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Subjectivity

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BORGES AND LEVINAS FACE-TO-FACE: WRITING AND  
THE RIDDLE OF SUBJECTIVITY

**Abstract.** Borges asserts that every writer simultaneously inscribes the particular line he is writing and creates an image of himself. How does writing that re-creates the author's image work? What is the "Otherness" that erupts from the depths of subjectivity? These questions are examined in relation to Levinas's discussion of the rupture of the logic of identity within paternal relations and subjectivity's transformation into a paradoxical "trans-substantiality"—split into the same and Other. Borges, following an examination of the images of Shakespeare and Whitman, suggests that the dialectic of birth and alterity occurs within subjectivity, in an introvertive move in which the Other emerges during the event of the act of writing.

ONE FINE DAY, HERMANN Sörgel receives the complete memory of William Shakespeare. A scholar who has devoted his life to studying the bard's works, the professor understands that he has been given a priceless treasure. With the key to understanding the poet's consciousness in his hand, he will be able to perfectly interpret all his writings. Gradually, Shakespeare's memories are being absorbed into his mind. He is surprised to realize, however, that possession of the bard's memory has only given him access to a "chaos of vague possibilities." At this point, he begins to grasp that he still cannot decipher the enigma of Shakespeare's luminous oeuvre, the poet's memory revealing only the "circumstances of the *man* Shakespeare. Clearly, these circumstances do not constitute the uniqueness of the poet." To his dismay, he also gradually finds that Shakespeare's memory is infiltrating his own and

that he must now bear the burden of two memories intertwined with each other. Personal identity being based on memory, he fears lest he will lose his sanity. In his alarm, he seeks to resume being Hermann Sörgel. Finally, he conveys Shakespeare's memory to another person via an anonymous telephone call.<sup>1</sup>

Borges wrote "Shakespeare's Memory" (1982) in his old age, interweaving into the tale (as was his wont) weighty philosophical questions such as the formation of subjective identity on the basis of memory and the possibility of deciphering literary works via their author's biography. These two issues are connected by means of a third—fantastical—link in the chain: the invasion of external otherness into the depths of subjectivity. The three themes—the status of subjectivity, the enigma of artistic creation, and the rupture of the logic of identity—recur in diverse variations throughout his multifaceted works. The philosophical examination of the breaching of subjective identity by external alterity immediately brings Emmanuel Levinas to mind. Following the latter, I shall call this phenomenon "trans-substantiality"—the paradoxical structure (stretching this term to its virtual breaking point) in which subjectivity maintains the strange state of multiplicity-within-identity, within which "being is produced as multiple and as split into same and other."<sup>2</sup>

As I shall seek to demonstrate, Borges takes the principle of trans-substantiality and applies it in his own distinctive and independent fashion to the context of literary creativity, in a certain sense presenting a surprising possibility that may herald the collapse of the entire Levinasian model. Levinas's trans-substantial model of identity nonetheless constitutes an excellent observation post from which one can attempt to elucidate the notion of subjectivity in its relation to literary creation in Borges's worldview. We must thus place Borges's and Levinas's texts in a Levinasian "face-to-face" relation in which their mutuality preserves inexhaustible distance.

As is well known, Levinas attacks the Western ideal of the panoramic, comprehensive, all-encompassing gaze, regarding it as a form of violence in the service of "ontological imperialism."<sup>3</sup> Begging his leave, I shall first attempt to provide a panoramic review of the development of Levinas's idea of trans-substantial subjectivity, focusing on its lucid exposition in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). In the wake of Bergson, Levinas's philosophy may be said to be reducible to a single point centering on the *autre*—the concrete other in his contact with the I—and, more generally, *alterité*, the "otherness of the other." These form the basis of his metaphysical ethics. In his preface to his magnum opus, which welds his early

philosophic writings into a fully wrought system of thought, Levinas defines the relation of the I to the other thus:

The other metaphysically desired is not “other” like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate, like, sometimes, myself for myself, this “I,” that “other.” I can “feed” on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their alterity is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*. (*TI*, p. 33; emphasis in original)

The metaphysical desire that cannot be satisfied or internalized is the eternal movement of the I toward the absolute Other, toward that which is inexorably exterior to the self. Heralding the breaking through of the impersonal totality that encompasses the identical-self subject, this move forms the basis for Levinas’s consideration of ethics as “first philosophy,” representing the infinite desire for the Other. Levinas argues that the identification between Being, thought, and identity that has constituted the metanarrative or metaparadigm of Western philosophy is an “ontological imperialism” that began with Parmenides and came to a peak in Heideggerian philosophy (despite Heidegger’s own claim that Western philosophy is pervaded by the “oblivion of Being”).<sup>4</sup> Being equaling thinking, according to this view, it results in a hermetic entity that Levinas calls *totalité*—evidenced par excellence in Hegel’s phenomenology, in which “self-consciousness is the distinguishing of what is not distinct, [which] expresses the universality of the same identifying itself in the alterity of the other” (*TI*, p. 36).

According to Levinas, Western philosophy “has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being” (*TI*, p. 43). His attempt to escape the ontological tyranny of Being in its menacing anonymity and violent totality is evident in his first philosophical treatise, *De l'évasion* (1935). In *Existence and Existents* (1947)—largely written while he was in a German prisoner-of-war camp—Levinas takes Heidegger’s *es gibt* to task, exposing the latter’s “bountiful and generous” Being to be an impersonal and menacing encompassing of *il y a*—“the anonymous and senseless rumbling of being” (*EL*, p. 52).<sup>5</sup> Here we find the crux of Levinas’s philosophy—namely, the claim that the impersonal expanse of anonymous Being must be replaced by a disinterested recognition of the Other. Responsibility for the Other releases the subject

from the solitariness of Being. Ethics—or, more accurately, ethical metaphysics—thus precedes ontology as first philosophy (*EI*, pp. 95–101).

In order to elucidate this turning point, Levinas subjects the self's relations with the Other to a phenomenological analysis, eschewing psychological and sociological perspectives while maintaining ontological language, because "psychological 'accidents' are the ways in which ontological relations show themselves" (*EI*, p. 70). Levinas's phenomenological Other gives rise to the presence of the transcendental—the "absolute Other" who appears within temporality when the subject places himself in the service of another person and thereby "testifies" to the infinite. Here, transcendental divinity resumes its place at the center of the philosophical discussion: "The intelligibility of transcendence is not something ontological. The transcendence of God cannot be stated or conceived in terms of being, the element of philosophy behind which philosophy sees only night."<sup>6</sup> The ideal of the autarchic—and what Levinas calls "atheistic"—identical self thus gives way to a relationship in which the self turns to the Other who stands in front of him/her at an irreducible distance. This is the "face-to-face" relationship in which the wonder of the "breach of totality" takes place (*TI*, p. 35).

Levinas's goal is neither to subjugate subjectivity to Being or an anonymous principle à la Heidegger nor to create an abstract, pure subject à la Husserl. In his dissociation from his two great teachers at Freiburg, Levinas defines subjectivity as that which is always in a relationship with the Other, thereby attesting to the transcendental. Aware of the weight of the almost paradoxical task of preserving subjectivity in an open and relational system that differs from totality, Levinas sketches the outlines of the solution he proposes in *Totality and Infinity*:

We have sought outside of [Husserlian] consciousness and [Heideggerian] power for a notion of being founding transcendence. The acuity of the problem lies in the necessity of maintaining the I in the transcendence with which it hitherto seemed incompatible. Is the subject only a subject of knowings and powers? Does it not present itself as a subject in another sense? The relation sought, which qua subject it supports, and which at the same time satisfies these contradictory exigencies, seemed to us to be inscribed in the erotic relation. (*TI*, p. 276)

Following in the footsteps of his teachers, Levinas subjects the existence of the subject in the world to a phenomenological analysis. The point of origin is the "atheistic" subject anchored in the totality of its

selfness that delights in itself, existing autarchically and contentedly as one of the epicurean gods. This self-satisfaction and self-immersion takes place in the protected and closed space of the house, in a snail-like “stationing” that preserves subjectivity from its environment. Here, the subject exhibits a natural tendency toward perpetuity in its essential existence—in the warmth of Spinoza’s *conatus essendi*. In the protected space of the home, however, monadic subjectivity encounters the woman.

The erotic relationship between them constitutes a form of “intimacy, dual solitude, closed society, the supremely non-public” (*TI*, p. 265). In its depths, the subject discovers femininity to be the embodiment of complete alterity—“a flight before the light . . . hiding” (*EI*, p. 67). In the intimacies of the erotic caress, the full force of the infinite distance of the Other now emerges: “The caress does not act, does not grasp possibilities. The secret it forces does not inform it as an experience” (*TI*, p. 259). As a result, the totality that bears the relationships of the I with itself and with the erotic, non-I other, is broken: “An amorphous non-I sweeps away the I into an absolute future” (*TI*, p. 259). This future is the son created from the erotic fecundity. In the “father-son” relationship that burgeons, self-existent monadic subjectivity transforms from a pupa into a butterfly, as it were; fertility thus turning the monadic self into a subjectivity that maintains a unique relationship with the other that is the I—the son. Hereby, a new logic of identity is created within the depths of subjectivity itself that differs from ontological totality.

In order to understand Levinas’s bold move in its full depth, let us survey the three alternative models of Western subjectivity as sharply depicted in the last part of *Totality and Infinity*: the “self-identical” model that has ruled Western philosophic thought since Parmenides, Heidegger’s “indetermination of the possible” model, and the paradoxical model of “existing infinitely” that is realized as the father-son relationship in Levinas’s thought. These will then serve as prime coordinators for examining Borges’s narratival subjectivity.

At the base of the self-identical model lies the Parmenidean logical framework, grounded in the indivisible link between the “One” and “Being”: “Being qua being is for us monadic. Pluralism appears in Western philosophy only as a plurality of subjects that exist. . . . Unity alone is ontologically privileged” (*TI*, p. 274). Identity is similarly monadically ontological: “The I . . . is the being whose existing exists in identifying itself, recovering its identity, throughout all that happens to it. It is the primal identity, the primordial work of identification. The I is identical in its very alterations” (p. 36). The pinnacle of self-identical

subjectivity finds its expression in the Hegelian dialectic, wherein the identical identifies itself through—or behind—the alterity of the objects given to its thought. As Hegel puts it, “This which is distinguished, which is set up as unlike me, is immediately on its being distinguished no distinction from me” (*TI*, p. 36).<sup>7</sup>

The experiences of the subject being none other than the expressions of the indestructible identity between the I and the self, Levinas asserts that: “The alterity of the I that takes itself for another may strike the imagination of the poet precisely because it is but the play of the same: the negation of the I by the self is precisely one of the modes of identification of the I” (*TI*, p. 37). The Greek Odysseus serves Levinas as the symbol of this self-identical subjectivity: despite all his wanderings, he always returns home to himself.<sup>8</sup> This circularity represents for Levinas the “tragic egoity” to which the curse of the goddess of fate condemns human existence under the iron sky of deterministic inevitability.

The second model Levinas presents is Heidegger’s concept of the possible, which challenges the first. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests that existence be defined in terms of possibility—or, more accurately, as that which enables both the possibly real and the really possible. In bold defiance of Greek ontology and its celebration of essentialist reality, Heidegger perceives Being as a “possibilization” (*Ermöglichung*) that precedes all possibility and Being. Being is thus both what differs from reality and its possibilities and that which allows them—“the quiet force of the possible.”<sup>9</sup> The differentiation of Being as possibilization is the prerequisite for all reality or the possibility of concrete beings, creating existence within time: “When I speak of the ‘quiet power of the possible’ . . . I mean Being itself, which in its favoring [*mögen*] presides over thinking and hence over the essence of humanity, and that means over its relation to Being.”<sup>10</sup> In *Being and Time*, he describes the subject—the *Dasein*—in terms of potentiality-to-be (*seinkönnen*), or an “open” existence formed as perpetual opening up to the future.

Levinas subjects Heidegger’s claim to have provided an alternative to the erroneous Greek-Western ontological tradition to a searching critique:

In articulating existing as time rather than congealing it in the permanence of the stable the [Heideggerian] philosophy of becoming seeks to disengage itself from the category of the one, which compromises transcendence. The upsurge or the projection of the future transcends—not by knowledge only, but by the very existing of being. Existing is freed

from the unity of the existant [*sic*]. . . . This separation of Being and the One is obtained by the rehabilitation of the possible. No longer backed up by the unity of the Aristotelian act, possibility harbors the very multiplicity of its dynamism, hitherto indigent alongside of the act accomplished, henceforth richer than it. But the possible is immediately inverted into Power and Domination. In the new that springs from it the subject recognizes himself. He finds himself again in it, masters it. His freedom writes his history which is one; his projects delineate a fate of which he is master and slave. An existant [*sic*] remains the principle of the transcendence of power. A man thirsting for power, aspiring to its divinization, and consequently destined to solitude, appears at the term of this transcendence. (*TI*, p. 275)

Levinas thus argues that Heidegger's model of possibilization is governed by the same Parmenidean logic of identity it sought to replace. The journey is merely circuitous, freedom deteriorating into power in the service of the subject's will-to-power. Possibility is nothing other than that of the subject. Identifying this as "the indetermination of the possible," Levinas maintains that it "does not exclude the *reiteration* of the I, which in venturing toward this indeterminate future falls back on its feet, riveted to itself, acknowledges its transcendence to be merely illusory its freedom to delineate but a fate. *The diverse forms Proteus assumes do not liberate him from his identity*" (*TI*, p. 268; emphasis added).<sup>11</sup>

Levinas then sets out his own challenge to the Parmenidean logic of identity, establishing a paradoxical form of subjectivity that he calls "trans-substantial." As we observed above, this model emerges out of the erotic relationship in which femininity employs fecundity in giving birth to the son. But is the son not simply one of my possibilities or is he not the other that is not I—two poles that return us to the circular ethics of totality and fate? Levinas adduces here the Greek myth of Gyges, whose ring allows him to see without being seen, to argue that the autarchic existence of the self in and of itself is an illusion. It is only when the erotic relationship with femininity engages the self with fecundity and sets it before the birth of the son that the self escapes its tragic fate, Levinas argues, because the son is *the I who is foreign to the self*.

This is a strange situation. On the one hand, the father's subjectivity does not dissipate with his son's materialization but remains in its self-identity. On the other, within this identity, the son emerges as the other-who-is-I: "it is the child, mine in a certain sense or, more exactly, me, but not myself; it does not fall back upon my past to fuse with it and delineate a fate" (*TI*, pp. 271–72). In paternity, the identity of the



subject thus assumes a new logical form in which it is both itself (as the father) and not itself (as the father of the son). The self is other than itself by remaining itself.

This conception radicalizes the logic of the unitary identity Parmenides established in asserting, “It is to be, but nothing it is not” (fr. B6). The father’s possession of the son does not exhaust all the relationships between them, the son being both him and not-him: “I do not have my child; I *am* my child. Paternity is a relationship with a stranger who while being Other . . . *is* me, a relation of the self with a self which is yet not me” (*TI*, p. 277; emphasis in original).

Paternity thus holds within it the difference of the same. The principle of the unitary identity ( $A = A$ ) collapses, to be replaced by a transcendence that appears within subjectivity itself—in the form of the other who is also me. Hereby, the autarchic, “atheistic” subjectivity that sees without being seen dissolves, giving way from within the relation of the self to its nonself to a mode of existence that Levinas calls “being infinitely.” In paternity, subjectivity is thus “produced as multiple and as split into same and other; this is its ultimate structure. It is society, and hence it is time. We thus leave the philosophy of Parmenidean being” (*TI*, p. 269). This rupture of the principle of identity that constitutes a “farewell to Parmenides” finally frees the subject from totality and fate alike, multiplicity and transcendence burgeoning forth from within the depth of subjectivity:

Fecundity is part of the very drama of the I. The intersubjective reached across the notion of fecundity opens up a plane where the I is divested of its tragic egoity, which turns back to itself, and yet is not purely and simply dissolved into the collective. Fecundity evinces a unity that is not opposed to multiplicity, but, in the precise sense of the term, engenders it. (*TI*, p. 273)

Fecundity thus constitutes a new, artificial ontological category in which unity is simultaneously multiplicity. First and foremost, it represents the collapse of the principle of totality and the breaking through of the infinite, the transcendence. Second, it forms a paradoxical—perhaps mythological—form of subjectivity in which the subject is at the same time also the other-than-self. Not being merely a biological matter, paternity thus serves as a prime example of the general model of identity that is split into identical and other in its relation to the Other.<sup>12</sup> Third, it addresses the problem of time. Paternity—the way

to be oneself and another at one and the same time—has nothing in common with mutation within time. Unlike Proteus—who changes his form but remains himself—paternity diverges from being and thus also from time. Precisely because the father dies and the son differs in a future that is no longer his father's, a type of interrupted sequence is created that overcomes the finality of Heideggerian existence as a “being-toward-death” (*Sein-zum-Tode*). In place of the tragic egoity that perpetually returns to itself in the absolute horizon of death, a new, multiact drama now emerges:

There must be a rupture of continuity—and continuation across this rupture. The essential in time consists in being a drama, a multiplicity of acts where the following act resolves the prior one. Being is no longer produced at one blow, irremissibly present. Reality is what it is, but will be once again, another time freely resumed and pardoned. Infinite being is produced as times, that is, in several times across the dead time that separates the father from the son. It is not the finitude of being that constitutes the essence of time, as Heidegger thinks, but its infinity. . . . Death and resurrection constitute time. But such a formal structure presupposes the relation of the I with the Other and, at its basis, fecundity across the discontinuous which constitutes time. (*TI*, p. 284)

These three components—the new logic of identity based upon self-multiplicity; the selfness of paternity in which the transcendent, the not-self-in-the-self, emerges in the depths of the I; and the infinite time that forms in the broken continuity of death and birth—constitute the Levinasian model of identity that confronts tragic totality as a trans-substantial subjectivity.

To summarize, the three models are:

(1) identical-self subjectivity, in which the identical identifies itself through otherness, thereby annulling the latter, in line with the Parmenidean logic of self-identical identity. Everything that was differentiated and different is assimilated into the one self through the all-encompassing unity of thought. The symbol of this subjectivity for Levinas is Gyges, possessor of the ring that allows him to see without being seen.

(2) The Heideggerian subjectivity of the “indetermination of the possible,” in which the subject forms itself in time in relation to Being—the “quiet force of the possible” that constitutes the very “possibilization” of all possibility. While this subjectivity does not comprise actual, permanent, self-identical existence but a range of possibilities always open

to the future, Levinas argues that possibility inevitably becomes power, the subject returning and identifying itself in it. Proteus serves as the symbol of this model in Levinas's thought—the creature who changes its form but not its being. The symbol common to both these model is thus Odysseus, who perpetually returns to himself at the end of his wanderings.

(3) Levinas's scheme, in which trans-substantial subjectivity emerges from the erotic in the father-son relation, the son being the Other who is also the I. The self also being the other-for-itself in paternity, difference occurs within identity, transcendence thereby replacing totality. Existence is transformed from tragic egoism into "being infinitely" in the continuity of the chain of descendants across time.<sup>13</sup>

Armed with these models of subjective identity, we can now turn the spotlight onto Borges. Can subjectivity or personal identity in Borges's writings be the subject of a serious discussion? In his essay "On the Nothingness of Personality" (1922), Borges appears to take an uncompromisingly nihilistic attitude toward this issue in his reading of Buddhist works, Schopenhauer, Berkeley, and David Hume. He announces his intention right from the outset: "I propose to prove that personality is a mirage maintained by conceit and custom, without a metaphysical foundation of visceral reality."<sup>14</sup> In "A New Refutation of Time" (1947) he thus starts off by rebutting the I in Hume's philosophy, to which he adds the possibility of refuting linear time. He concludes his discussion, however, with the following statement:

*And yet, and yet. . . Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. 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. 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.*<sup>15</sup>

It is more accurate to say that the question of subjectivity troubles Borges throughout his works, time receiving a central place in every treatment of it, as this quote reflects. Despite his not seeking to propound a systematic theory of time and subjectivity, Borges's writings nonetheless present us with a significant idea in this relation, exemplified in his essay "Time" (1978). He adduces here one of his favorite metaphors—life as a river—quoting the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus's dictum, "No

man ever steps in the same river twice.” The beauty of this metaphor prompts him to ponder human identity:

We are always like Heraclitus watching himself reflected in the river and thinking that the river is not the same because its water flow and that he is not the same Heraclitus because he had been so many people since he saw himself in the river the last time. *The meaning of this is that we are something that changes and something permanent. We are essentially something mysterious. . . .* This is a problem we have never been able to solve: the problem of identity subject to changes. Perhaps the word “change” is sufficient. Because if we speak of a change in something, we are not saying that it has been replaced by something else. . . . The intention is that this is the idea of the permanent within the transient.<sup>16</sup>

According to Borges, time forms the central problem of metaphysics and personal identity precisely because existence within it creates the mysterious structure of being that is simultaneously identical to and different from itself. The tension of time-bound subjectivity thus lies in the dialectic of permanence and transience. As is his wont, Borges treats these irresolvable philosophical conundrums via the spinning of fantastical stories in a type of thought experiment (*Gedankenexperiment*). Is the subjectivity he portrays herein consistent with the linear models I have sketched above?

One of Borges’s most prominent treatments of the issue of the continuity of identity over time, in all its mysteriousness, appears in “The Other” (1975). In February 1969, Borges sits on a bench by the banks of the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The flowing water inevitably prompts him to think of “time . . . Heraclitus’ ancient image” (*CF*, p. 411). A young stranger sits down on the bench next to Borges, one whose voice, when they strike up a conversation, Borges uncannily recognizes as his own. Learning that he is living at Borges’s old address in Geneva, Borges turns to him and says, “In that case, your name is Jorge Luis Borges. I too am Jorge Luis Borges. We are in 1969, in the city of Cambridge.” The younger man demurs: “‘No,’ he answered in my own, slightly distant, voice, ‘I am here in Geneva, on a bench, a few steps from the Rhône.’ Then, after a moment, he goes on: ‘It is odd that we look so much alike, but you are much older than I, and you have gray hair.’” The two engage in a lively and perplexing debate, the old Borges sharing details of his past with the younger figure, for whom they still lie in the future. The dialogue quickly comes to a halt, however, the old Borges understanding his predicament:

A half century does not pass without leaving its mark. Beneath our conversation, the conversation of two men of miscellaneous reading and diverse tastes, I realized that we would not find common ground. We were too different, yet too alike. We could not deceive one another, and that makes conversation hard. Each of us was almost a caricature of the other. . . . There was no point in giving advice, no point in arguing, because the young man's inevitable fate was to be the man that I am now. (*CF*, p. 416)

The two part without touching or seeing each other again.

Let us examine this unusual situation. Borges creates here what Douglas Hofstadter calls a "strange loop"—a hierarchical movement that in fact transpires to be circular. "Wrinkling" linear time, Borges sets forth a certain point in the future that touches a certain point in the past, the present-past thus becoming a circular loop. In parallel, Borges as an old man meets himself as a young man—a subjective representation of the ouroboros, the mythical snake that eats its own tail. The strange loop in time is reflected in the strange loop of subjectivity, a person meeting himself—or, more accurately, his double.

The double forms one of the motifs that captured Borges's imagination, recurring frequently in his stories, for example, "The Theologians," "Deutsches Requiem," and "The Other Death." In our story, the identical meets his double in the split logic of the strange loop. In an afterword to this story, Borges thus notes, "My task was to come to a point where the protagonists were sufficiently different to be two people but sufficiently similar to be the same person" (*CF*, p. 484).

From a Levinasian perspective, two key questions arise here: is this indeed a meeting of the alterity of "The Other"—as the title suggests—and does subjectivity actually split in this case? Borges is certainly not describing a face-to-face encounter with the Other here because no essential distance exists between the two: the old Borges knows everything about his younger double, his views sounding weird and wonderful to the other. What Borges gives his double is no more than information about his ineluctable future. Dialogue (in the Levinasian sense of the term) thus being impossible, subjectivity is not placed here in the presence of transcendent alterity. In fact, the drama takes place wholly within the closed iron circle of subjectivity immersed within itself—a relation Levinas calls "allergic" (in the Greek etymological sense of *allos* and *ergon*, meaning that the Other has no effect on the subject's thought) because it negates the alterity of the other.<sup>17</sup> From a Levinasian perspective, the encounter in its entirety is thus nothing other than a drama

on the stage of “tragic egoity”—another twist in the circle of fate in its anonymous and unforgiving inevitability.

The second question elucidates itself. Despite the strange loop, there is no real splitting of subjectivity but rather an accommodation to the Parmenidean self-identical model. The encounter between the self and its double is none other than a presentation of—to put it in Levinas’s words—an “I profiling itself behind the I; . . . the presence behind the I of a foreign principle which is not necessarily opposed to the I, but which can assume this enemy demeanor” (*TI*, p. 272). The meeting with the double is therefore nothing other than another trick of the Parmenidean logic of identity that ultimately presents the “unrendable identity of the I and the self . . . : the negation of the I by the self is [thus] precisely one of the modes of identification of the I” (p. 37).

The divergence from the self-identical thus transpires not to be embedded in the Borgesian doppelgänger. While the latter creates the paradoxical situation of double identity, thus producing the disturbing, fantastic effect of the text, it does not break the mold of the self-identical. On the contrary, this principle takes on grotesque proportions. In fact, in Borges’s work the “breach” only occurs during the course of the act of literary creation. This brings us back—as we shall see below—to Shakespeare.

In relation to Levinas’s attitude to literary writing, we may perhaps first note that he exhibits a rather critical stance toward art and literature, like Plato tending to measure their value on a rigid scale of radical ethics. In an early essay, “Reality and Its Shadow” (1948), he raises Platonic objections to the literary endeavor, arguing that it constitutes a game of shadows and images that distances human beings from objects. He then proceeds to posit that art blunts the artist’s sense of responsibility toward the Other, enclosing him/her within the sterile circle of a subjectivity that gazes at itself.<sup>18</sup> Levinas thus subjects literature and art to the criterion of ethical evaluation—a view Borges, of course, totally rejects.

Borges’s zealous devotion to the absolute autonomy of literary writing is epitomized in his assertion, “The craft [of verse] is mysterious; our opinions are ephemeral” (*CF*, p. 346). The two thinkers thus fiercely contend the status of literary endeavors. If, for a moment, we allow ourselves to distinguish between the various parts of Levinas’s thought—the clock from the cuckoo, as it were—we can attempt to examine Borges’s attitude in light of Levinas’s subjective schematics discussed above, in the context of the mutual relations between subjectivity, alterity, and writing. These may serve us here as means of elucidating the nuances

of the status Borges attributes to subjectivity while engaging in the act of writing.

In his memoirs, Borges recounts a strange and amusing anecdote about his joint writing with his close friend Bioy Casares. During the 1940s, the two collaborated from time to time under the pen name Honorio Bustos Domeq—an anagram of their fathers' names. Domeq is much more than a pseudonym, however. In an interview, Borges described him as an independent entity that arose from the writing partnership and became his own writer: “[Domeq was] a fantastic author with his likes and dislikes, and a personal style that is meant to be ridiculous; but still, it is a style of his own, quite different from the kind of style I write when I try to create ridiculous characters.”<sup>19</sup> Thereafter, in his autobiographical essay, he accentuates Domeq's individuality and independence: “In the long run, he ruled us with a rod of iron and to our amusement, and later to our dismay, he became utterly unlike ourselves, with his own whims, his own puns, and his own very elaborate style of writing.”<sup>20</sup>

Borges and Casares eventually understood that they had no recourse but to put the autonomy-seeking character out of existence and end their literary collaboration. Like the Maharal of Prague, Domeq grew out of the act of writing, turning his chaotic powers upon his creators in protest against being the mere product of their literary imaginations. In a Levinasian and Heideggerian formulation, he can thus be perceived as an *alterity that emerged from the act of writing*, separate from the subjectivity of each of the two authors who created him. But what ontological status does such a being actually possess?

This strange form of alterity that manifests itself in writing naturally calls to mind the figure of the multifaced Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, whose writing is laced through with the names of nonexistent poets—the most famous of which are Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos, and Alberto Caiero. Arguing that these were not pseudonyms, Pessoa coined the term “heteronym” to define them—derived from the Greek *heteros*, other. Every heteronym, he explained in his well-known letter to his younger colleague Monteiro, is a unique figure with his own style, biography, and personality that comes to life in the process of writing. Insisting that they are not merely fictional characters, he ponders their ontological status: “Ever since I was a child, it has been my tendency to create around me a fictitious world, to surround myself with friends and acquaintances that never existed. (I can't be sure, of course, if they

really never existed, or if it's me who doesn't exist. In this matter, as in any other, we shouldn't be dogmatic.)"<sup>21</sup>

The plethora of heteronyms that populate Pessoa's writings possess their own existence. Over time, they come to constitute a miniature hermetic universe, linked by ties of friendship, in which they argue over aesthetics and style, disagree and make up. In one case, one writes an elegy for another who has just died. All this takes place outside and beyond Pessoa's will and intention: "In all this, it seems to me that I, the creator of it all, was less concerned with it. It seems to me that everything happened without any dependence on me. This still seems to be true today."

Pessoa's heteronym's alterity thus bursts forth from his subjectivity during the course of the act of writing, fueled by a sort of chaotic inner force. It thus appears to be another subjectivity whose voice flows from the poet's pen. Pessoa's own selfhood—the queen bee that creates all the others—he stresses, is nothing but an empty vacuum, devoid of all idiosyncratic features, similar to Plato's airy poets in the *Ion*.

Here we thus face a harsh tension between the fecundity of an innumerable number of "subjectivities" and the vacuity of their source, the creative subjectivity per se. In his well-known poem "The Tobacco Shop," Pessoa paints this circumstance in cold clarity:

I'm nothing.  
 I'll always be nothing.  
 I can't want to be something.  
 But I have in me all the dreams of the world.<sup>22</sup>

During the act of writing, the author's subjectivity is thus drained of all content, becoming, as it were, an empty womb.<sup>23</sup> Out of this ontological void sprout a dizzying profusion of identities that are quasi-ontological—a sort of Meinongian entities. Heteronyms possess completely different identity features from the author's subjectivity, their selfhood being separate and autarchic and finding voice in their own unique styles.

What status do heteronyms possess in a Levinasian world—that is, from a phenomenological-ontological rather than a psychological perspective? At first glance, we have here a certain form of alterity—"otherness" in the Levinasian sense of an identity completely separate from subjectivity (even though the latter enables the existence of the former). No real dialogue exists, however, nor any face-to-face relationship. On the contrary, the heteronym draws its existence from the void



of the subjectivity that gives it birth. So Pessoa retreats to the realm of the “nothing,” and Borges and Bioy similarly determine to stop their collaborative project in light of Domeq’s fantastic, disturbing autonomy. In Levinasian terms, therefore, the most we have here is an “allergic” relationship—one that cannot withstand the tension between distance and acceptance of the Other’s alterity. Although, rather strangely, the self is absorbed into the Other rather than vice versa, the duality within the mutual relation—realized by the face-to-face encounter of two separate entities—collapses.

However, my interest herein lies less with the heteronym than the subjectivity that births it from the depths of its void in the act of writing. In the case of Borges, this is embodied in the enigmatic figure of William Shakespeare.<sup>24</sup> For Borges, the riddle of Shakespeare’s creativity is bound up with the bard’s ability to breathe life into his characters. In his essay “El enigma de Shakespeare” (1964), he appeals to this capacity in order to refute the well-known claim that “Shakespeare” was in fact none other than Christopher Marlowe. In Marlowe’s writing, only the protagonists are real, all the other characters being merely pale shadows. Each of Shakespeare’s characters comes to life, however, argues Borges—even those who make only a fleeting appearance, such as Yorick, whose sole existence lies in the brief words spoken by Hamlet as he holds the dead jester’s skull. Shakespeare thus being the example par excellence of creative fecundity, Borges admits, “We do know that for us the work of Shakespeare is virtually infinite, and the enigma of Shakespeare is only one part of that other enigma, artistic creation, which, in turn, is only a facet of another enigma: the universe” (*SNF*, p. 473).

Borges develops this notion in “From Someone to No One” (1950) in light of the Romantic perception of Shakespeare. Hazlitt, for example, observes that the bard was “nothing in himself, and yet he was all that others were, or that could become,” Victor Hugo comparing him to the ocean, “which is the seedbed of all possible forms” (*SNF*, p. 342). Coleridge went furthest in depicting Shakespeare as embodying the force Spinoza attributed to the divine—the *natura naturans* that creates all creatures and objects.

These ideas all remain within Pessoa’s basic structure, in which the author’s subjectivity constitutes the formless ontological zero point out of which emerges an endless array of figures. Borges correctly compares them with the negative theologies propounded by such thinkers as John Scotus, in whose mystic thought *creatio ex nihilo* signifies God as the “nihilistic” source of all creation. Here again the author’s nihility

produces an infinity—mathematically speaking, an eternal produced by the zero. Borges refines this notion in asserting, “To be one thing is inexorably not to be all other things; the confused intuition of this truth has induced man to imagine that not to be is more than to be something, and that, in some way, is to be everything” (*SNF*, p. 342).

The Borgesian Shakespeare and Pessoaan heteronym thus share a singular mode of existence in which the creative subjectivity is nullified in the act of writing, this void giving rise to endless forms. If we examine this existence from a Levinasian perspective, and in particular in light of the models of subjectivity reviewed above, we immediately observe its affinities with the Heideggerian model of the possible. In this scheme, the entity retreats from identification with the one true real identical with itself to an inexhaustible source of possibilities. Subjectivity thus forms itself dynamically within temporality, projecting its possibilities into the future. Being in and of itself a formless or a fixed entity, subjectivity is ontologically void. The plethora of forms or possibilities thrown out from it as a projection forward can take shape in writing—in the dizzying multitude of Shakespearean figures and strange alterity of the Pessoaan heteronym.

Yet what is the relationship between the infinite array of possibilities and blank subjectivity? Levinas contends that the Heideggerian possibility is ultimately nothing other than a movement backward that eventually augments the subject—an idealization in which possibility becomes force and power. At first glance, it thus affords a dynamic existence to subjectivity that, while differing from the “self-identical,” does not in essence diverge from the tragic circle of bondage: “The diverse forms Proteus assumes do not liberate him from his identity” (*TI*, p. 268). In other words, while Heidegger posits that “the quiet force of the possible” provides an escape from self-identical subjectivity into a subjectivity that forms itself in time in the gap between the void and the possible, Levinas maintains that this “indetermination of the possible” does not prevent the I from returning to the self—to the tyranny whose “origin lies back in the pagan ‘moods,’ in the enrootedness in the earth” (p. 47). In understanding Shakespeare as a possibility realized in writing, does Borges thus reflect the pure Heideggerian model of subjectivity—or does he also recognize Levinas’s critique of this notion?

Borges’s “Everything and Nothing” (1960) represents his most direct treatment of the riddle of Shakespeare’s personality and the Heideggerian model of subjectivity. Its very title draws attention to the tension we noted above between *nihil* and the infinite. In the very

dramatic opening lines, Borges only refers to Shakespeare indirectly: “There was no one inside him [*nadie hubo en él*], nothing but a trace of chill, a dream dreamt by no one else behind the face that looks like no other face (even in the bad paintings of the period) and the abundant, whimsical, impassioned words.”<sup>25</sup> Here, a Levinasian reading imposes itself on the text. The blurring and “effacing” is tantamount to the negation of Parmenidean self-identical subjectivity. Shakespeare’s mode of existence is a nullity. Opposite the voiding of subjectivity stand the floodgates of poetic fecundity, the facial vacuity that is replaced by the tremulous abundance of words.

This nonbeing disturbing the protagonist, he seeks relief for his distress, first and foremost in the theater, where he happily takes on the role of an actor playing someone else, and then in dramatic writing, where he can become Julius Caesar, Juliet, or Macbeth. At some point, he may intersperse a personal confession into the creation, certain that no one will notice. Here, in writing, he thus transforms his empty selfhood into a plethora of characters: “No one was as many men as this man: like the Egyptian Proteus, he used up the forms of all creatures. . . . The fundamental identity of existing, dreaming, and acting inspired him to write famous lines” (*SP*, p. 87). Here, the image of Proteus signifies the infinite multiplicity of the products of blank subjectivity. Like Pessoa’s heteronyms, however, the relationship between the many and the none is asymmetrical, one-directional, and nondialogical. Persisting in this “controlled hallucination” for twenty years, Shakespeare finally retires to his birthplace to return to his empty existences, playing himself here and there for his friends.

Up until this point, Borges’s portrait of Shakespeare conforms to the Romantic paradigm of Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Hugo, according to which the infinite power of the bard’s creativity derives from his blank personality. It is also commensurate in form with Heidegger’s possibilization model, as well as closely resembling Pessoa’s remarks regarding the heteronyms that emerge from the nothingness of his personality. At the dizzying end of the text, however, Borges introduces a surprising twist:

The story goes that, before or after he died, he found himself before God and he said: “I, who have been so many men in vain, want to be one man: myself.” The voice of God replied from a whirlwind: “Neither am I one self; I dreamed the world as you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare, and among the shapes of my dream are you, who, like me, are many persons—and none.” (*SP*, p. 89)

This theological watershed alludes, of course, to the book of Job and God's revelation of Himself from within the tempest to explain His faithful servant's suffering. Here, Borges has God elucidate the analogy between divinity and humanity: Shakespeare's creative infinity is the other side of his vacuity just as God's is the counterpoint of His nihility. Although Borges inherits the comparison of Shakespeare with the divine from Coleridge and Spinoza, this passage also refers to dreaming: God dreams Shakespeare, who dreams his literary creativity. From the perspective of Berkeley's idealism—of which Borges was so enamored—this dream chain does not negate the ontological status of the literary artifact. A dream constituting one of the modes of mental activity and its images perceived by consciousness, dreaming thus pertains to the idealistic principle of "to be is to be perceived" (*esse est percipi*).

At the most, therefore, we have here that same "fundamental identity of existing, dreaming, and acting" (*SP*, p. 87) noted in the text. The real departure of this passage, in my opinion, lies in the appearance of Shakespeare's name. The bard wants to be one person, he himself, and overcome the vacuity of his personality. In the biblical context, naming a person bestows upon them their own distinct, idiosyncratic selfhood, whose essence the name sums up. Thus, for example, Jacob (the "heel-holder") is given the name "Israel" after he "struggles with God." At the end of the story, when the impersonal subject receives his proper name, Borges turns Shakespeare into an essential subject, a self-identical entity. Hereby, I suggest, he approaches Levinas's critique of Heidegger's paradigm, in which the possibility eventually becomes an empowering force in the service of the subject's selfhood.

Borges's affinities with Levinas are mediated via the symbol of Proteus, to whom both authors allude. Levinas asserts that Proteus assumes diverse forms that fail to liberate him from his identity. Borges takes a slightly different tack, alleging, "No one was as many men as this man: like the Egyptian Proteus, he used up the forms of all creatures" (*SP*, p. 87). Relating to the transformation of this anonymous "person" into the subject "Shakespeare," this may mean, in Levinasian terms, that all the forms Proteus assumes *determine* his identity as a subject.

Here a new, dialectical principle emerges in which the relationship between subjectivity and the plethora of characters to which it gives rise is circular rather than one-directional. While blank subjectivity initially forms the condition for multiple creations, the latter then return to establish subjectivity as a separate identity. Here, too, the question of the relationship between the other and the identical (*el otro, el mismo*) that

so preoccupied Borges throughout his writing arises. It thus transpires that Heidegger's asymmetrical model of the possible—capable, perhaps, of adequately explaining the status of Pessoa's heteronyms—cannot fully elucidate the delicate, intricate mutual relationship between subjectivity, alterity, and literary creativity.

Hereby, Borges brings us to the brink of the third model reviewed above—Levinas's radical scheme of paternity: "Every writer undertakes two quite different works at the same time. One is the particular line he is writing, the particular story he is telling, the particular fable that came to him in a dream, and the other is the image he creates of himself. Perhaps the second task that goes on throughout life is the most important."<sup>26</sup> A statement made in a lecture given in honor of his eightieth birthday, this makes an interesting link between an author's subjectivity and his writing. Unlike Shakespeare, it does not adduce either a uni- or a bidirectional relationship between the writer and his characters—nor even the flourishing of heteronyms from blank subjectivity as with Pessoa. Here, the move is more encompassing and bold, the author *creating* a self-image via his writing over the course of his life. In other words, his self-image is created from his whole oeuvre. The Archimedean point here is not the relationship between the writer and himself or between himself and his characters. Rather, the drama unfolds within the author's own subjectivity, during the act of writing. What, then, is the writer's relationship to this weird "image he creates of himself" as he writes?

Borges associates this issue above all with Walt Whitman, whom he regarded in his youth as the poetic archetype.<sup>27</sup> In his early essay "A Note on Walt Whitman" (1932), Borges already hints at the nature of this "experiment" in alluding to what he calls the "two Whitmans"—"the amiable, eloquent wild writer, and the poor man of letters."<sup>28</sup> One is a hard-up wretch, a barren subject devoted to the writings of Hegel and Emerson; the other, the symbol of nascent American democracy. The two antithetical personalities are nonetheless indivisibly connected to one another via the same "great literary experiment." In a lecture delivered at Indiana University, Borges explained:

The central character would be called after the author, Walt Whitman, but he was, firstly, Walt Whitman, the human being, the very unhappy man who wrote *Leaves of Grass*. Then a *magnification, or transmogrification* of that Walt Whitman, who was not the real Walt Whitman at all, or at least not the Whitman his contemporaries knew, but a divine vagabond.<sup>29</sup>

Whitman the down-and-out human becomes Whitman the divine roamer. The uncertainty with regard to the meaning of the split into the two personalities is not coincidental. “Magnification” extols the subject in the service of subjectivity in the framework of the self-identical; “transmogrification,” in contrast, embodies an essential metamorphosis—the alterity within subjectivity. This dialectic forms the key to the key room, so to speak. As we have seen, from a Levinasian perspective, the Borgesian double is nothing other than the enlargement and amplification of the self-identical, just as heteronyms and the Heideggerian possibility are nothing other than the self returning to itself reinforced with the power of the possible.<sup>30</sup> Only here do we find an essential alterity that exists in the drama of the split identity within the depths of subjectivity—the drama of “the other that is the same.” According to Borges’s interpretation of Whitman, during his acts of literary creation an *identity* is formed that is simultaneously both his self-glorification and something entirely different.

We thus have before us three unprecedented principles. First, identity splits into two, so that the author’s image—or shall we say, his narrative personality—stands in a dynamic relationship to his subjectivity, which actually creates it. Second, the created image is at once identical and Other in its relation to the author’s subjectivity. Third, the ongoing act of writing in time is the force that drives the process as a whole. In fact, the principles we encountered above in the third identity model—Levinas’s paternity—appear. The son is the same and the other in relation to his father. Transcendence manifests itself in the breaking of totality, the subject finding a way out of the circularity of the tragic occurrence of fate. As noted above, Levinas coins the term “trans-substantiality” in order to express the breaking—realized by paternity—of the form of identity in which Being is identical to the One:

By a total transcendence, the transcendence of trans-substantiation, the I is, in the child, an other. Paternity remains a self-identification, but also a distinction within identification—a structure unforeseeable in formal logic. . . . (*TI*, p. 267). [In paternity, b]eing is produced as multiple and as split into same and other; this is its ultimate structure. . . . We thus leave the philosophy of Parmenidean being. . . . (p. 269). The father does not simply cause the son. To be one’s son means to be I in one’s son, to be substantially in him, yet without being maintained there in identity. Our whole analysis of fecundity aimed to establish this dialectical conjuncture, which conserves the two contradictory movements. (pp. 278–79)

Let us recall Levinas's claim that, in addition to breaking the logic of identity and totality, trans-substantiality also releases subjectivity from the iron prison of time. No longer the Heideggerian race toward death, it represents the perpetual urge to "live infinitely" in the father-son relationship. The paternal relationship also being one with the future that differs from the father's future, it is a domain in which "infinite being is produced as times, that is, in several times across the dead time that separates the father from the son" (*TI*, pp. 283–84). This thought is critical for Borges, dealing with what he regards as the root of the problem of subjectivity and the greatest metaphysical question of all: time.

In a conversation with Philippe Nemo, Levinas explained that the paternal relationship is not merely biological but signifies a unique ethical relation between entities, adducing the example of the relationship between master and disciple. Developing this theme, we may suggest that the paternal relationship constitutes the form of creation that occurs within the writing subjectivity—the trans-substantial form of "two Whitmans" in which identity is "produced as multiple and as split into same and other." In other words, Levinas's paternity may also be conceived as a trans-substantiality that arises *within* the subjectivity of the author, who creates himself anew as alterity or magnification during the act of writing without relinquishing his original self. Hereby, the identity produced appears to be himself and not-himself at the same time. If this interpretation is correct, writing thus comprises a radical dialectic during the course of which the author's logic of identity splits as he bursts out of the shell of his tragic fate to become an "infinite being."

I thus posit that the relation between writing, alterity, and subjectivity in Borges constitutes a fabulously singular and distinctive example of the Levinasian model of paternity. The cornerstone of this affinity between the writer and philosopher lies in the breaking of the logic of identity. Borges's boldness is epitomized in the idea that this dialectic of birth and alterity exists within subjectivity, in an introvertive move in which the other emerges from within in the act of writing. This is the great and daring "literary experiment" of "two Whitmans." It also forms Borges's own experiment, as he describes in "Borges and I" (1960)—perhaps the most intimate of all his pieces:

The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. I walk through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of Borges from the mail and see his name



on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him, though I am quite aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things.

Spinoza knew that all things long to persist in their being; the stone eternally wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger. I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.

I do not know which of us has written this page.<sup>31</sup>

The opening lines present the issue of duality in its full force. The things that happen to “Borges,” the writing “I” learning about them from reading his mail and the entry on Borges in a biographical dictionary. Unlike “the Other” analyzed above, this text does not relate to a double, the two being completely separate, different figures. Nor is it consistent with Pessoa’s heteronyms or Heidegger’s possibility, the subjectivity of the “I” being a sustainable identity possessing its own idiosyncratic psychological and existential proclivities despite its undefined anonymity. Alternatively, here Borges presents us with a duality—an alterity and existence-within-distance of two individual identities, one of whom (“Borges”) is created by the other (the “I”). At the same time, the two overlap—dividing hobbies between them, for example.

The central—dramatic—section exhibits the intricate relationship between the two. This is a relationship-within-distance that creates a razor-sharp dialectical tension between alterity and unity. Here, the split logic of identity of Levinasian paternity reaches full and clear expression: the “I” agrees to go on living so that “Borges” can contrive his literary output. On the one hand, “Borges” is dependent upon the



existence of the “I,” thus resembling the status of the son in relation to the father who begets him; on the other, he justifies the existence of the “I” in the same way as the son trespasses across the boundaries of the father’s tragic fate.

The continuation sets out even more forcefully the trans-substantiality of the relationship between the two. The borders of the identity of the “I” are no longer clear in the face of the identity of the Other. The “I” discovers that only moments of his existence occur in “Borges”’s literature, the latter not being merely romantic self-aggrandizement. At the same time, however, the Spinozian principle of continuous self-existence (*conatus*) dictates that the “I” must exist in Borges and not in itself.<sup>32</sup> The ontological point of gravity of the “I”’s existence thus lies outside itself, in trans-substantiation, in the Other who is the same within him.

Alterity, otherness, and the tension of differing from the self-identical identity ultimately take on the form of flight. Here, too, however, “Borges” will not countenance the existence of a monadic substance. The meaning of the perpetual flight and crossing of all the paths from the “I” to “Borges” denote, in my view, the Levinasian asymmetry of the subject’s relationship with the Other. The Other is the “master” in his claim of infinite alterity in relation to the subject, the impossibility of flight from him confirming the totality of his demand for ethical responsibility. This is a startling variation of Levinas’s radical ethics in which the I is a “hostage” in the service of the Other.<sup>33</sup> Here, however, the introvertive move occurs in the frame of the duality that lies within the subjective identity of the author.

The final line is mesmerizing in its perspicuity: “I do not know which of us has written this page.” In a crescendo of mutual relations between the “I” and the “Borges” begotten from it, the duality between the two—the Other and the same—remains. Subjectivity does not collapse into nihilism, as with Pessoa’s heteronyms, just as the Other is not subsumed within the self as in Hegel’s self-identical model, Borges carefully choosing his words here—*no sé cual de los dos* (literally, “I don’t know which of the two”). At the same time, however, the boundaries of identity between the same and the Other—the “I” and “Borges”—are no longer amenable to Cartesian distinction.

From the perspective of Levinasian paternity, the final line bears a radical significance: the dynamic of trans-substantiality *occurs* as an event in the literary writing that takes place in front of our very eyes, in the text that we are reading.<sup>34</sup> Every act of writing bursts through the boundaries of the logic of the identity of the “I” afresh, dynamically

constituting a dual-faced identity that moves toward the other—toward the transcendent within selfhood.

This is, therefore, a Levinasian reading of the text—the relationship between the “I” and “Borges” resembling that between father and son. Its dynamic nature marks the breaking of the hegemony of totality (“ontological imperialism”)—the transformation of the substantial into the trans-substantial and the emergence of alterity as the transcendent within the self. The classic structure of the logic of the self-identical splits into the logic of the paradoxical identity of the same and Other, the father and son, the “I” and “Borges,” in a new form of existence. As Levinas, quoting Isaiah, notes, “My child is a stranger (Isaiah 49), but a stranger who is not only mine, for he *is* me. He is me a stranger to myself” (*TI*, p. 267).

The paternal relationship is the most important of all for Levinas because it breaks through the cloak of totality, restoring the transcendent, the infinite, to the realm of the existence of the subject. Hereby, paternity forms the bedrock of the ethical relationship and the face-to-face encounter between the same and the Other. For Borges, this model of identity creates a tension in the duality that exists between the subject and the Other produced by the subject in the act of writing. In Borges’s eyes, this dialectic of “the same, the Other” (*el mismo, el otro*) sums up the essence of the effect of the aesthetic act upon the writer’s selfhood. It is also of decisive importance for addressing the riddle of subjectivity carried forward on the Heraclitean river of time. We thus see that Levinas’s paternity is highly consistent with Borges’s drama of the writer’s split personality.

In summation, we may observe our analysis from the panoramic metaview that Wittgenstein calls “perspicuous representation.” Here, I am surprised to discover that the conclusion drawn from the discussion significantly diverges from the original intention—as though the discussion were the heteronym of my thought. I hope this may also be understood in another way. For if the trans-substantial split is in fact possible during the act of writing as an introvertive division within the selfhood of the writer, the tension of the relationship toward alterity can indeed materialize—as we saw in Borges and Whitman—in the depths of subjectivity. Then the valid conclusion is that the external Other, the fellow man, is completely unnecessary for the creation of alterity in relation to the self. If trans-substantiality is indeed possible during the introvertive move of the author and his writing, without any relation to the external Other, literature is not merely a game played in the

shadows and Levinas's radical ethics fails Popper's falsifiability test—at least from the perspective of the question of identity.<sup>35</sup> If this is in fact the case, aesthetics might replace ethics as first philosophy.

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "Shakespeare's Memory," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 513; hereafter abbreviated *CF*.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), p. 269; hereafter abbreviated *TI*.
3. See *TI*, pp. 187–94, 294–97; and Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), chap. 6, hereafter abbreviated *EI*. This critique forms the notion of the "face" that lies at the base of Levinas's mature thought.
4. According to Parmenides, the "way of Truth" consists in understanding that "the same is thinking and Being" (fr. B3).
5. The horrors of the Holocaust and World War II exerted a decisive influence on Levinas's philosophy. He describes some of his experiences in his essay "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights": They "stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes. . . . We were beings entrapped in their species; despite all their vocabulary, beings without language." In bitter irony, the only creature to treat them as human beings was a stray dog who adopted them: "For him, there was no doubt that we were men. . . . This dog was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany" (Emmanuel Levinas, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997], p. 153).
6. Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 147.
7. See Georg Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Dover, 2003), p. 95.
8. Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique Vrin, 2002), p. 263.
9. In terms of its ontological status, this state of being as a preliminary condition that simultaneously differs from and allows real existence parallels the good in Plato's Analogy of the Sun, which, at the same time as enabling both the seeing of things and their existence, is different from both: "In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence [*epekeina tes ousias*] in dignity and surpassing power"

(*Republic* 509b). Levinas addresses this Platonic concept at length in various places as testimony of a rare philosophic divergence from the principle of totality and an allusion to the transcendent: see *TI*, part 1, section 4.

10. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings: From "Being and Time" (1927) to "The Task of Thinking" (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 220.

11. I shall return below to the figure of Proteus, the many-sided Egyptian god whom Homer describes, in Borges's refashioning of him.

12. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, ed. Jacob Golomb, trans. Ephraim Meir (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995), p. 24 (in Hebrew).

13. In *Otherwise Than Being; or, Beyond Essence* (1974) Levinas replaces the ideal face-to-face relation—the encounter with the Other out of respect for the infinite distance of his otherness—with another fundamental, essentially asymmetrical principle: that of absolute responsibility for the other. This responsibility is the "essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity" (*EL*, p. 95). It alone is constitutive of subjectivity. Service precedes all dialogue. This view thus seems to me to take the place of ontological imperialism via a certain type of ethical tyranny, setting up a radical demand for self-proximity similar to that of the Golem of Prague in Jewish tradition, who only appears at the command of the other and whose sole purpose is to serve others; a kind of magical butler (*fabuli*). It is no wonder that the common designation used to define responsibility to the other here is a relatively violent one, the subject being a "hostage" in the service of the other. I shall thus focus on the more balanced, dialectical model of trans-substantiality presented in *Totality and Infinity*.

14. Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *SNF*. Although this stance appears in various guises throughout his writing, we cannot infer from it that Borges is a proponent of the Buddhist nonself (*anatta*).

15. Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: Modern Library, 1983), pp. 233–34; emphasis in original.

16. Jorge Luis Borges, "El tiempo," in *Obras completas* (Barcelona: Emecé, 1996), vol. 3, p. 205; my translation and emphasis.

17. The use of the word "fate" ("the young man's inevitable fate was to be the man that I am now"; "The arc of the silver coin disappearing into the silver river would have lent my story a vivid image, but fate would not have it") is, of course, not coincidental in the text.

18. It is only in his essay on Proust that Levinas discerns, for the first time, a sense of ethical responsibility for the Other. In his sad searching for Albertine, Proust experiences the strange sensation of seeking otherness in the depths of the inner dialogue of a monadic subjectivity plagued by its solitariness. See Emmanuel Levinas, "The Other in Proust," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Basic Blackwell, 1989), pp. 164–69.

19. See Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), p. 366.

20. Jorge Luis Borges, "Autobiographical Essay," in Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges*, p. 246.
21. Casafernandopessoa.cm-lisboa.pt/index.php?id=4292&L=4. See also Fernando Pessoa, *Un corazón de nadie*, ed. Angel Campos Pampano (Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores, 2001), p. 577.
22. "Não sou nada. / Nunca serei nada. / Não posso querer ser nada. / À parte isso, tenho em mim todos os sonhos do mundo" (Pessoa, *Un corazón de nadie*, p. 434).
23. The first to employ this imagery in describing the poet's identity was Plato, in his discussion of the poet's transcendent inspiration. For an extensive discussion of Plato's idea in relation to Borges's view of inspiration, see Shlomy Mualem, *Borges and Plato: A Game with Shifting Mirrors* (Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt: Vervuert, 2012), pp. 153–74.
24. For the discussion on which the following is based, see Shlomy Mualem, "The Literary Proteus: The Literary Image of Shakespeare in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges," *Latin American Literary Review* 68, no. 34 (2006): 83–105 (in Spanish).
25. Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 87; hereafter abbreviated *SP*.
26. Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*, ed. Willis Barnstone (New York: New Directions, 2013), p. 143.
27. "I thought of Whitman not as a great poet, but as the *only* poet. I thought that all poets the world over had been merely leading up to Whitman" (Borges, "Autobiographical Essay," p. 30).
28. Published in *Discusión* (1932); my translation.
29. Borges, *Borges at Eighty*, p. 136; emphasis added.
30. Even the other explanation of heteronyms—that is, as the collapse of subjectivity into an empty void that produces infinite possibilities—leaves no tension within subjectivity.
31. Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 51. As it happens, I first encountered this text in a used bookshop called Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in Ramat Gan, Israel. It was the first Borges I ever read, and I still remember the shock I felt on reading it. This essay may perhaps constitute a modest attempt to comprehend this germinal experience.
32. "Each thing, as far as it lies in itself, strives to persevere in its being" (Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 3, prop. 6).
33. "The responsibility for another, an unlimited responsibility which the strict book-keeping of the free and non-free does not measure, requires subjectivity as an irreplaceable hostage. This subjectivity it denudes under the ego in a passivity of persecution, repression and expulsion outside of essence, into oneself" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998], p. 124).
34. This occurrence may perhaps be regarded as a Heideggerian *Ereignis*—an "event" realized in writing. Here, however, the happenstance denotes *divergence* from totality rather than existence within the framework of impersonal Being.

35. It is interesting to note that the principle of trans-substantiality realized during an introverted, isolated act is also found in the Upanishads, expressed in the metaphysical identity between the Atman (man's genuine self) and Brahman (absolute reality), and most clearly manifested in the dictum "that art thou" (*tat tvam asi*). Here, too, the same is also the other. Borges's familiarity with the Upanishads derived from the writings of his favorite philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer.