instead was “to engender “poetic faith” in the reader.”¹¹⁶ Borges reiterates this notion when in ‘The Avatars of the Tortoise’ he writes, “it is venturesome to think that a coordination of words (philosophies are nothing more than that) can resemble the universe very much.”¹¹⁷

Menard’s attempt to reconstruct Cervantes’s time and space is therefore not only futile but is also a case of “authorial hubris,” in Woodall’s view. Woodall considers the story of Pierre Menard as Borges’ “brilliant fictional statement about the inefficacy of the written word... and the stark dubiety of the writer’s role.”¹¹⁸ ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ too, Woodall points out, speaks of the self-doubt that assails the mind of a writer who has to rely on “fiction, untruth, a strange space where... the constructs of empirical reality are made ghostly...”¹¹⁹ Towards the end of this story, Borges writes about the falsehoods and uncertainties that cloud one’s memory of Tlön. “A fictitious past occupies in our memories in place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty – not even that it is false.”¹²⁰ Woodall signals the foreboding nature of the story of Tlön when he opines that in this tale Borges was offering moreover “a metaphor for global catastrophe.”¹²¹ (In fact, two months after ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ was published in 1940, Paris fell. Borges wrote in *Sur* that throughout 1940 “each morning, reality resembles more and more a nightmare.”)¹²²

¹¹² Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 68.

¹¹³ Bossart, *Borges and Philosophy*, p. 120.

¹¹⁴ Scholes, ‘Reality of Borges’.

¹¹⁵ Scholes, ‘Reality of Borges’.

¹¹⁶ In Colm Tóibín, ‘Don’t Abandon Me’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 28, no. 9 (2006), pp. 19-26.

¹¹⁷ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 243.

¹¹⁸ Woodall, *Man in the Mirror*, pp. 113-114.

¹¹⁹ Woodall, *Man in the Mirror*, pp. 116-117.

¹²⁰ Borges, *Labyrinths*, pp. 42-43.

¹²¹ Woodall, *Man in the Mirror*, p. 116.

¹²² Woodall, *Man in the Mirror*, p. 115.

Conclusion

In 'Partial Magic in Quixote', Borges talks about how Cervantes "takes pleasure in confusing the objective and the subjective".¹²³ For example, Don Quixote's library includes Cervantes's *Galatea* and it appears Quixote's barber is a friend of the author of this book and, more interestingly, the barber does not admire Cervantes very much! Thus, "[t]he barber, a dream or the form of a dream of Cervantes, passes judgment on Cervantes."¹²⁴ In the same essay, Borges cites also an analogous inversion from *Hamlet* where Shakespeare includes another stage (within where the main story unfolds) where a tragedy almost similar to that of Hamlet is being enacted. Borges is concerned that "these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious."¹²⁵

But then Borges was himself a great exponent of this art of melding layers of fiction and reality and he even uses the ambiguity that attends such a device as the central theme of 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', one of his many fantastic stories. This perhaps harks back yet again to his recognition of the chimerical nature of the self – an awareness that I have endeavoured to reveal in this article – from which spring a writer's imaginings. Borges reflects upon such limitations of the self – and how we all (including writers and philosophers) strive to orient ourselves using such an imperfect tool – when he writes that "the metaphysicians of Tlön do no seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding."¹²⁶ The Tlön metaphysicians realise that exactitude with portraying reality is not within our reach thanks to our patchy understanding of the self and the inadequacies of language. It is therefore not surprising that they consider "metaphysics [as] a branch of fantastic literature."¹²⁷ Borges on his part displays here a perfect combination of deep insight and literary brilliance – an example perhaps of "the astounding" that the Tlön metaphysicians sought – and which, Andre Maurois thought, "well defines the greatness and the art of Borges."¹²⁸

¹²³ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 229.

¹²⁴ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 229.

¹²⁵ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 231.

¹²⁶ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 34.

¹²⁷ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 34.

¹²⁸ Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 14.