

THE ESSENTIAL BORGES

by Donald McGrady and Henry Wise, Jr.

Well known to the readers of Jorge Luis Borges are his penchants for brevity, density, and the treatment of a few basic themes in a variety of shapes. Equally notorious is Borges' contention that every man is Everyman, a premise which rules out all possible originality in writing, for all ideas are merely echoes from earlier minds. Given this context, it appears desirable -- perhaps inevitable -- to write a cryptic essay on Borges' metaphysics, an essay perforce free of the burden of scholarly apparatus, for, since all ideas lack originality, to attribute them to certain individuals is to commit a deplorable act of pedantry.

It is quite clear, despite the considerable bibliography on the subject, that the basic image in Borges is that of the Labyrinth, which stands as a metaphor of life. Almost equally frequent in his writing is the motif of the Eternal Return. In point of fact, these two themes constitute differing expressions of a single unity, for the Labyrinth is to Space as the Eternal Return is to Time. Both the Labyrinth and the Eternal Return are circles (unending spirals) with neither starting point nor destination, where the navigator ever remains lost in a continuum. Time does not exist because man makes no progress in his circle; he realizes no new acts, merely repeating the same thoughts and actions of his forbears. Likewise, true space does not exist, because identical circumstances surround the same persons (Person) everywhere.

Since every man winds through a single labyrinth in the same eternal present, all men are identical. No traits of individual personality are

possible, because all men simply repeat the gestures of their ancestors -- the entire human race -- who, after all, were only former incarnations of the present individual. In other words, every man is One Man. Consequently, human events are not important in themselves, but for their topicality. Man wanders forever

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lost in the coincidental orbs of Time and Space; he holds no hope for redemption from his vicious circle, for, unlike the noble Athenian, he possesses no clue to find his way out.

In a word, then, the Labyrinth and the Eternal Return are identical expressions of the same unity: both are circular, have no beginning and lead nowhere; combined, they impede any individual characteristics in man, making all his acts repetitions of (his own) previous actions. Additionally, the Labyrinth and the Eternal Return intersect so as to form a single sphere -- the kabbalistic Aleph, the single point which contains all the other points in Time and Space.

Thus far the cardinal premises;

several corollaries are implied. A continually recurring image in Borges is that of the mirror: emphasizing the repetition of the universe, in man it stands for the Double, that reincarnation which occurs simultaneously in two individuals (reincarnations normally appear at different points on the circle of Eternal Time, but when two appear at the same moment, they form a man and his double). Another thematic corollary is that of hubris and its castigation: overweening pride results from a cult of the individual, from presuming uniqueness of personality -- a lamentable display of ignorance to Jedermann.

Additional corollaries could be added, but they would only echo the unity of the Labyrinth, the Eternal Return, Everyman, and the Aleph.



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