

## Ontological Uncertainty in Three Stories by Jorge Luis

**Borges**

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Jorge Luis Borges possessed a profound interest in literature, critical theory, and philosophy and used his writing to comment on these topics. However, he questioned the authenticity of the systems of expression and explanation on which these three topics are based, and criticized their role in the subjectivity of human knowledge. Given his familiarity with different languages and cultures—especially those of Arabic-Muslim origin, Borges is conscious of the problems related to the transmission of ideas. Moreover, he recognizes the impossibility of communicating such ideas in a perfect manner due to the inevitable differences between linguistic, cultural and historical perspectives and the limitations that these create.

In his fiction, Borges suggests a new perspective that borrows from various formal traditions such as literature, critical theory, and philosophy, but does not submit to any of them. Moreover, he views such traditions as mere subjective attempts to deal with different aspects of human existence. In his three stories—“The Approach to Almotásim,” “The Zahir,” and “The Search for Averroes”—Borges does not try to resolve the issue of the

subjectivity of knowledge. On the contrary, he implies its inevitability and satirizes other writers’ attempts to resolve it. This is part of the dark humor of Borges. He uses these three stories to question the foundations and limits of reality as well as the validity of the systems that serve to explain it. In doing so, he suggests an ontological uncertainty. To demonstrate Borges’ proposal of ontological uncertainty and its association with literature, critical theory, and philosophy, I will focus on the following topics: the resistance to meaning, the use of intertextuality, and the lack of a fixed point of reference.

It is important to recognize that the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche influenced certain aspects of Borges’ thought (Rodriguez-Monegal 80). Both philosophers shared an interest in the entity of “the other” and tended to look for perspectives in other cultures that were not present in their own (Clark 845; Janaway 546). Also, they were skeptical of interpretation and epistemology. Schopenhauer proposed that illusion infiltrated the normal conscience (Janaway 547) and that the world was seen in terms of abstractions that impeded a correct interpretation (Feyerabend 329-30). In addition, he considered art to be a means of representing life—at times more authentic than philosophy (Janaway 551). Nietzsche said that “empirical” knowledge provided only one perspective and that language falsified reality (Clark 849-50). Both philosophers questioned the reliability of human perception and expression.

One of the most important principles of Borges’ thought is the resistance to meaning. This concept is influenced by the idea that the determination of a work’s meaning corresponds not with its producer but with its perceiver (Ulmer 852). Borges viewed criticism as a form of

creative and subjective expression (857). He satirized the use of language to imitate the world (Bickel 302). In addition, he said that truth is based on illusion (Cavallari 53). In doing so, he questioned the validity of different processes that influence meaning.

There are various elements that suggest the resistance to meaning in "The Approach to Almotásim." One is the lack of clarity regarding the function of the work. Although it appears to be a work of fiction, it also serves as a critical study of a fictitious novel titled *The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim*, written by the fictitious author Mir Bahadur Alí. In addition, the novelistic plot summary functions as a story in itself. This technique of meta-fiction, which is evident in the use of a story within a story, serves various purposes. First, it blurs the distinction between the fictional story and its critical analysis. It also suggests a certain imprecision of discourse that parallels the imprecision of memory and translation and, therefore, questions their validity (Sierra 56-57). Overall, the uncertainty of the function and the authenticity of the work obscures its meaning and complicates its interpretation.

Another element that obscures the meaning of "The Approach to Almotásim" is the uncertainty of the meaning of the word "Almotásim." This is apparent in the use of two orthographic versions—"Almotásim" in the title of the story by Borges, and "Al-Mu'tasim" in the title of the novel that it critiques, both of which lead to different interpretations. In Arabic, "Al-Mu'tasim" means "seeker of shelter" (Borges 417). However, the Spanish transliteration "Almotásim" sounds similar to the combination of the words "alma" and "tasa" or "taza" which mean "spirit" and "measure" or "cup" respectively. Thus "Almotásim" could symbolize the measure of the spirit as a point of reference

for the spirits of other people, or the source of the spirit from which other spirits can be replenished (Van Hee 63). In sum, its meaning in the context of the story is unclear.

Another element that reinforces the theme of the resistance to meaning is the reference to two versions of the fictitious novel. First, the existence of two versions effectively questions the authenticity of each. Also, each version suggests a step in the process of improving the work. According to Borges, the first version—although not perfect—is the better of the two. The second version is an attempt on the part of the fictitious author to improve the novel. However, it does not achieve this goal because it falls into allegory and proposes a cosmogonic system—considered extravagant by the narrator Borges—in which each entity including the Omnipotent is in search of someone superior (Borges 417). Ironically, the fictitious author's attempt to perfect his novel parallels the search carried out by his protagonist, which is implicit both in the word "Al-Mu'tasim" and in the title of the novel. Also, there is a certain irony in the critical role of Borges. On the one hand, Borges satirizes the cyclical and infinite theology proposed by the fictitious author. On the other hand, his act of criticism suggests his own superiority to the fictitious author and thus parallels the cyclical theology that he tries to discredit. Furthermore, his allegorical treatment of the author's efforts conflicts with his own criticism of the use of allegory.

The resistance to meaning plays a central role in "The Zahir." At the beginning of this story, the narrator Borges enters a tavern to erase the memory of his recently deceased wife and receives an Argentine coin, called the Zahir, that mysteriously occupies his thoughts and eventually leads him to the brink of insanity. Upon seeing the effect of the

Zahir on his daily life, the narrator tries— unsuccessfully— to forget it. To alleviate his confusion and satisfy his curiosity, he consults various texts in order to find an explanation of the Zahir. Unfortunately, the explanation that he finds serve only to confuse him further. Finally, he loses the coin in a desperate attempt to save himself.

The uncertainty of the Zahir's meaning is evident at the beginning of the story where Borges alludes to several of its different manifestations: a tiger in Guzerat, a blind martyr in the mosque of Java, an astrolabe, a peephole in the prisons of Mahdi, an inscription in the marble of the mosque of Cordoba and the bottom of a well in the Jewish ghetto of Tetuan (Borges 589). After reciting this list, the author speaks of his own experience with the Zahir. By presenting this experience as one of a long series of manifestations, Borges implies the infiniteness of the Zahir and the impermanence of its form. In doing so, he suggests a variety of meanings and the absence of a single correct interpretation.

Later, Borges indicates that the superstition regarding the Zahir is rooted in Islam, according to which, "Zahir" means something "notorious" and "visible." It is one of the ninety-nine names of God and, therefore, an aspect of God. According to Islamic hermeneutics, "Zahir" refers to the external interpretation of the Koran. However, the Koran also has another interpretation that effectively questions the validity of the external interpretation. These two aspects of the Koran parallel the visible and invisible aspects of God, which—while opposite—are reciprocal (Núñez Faraco 116). Each aspect of the Koran—or of God—complements the other and serves to enhance the overall image, but neither is complete by itself. This idea is also applicable to the Zahir, since none of its manifestations can

provide an image of its totality. The enigmatic quality of the word "Zahir" is reiterated by its use in colloquial Arabic to refer to something that drives people insane (Kushigan 40). This is evident in its effect on the narrator. On a metaphorical level, the Zahir suggests the insanity that occurs as a consequence of pursuing total knowledge. Its different manifestations and interpretations reiterate the inability of a text to constitute itself totally. Moreover, they suggest indeterminacy (Dove 53).

The idea of indeterminacy is implicit in the narrator's reaction to his dilemma. Faced with the impossibility of understanding the different meanings of the Zahir—and thus its overall meaning—he considers the Sufi tradition of losing oneself in God by reciting his ninety-nine names until they lose meaning. He adds that each word in the language of God implies an infinite series of facts in a manner that is both explicit and simultaneous. In a linguistic context, this implies the impossibility of determining the precise meaning of a word (Lydenberg 112), an idea that is reinforced by the parallel between the tangible and the intangible aspects of the Zahir and the literal and figurative meanings of language (Kushigan 41). In an ontological sense, it suggests humans' inability to comprehend the totality of the universe.

The resistance to meaning can also be seen in "The Search for Averroes," which satirizes the tendency of interpreting the world according to one's own cultural values. In the central plot, this is apparent in the difficulty faced by Averroes—a famous Persian translator and commentator who lived in medieval Spain—in understanding the work of Aristotle. After hearing a story about a trip to China by his neighbor Abulcásim, Averroes

reinterprets Aristotle's work, based on his friend's misconceptions regarding the Chinese culture. Borges, upon recognizing the futility of Averroes' effort to portray Aristotle, ceases his own effort to portray Averroes. As a result, Averroes disappears.

The difficulty of interpretation can be attributed to two main obstacles: language and culture. According to Borges, language can pervert a text and its meaning (Gallagher 26). In other words, it can alter both the form and the content of a text. The effect of language on form is evident in the list of different translations of the name "Averroes" at the beginning of the story: "Abugualíd Muhámmad Ibn-Ahmad ibn-Muhámmad ibn Rushd (this long name took a century to arrive at Averroes, passing through Benraist and through Avenryz and even through Aben-Rassad and Filius Rosadis)" (Borges 52). Culture's tendency to obscure meaning is evident in Averroes' inability to comprehend the words "tragedy" and "comedy" (583). His ignorance is due to the absence of such concepts in the Arab-Islamic culture. In spite of his Greek and Arabic dictionaries and his proficiency in both languages, he still does not understand the two words due to his lack of cultural understanding (Eco 12).

Another obstacle faced by Averroes and his colleagues is the tendency to interpret other cultures according to Islamic values. This is implied by their initial discussion of the Koran, which provides a background for their subsequent conversations and implies a biased point of departure. Such a perspective is evident in Averroes' proposition to interpret the work of Aristotle in the same manner in which Islamic theologians interpret the Koran. It can also be seen in his proclamation that tragedy and comedy abound in the Koran (Bell-Villada 169). Such a

commentary shows that misinterpretation can impede the understanding of one's native culture as well as foreign cultures.

Other examples of the cultural limitations can be seen in different characters' inability to recognize the presence of drama in daily life. When Averroes sees three children imitating the environment of a mosque, he judges it as a trivial game without recognizing it as drama. Abulcasim, on his part, interprets his experience in the Chinese theater in terms of the Arab-Islamic culture. First, he views the theater as a house (Bell-Villada 169). He also interprets the theatrical performance as a series of religious prayers. His inability to recognize drama may stem from the Islamic prohibition of the artistic representation of human figures (Bell-Villada 166). In any case, the observation of drama without perceiving it shows that native cultural values can impede the comprehension of other cultures (Spivakovsky 229). By depicting these situations, Borges implies that the total comprehension of another culture or historical period is impossible and he satirizes other people's attempts to achieve it.

Although resistance to meaning manifests itself in different ways in these three stories—the ambiguous function of the text, the indeterminacy of an object's meaning, the etymological development of a name and cultural ignorance—in each case, it indicates a change in meaning and a lack of understanding on the part of the perceiver. Nevertheless, by recognizing that understanding—or at least the appearance of understanding—is the goal of dialogues between books, cultures and historical periods, Borges attests to the importance of intertextuality.

Intertextuality plays a key role in the literature of

Borges. One of its functions is to enhance the verisimilitude of a work. Another is to demonstrate the interdependence of fiction, critical theory, and philosophy. By showing their mutual influence, Borges indicates the subjectivity of these three entities and satirizes the historical, religious, and literary systems that they support (Stark, *Jorges Luis Borges* 95). Furthermore, by combining the roles of critic and author, he blurs the distinction between the two and, thus, between the practices of criticism and fiction (Ulmer 851). By suggesting that criticism can be creative as well as analytical, he effectively questions its objectivity and demonstrates the power of fiction.

The use of intertextuality in “The Approach to Almotásim” includes a mixture of different levels of fiction and of both real and imaginary elements. One example of different levels of fiction is the use of critical commentaries about a novel (Stabb 54). Such commentaries—which include the critique of the narrator, the commentaries of other people and a response to them by the fictional author—constitute three critical levels (Alazraki, *Twentieth* 22). Such a mixture of discursive levels—as well as the function of the critical summary as a plot in itself—implies a synthesis of critical and creative literature (Ulmer 846). Therefore, they question the validity of the critical commentaries and obscure the distinction between the real and the imaginary.

The mixture of real and imaginary elements questions the distinction between fiction and reality (Poirier 77). It is achieved through a variety of texts and characters that serve to enhance the verisimilitude of the story and, at the same time, question the validity of what appear to be “authentic” elements. This is evident in the critique of a fictitious novel written by a fictitious author. It can also be

seen in the allusions—made by both real and fictitious authors—to other authentic literary works. One example is a reference to the didactic tale “The Colloquy of the Birds” by the Persian author Farid Eddin Attar, on which the fictitious novel *The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim* is supposedly based. Another example is the comparison—made by a nameless and possibly fictitious inquisitor—with the tale “On the City Wall” by Rudyard Kipling (Balderston 97). Such similarities demonstrate the cyclical tendency of literature and suggest that each text is based, at least partially, on another text.

Intertextuality also plays an important role in “The Zahir.” In a similar manner to the last story, Borges uses different levels of fiction and a combination of authentic and imaginary elements. The distinction between levels of fiction is evident in the references to other texts that comment on the Zahir and in the allusions to other books that demonstrate the influence of money. Furthermore, it can be seen in the narrator’s description of his own personal experience with the Zahir and his attempt to write a fantastic tale based on his experience (Alazraki, *Contemporary* 47). Although they are fictitious, such autobiographical references serve to enhance the verisimilitude of the story (Dove 52).

The mixture of authentic and imaginary elements consists of allusions to characters and stories, each of which has a connection with the Zahir (Spivakovsky 227). One important aspect is the critical commentary of texts from different cultural and historical contexts that refer to the Zahir. Such commentary includes references to authentic works, such as the Koran and the Talmud, and references to fictitious works such as a German monograph which the narrator supposedly discovers in a bookstore (Bell-Villada

216-17). The duality between reality and fiction is also apparent on the level of the characters. The primary characters include Borges—the narrator—who is authentic, and Teodelina—the object of his affection—who is fictitious. The secondary characters also include both authentic and fictitious people. One example of the former is Flaubert, who is associated with the search for the absolute and, thus, parallels the protagonist. Another example is Philip Meadows Taylor, who supposedly speaks of his experience with the Zahir in his memoirs. Although Taylor was a real person, his works never mention the Zahir (215). One example of a fictitious secondary character is the historian Julius Barlach—the author of the German monograph (216-17). In conclusion, the creation or falsification of such texts constitutes a mixture of real and fictitious elements and of different levels of fiction.

The mixture of reality and fiction is also evident in the treatment of the concept of the Zahir. Although the word “Zahir” exists in Arabic, it is not a theme of folklore. Thus, the suggestion that the concept is based on legend is false. Another example is the explanation of its meaning. While there was indeed a medieval sect called the Zahirites, its beliefs—principally a strict literal interpretation of the Koran—conflict with the external interpretation suggested by Borges (Bell-Villada 215). Obviously, even though the narrator’s interpretive bases may seem realistic, they are actually false.

The use of intertextuality in “The Search for Averroes” is evident in the mixture of different levels of fiction (Stewart 321). One way in which Borges achieves this mixture is through the use of a narrator (Alazraki, *Contemporary* 47). While the majority of the story is narrated in the third person, it changes to the first person in the

epilogue. Here, Borges comments on Averroes’ inability to understand the work of Aristotle. In addition, he compares this with his own inability to comprehend Averroes and his historical context. His confession that Averroes’ disappearance is due to his own inability to imagine him implies that his story about Averroes is false. In a sense, Borges implies his own power as an author to create an image of the past and to manipulate and destroy the expectations of the reader. At the same time, he satirizes the attempts of historians to present the past in an objective manner.

Another element that suggests different levels of fiction is the commentary about other written and oral texts within the basic story. Such texts include “*Tahafut-ul-Tahafut* (Destruction of Destruction)” (Borges 582), “*Tahafut-ul-filasifa* (Destruction of Philosophers)” (582), the description of the perpetual rose by Ibn Qutaiba, the Koran, and the oral description of Abulcásim about his voyage to China (583-85). In addition to indicating another level of discourse, each reference suggests the subjectivity—and, thus, the fictitious aspect—of language.

In his own work—“*Tahafut-ul-Tahafut* (Destruction of Destruction)” (Borges 582)—Averroes contradicts another text by the Persian philosopher Algazali—“*Tahafut-ul-filasifa* (Destruction of philosophers)” (582)—indicating that “the divinity only knows the general laws of the universe, that which concerns the species, not the individual” (582). In this manner, he suggests the not only subjectivity of the work under criticism, but also that of all human works by token of not being divine. Later, the theologian Farach refers to the legendary commentary of Ibn Qutaiba about a perpetual rose in Indostan in whose petals is written the message: “There is no God but God; Muhammad is the

apostle of God" (583-84). At the level of the plot, this reference—and the implicit question to Abulcásim about his sighting of such a rose during his voyage—serve to trick him by forcing him to give a response that will show him to be either an impostor or an infidel. At the critical level, it questions the validity of two types of texts. One text, the profession of Islamic faith, has its origin in the Koran and thus represents the authentic and infallible quality of the Koran, which, according to Muslims, is a recitation of the word of God. The other text, the commentary on the perpetual rose by Ibn Qutaiba, while based on the religious concept of the omnipresence of God, is a human observation and, therefore, subjective. Averroes reiterates the theme of human subjectivity when he defends Abulcasim from his interrogator, saying "It is easier for me to admit an error by the learned Ibn Qutaiba, or by the copyists, than to admit that the earth produces roses with the profession of faith" (Borges 584). Here, Borges suggests that the perversion of a text's meaning may occur through oral or written transmission. He also satirizes the belief that the authenticity of a sacred text can be maintained through copying. In doing so, he implies the subjectivity of language and questions the blind faith typical of Averroes' era.

Another text that indicates the different levels of fiction is Abulcásim's description of the Chinese theater. It also demonstrates the manner in which human perception is limited by culture. Abulcasim's inability to recognize the building as a theater is evident in the description that he provides: "a house of painted wood, in which many people lived. It is impossible to describe what that house was like, which rather was a single room, with files of closets or balconies, one on top of another" (Borges 585). This

statement indicates that although the traveler acknowledges certain differences between this structure and the houses of his own country, he still does not recognize it as a theater. Although Albucaim suspects that the people in the building are presenting a story, his colleagues reject this interpretation because it conflicts with their own cultural traditions.

In conclusion, intertextuality serves to diminish the distinctions between different types and levels of discourse. Moreover, all texts, regardless of their traditional categorization as authentic or fictitious, are considered subjective by token of being human works. Some of the themes associated with intertextuality—the search, the infinitive regress and the act of creating or evaluating other texts—suggest a constant change of perspective not only for characters, but also for readers. In doing so, they imply the lack of a fixed point of reference.

The lack of a fixed point of reference is a central theme in Borges' thought. It questions the authenticity of interpretive systems—such a history, philosophy, religion—and presents them as aesthetic works (Alazraki, *Contemporary* 45). As a result, it destroys the complacent perspective of order and meaning in the world and implies an ontological uncertainty. Borges achieves this in several ways. One example is the use of paradox. While present at the textual level with the use of contradictory images and ideas, it is also present at the meta-textual level in regard to the meanings and functions of the stories themselves (Gallagher 25). Another element that reiterates the lack of a fixed point of reference is the view of the world as a series of interconnected codes, each of which derives its meaning from other codes in an infinite regress (Ulmer 850). This suggests that no idea is totally irreducible or objective. In

any case, the representation of multiple points of view and the subversion of established traditions contribute to the sense of ontological uncertainty (Gonzalez 7).

Such an uncertainty is evident in "The Search for Almotasim." It is first implied by the dilemma regarding the work's function as a story or as a critical study. In the novel that it analyzes, the protagonist is a student of law in Bombay who departs from the Islamic faith of his family and proceeds to search for another means of explaining his existence. Two examples of uncertainty regarding the protagonist are his lack of a name and his act of apostasy—which according to Islam is a crime punishable by death. Another element that reiterates the theme of uncertainty is the civil turmoil between Muslims and Hindus in which the protagonist becomes involved. This event, summarized by the narrator as "God the indivisible against the Gods" (Borges 415), implies a theological conflict between monotheism and polytheism. After fleeing from the battle, the protagonist begins a voyage through different regions of India in search of the legendary figure Almotasim. In doing so, he begins an epistemological search that indicates his own uncertainty and his desire to overcome it.

Over time, the protagonist meets different people through which he supposedly increases the influence of Almotasim in his life (Van Hee 63). When he finally meets Almotasim—whose name means "seeker of shelter"—the protagonist discovers that Almotasim is also searching for someone. Furthermore, the mutual objective of both characters reinforces the infinite nature of the search and, thus, implies the impossibility of its fulfillment. In a similar manner, the numerous postponements during the protagonist's voyage question the efficacy of his efforts.

They also suggest that reincarnation may be a necessary aspect of the search for shelter (Barrenchea 38).

The idea of an infinite search is related to epistemology. All areas associated with this broad topic—such as philosophy, literary criticism, literature and language—focus on the search for or the transfer of meaning. In each area, all the concepts derive their meanings from other concepts. Furthermore, the meaning of a concept changes as a result of its transfer from one temporal, cultural or linguistic context to another. With this in mind, the transformations that result from the protagonist's reincarnation could symbolize the changes in meaning that occur to words, concepts, legends or books as a consequence of translation or interpretation (Alazraki, *Twentieth* 21). Reciprocally, the transmigration of the soul that accompanies this spiritual process parallels the repetition of old schemes in new texts (Stabb 54). This idea is reinforced by the suggestion that the fictitious novel is based on the story, "The Colloquy of the Birds." Overall, the cyclical interdependence of these phenomena suggests an infinite regress and reinforces the idea of ontological uncertainty (Bell-Villada 66).

The lack of a fixed point of reference plays an important role in "The Zahir." Aside from communicating its own meaning of "visible," "tangible" and "notorious" (Wilson 39), the mention of the Zahir suggests other ideas as well. One of these is the concept of "Batin" which signifies the invisible and the intangible according to Islamic philosophy and, thus, constitutes the opposite of "Zahir." Although both concepts—Zahir and Batin—pertain to the same cultural tradition, they imply different perceptions of the universe (Núñez-Faraco 116). Another concept suggested by the Zahir is "Aleph," which, according to the

Jewish cabbalistic tradition, signifies the total and simultaneous knowledge of the universe. Therefore, the implicit conflict between Zahir and Aleph corresponds with the philosophical conflict between the particular and the general (Alazraki, *Contemporary* 45). Moreover, phenomenal reality corresponds with the concept of Zahir while transcendent reality corresponds with the concepts of Batin and Aleph (Sierra 75). These oppositions demonstrate the association between a concept and its anti-concept and reiterate the lack of a fixed point of reference (Spivakovsky 224).

In “The Search for Averroes,” the lack of a fixed point of reference is evident in the treatment of perspective, the infinite regress, and the relation between reality and fiction. Given that each of these three themes implies multiple points of view, their treatment questions the validity of these points of view. Overall, they suggest an ontological uncertainty that questions the authenticity of different epistemological systems.

The use of perspective in this story can be seen in various failed attempts to comprehend conditions and events in unfamiliar settings. In each case, this failure is due to the cultural, temporal and linguistic differences between the observers and the contexts that they observe. Furthermore, it implies their lack of authenticity. In addition to implying the subjectivity of history through his attempts to recreate Averroes, Borges also objectifies fiction. By placing the historical figure of Averroes in a context with other fictitious characters, Borges gives the impression that all of them are authentic. Nevertheless, when the end of Borges’ dream causes Averroes’ disappearance, he effectively returns Averroes as well as all other characters in the dream—both authentic and fictitious—to the realm of

fiction (Alazraki, *Contemporary* 47).

Another example of the use of perspective is Borges’ treatment of divine knowledge. While the philosopher Algazali—whose work is criticized by Averroes—supports the idea that God is omniscient, Averroes sustains that God only knows the general laws of the universe and not the laws that pertain to the individual. This dilemma implies two different perceptions of God. The lack of divine omniscience suggested by Averroes parallels the ignorance of Borges, whose inability to completely imagine Averroes and his world ultimately leads to the end of his dream (Borges 587). However, if the ability to dream and create depends on total knowledge, as Borges implies in his final commentary, the non-omniscient divinity postulated by Averroes would be impossible.

The infinite regress is another theme that corresponds with the lack of fixed point of reference. It implies constant change in all entities, and thus the impermanence and the triviality of their forms. In this manner, it implies an interdependence of the meanings of different entities, and thus their collective subjectivity. One example of this is the idea that each author creates his own predecessors (Spivakovsky 226). Although Borges recognizes Averroes as his own predecessor, he effectively creates him anew through his story. Averroes does the same through his portrayal of the characters and theories of Algazali and Aristotle in his own critical studies. By presenting these scenarios, Borges questions the veracity of history and of perceptions of reality in general (Alazraki, *Contemporary* 47).

While the previous examples suggest the superiority of the creator, there is another perspective that purports the superiority of that which is created. According to this point

of view, a person's identity is based on his creations. This idea is suggested in the story when Averroes disappears upon realizing his inability to recreate the world of Aristotle. Although this theory does not account for Borges' survival after his own creative failure, it does imply a degree of dependence on the part of authors and, thus an uncertainty of the true hierarchy between a creator and his work. Moreover, it suggests an infinite regress because it demonstrates that both people—Averroes and Borges—depend on each other in order to exist (Stark, *Literature* 55). Borges acknowledges just such an infinite regress in the following quotation: "I felt on the last page, that my narration was a symbol of the man that I was, while I wrote it and that, to edit this narration, I had to be that man, I had to edit that narration, and so on until infinity" (Borges 588). Although the author never clearly indicates the hierarchy of this cycle, he suggests that each entity has a connection with universal history, which is presented as an infinite series of causes and effects (Alazraki, *Contemporary* 47).

In these three stories, Borges questions the bases and limits of reality and the validity of the systems that serve to explain it. He satirizes various means of communication and thought such as language, fiction, history, philosophy and religion, all of which are elements in the ongoing dialogue of humanity. He sustains that each entity derives its meaning from other entities and therefore, lacks a permanent or intrinsic meaning of its own. In addition, he indicates that the ideas in any system are influenced by its context. Furthermore, he proposes that the transmissibility of the ideas is impeded by linguistic, cultural and temporal limits. By showing the ubiquitous yet imperfect nature of dialogues between different groups of people and their

contexts, Borges demonstrates both their importance and their limitations in the development of human thought and civilization. Moreover, by explaining and demonstrating the interdependence of fiction, literary criticism and philosophy, he implies the subjectivity and uncertainty of each. In conclusion, he does not propose any resolution to the ontological uncertainty; on the contrary he suggests its impossibility.

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