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Connecting the Dots: The Ontology and Ethics of Intersubjectivity
in Borges's "The Writing of the God"

Brendan Kurt Lund

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Connecting the Dots: The Ontology and Ethics of Intersubjectivity in Borges's "The Writing of the God"

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How do we establish objectivity when each person's perspective is uniquely subjective? Borges's "The Writing of the God" shows how an epistemically isolated subject is incapable of ever arriving at a robust sense of objectivity without reference to an Other. Donald Davidson's theory of interpretive triangulation posits that the Other's external perspective establishes objectivity by making the subject aware of the limits of his or her perception. Emmanuel Levinas suggests that the face of the Other establishes ethics as first philosophy through a primordial, affective discourse. The ethical relation is what undergirds the questions of epistemology which Davidson addresses.

Keywords: subjectivity, objectivity, ethics, epistemology, Borges

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Introduction

The promise of objectivity is the promise of a commonly shared world of facts in which we can clearly delineate the true from the false by stripping away all subjectivity such as personal feelings or biases which cloud our judgment. In his book, *The View From Nowhere* (1986), Thomas Nagel breaks down the process by which we move from subjective judgments towards objective ones: “To acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object” (3). But no perspective is entirely separate from its context, and so an irreducible component of subjectivity remains in even the most ostensibly objective statements.¹ If objectivity seeks an understanding of the whole world as it really is, “we can’t forget about those subjective starting points indefinitely; we and our personal perspectives belong to the world” (5). Perfect objectivity would paradoxically have to transcend the finite nature of our experience, allowing the viewer to perceive the world from all possible perspectives simultaneously while also not privileging any one viewpoint in particular (thus occupying the “view from nowhere” to which the title of Nagel’s book alludes). Human nature, on the other hand, is defined by its finitude and the limits of our perspectives and the interpretations that we apply to our experiences. In light of these facts, does it make sense to conclude that objectivity is simply a myth or perhaps a spectrum without an absolute value? And given the inescapable subjectivity of our judgments about the world, how can we ever agree upon universal facts or communicate our understanding to others with their own, inaccessibly subjective, perspectives? This reconciliation of subjective and objective must not be mistaken as

¹ A possible exception to this might be the truths of mathematics but the application of these truths to the real world would reintroduce the problem of subjectivity on the part of those who do the applying.

a case of semantic hairsplitting in philosophy; Nagel argues that “it is the most fundamental issue about morality, knowledge, freedom, the self, and the relation of mind to the physical world” (1).

The problem of objectivity is evident in the curious experience of Tzinacán, the protagonist of Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Writing of the God.” Borges tells the story of Tzinacán, a 16th-century Mayan priest who, imprisoned in a darkened cell by the Spanish conquistadors, comes to believe that his god has provided him the key to his freedom. It is to be found in an arcane text which, if deciphered, would give him the power to overthrow his enemies and restore his kingdom to its former glory. The story juxtaposes Tzinacán’s impoverished personal perspective in his solitary confinement with the difficulties of his effort to decipher the titular “writing” which the gods of his religion hid somewhere on the Earth. However, Tzinacán quickly comes to realize the complexity of his task, since to read the writing would require the reconciliation of his mortal, finite perspective with the infinite perspective of a god. We can think of Tzinacán’s perspective within the solitary confinement of the prison as being purely subjective: whatever he experiences (including dreams and memories) becomes his reality because he has nothing against which to compare it to determine its validity. The god’s-eye-view required to understand the writing can thus be understood as perfect objectivity which remains perpetually elusive to mortal consciousness. Like Tzinacán, philosophers continue to grapple with the issue of how beings with inherently subjective experiences are able to form a concept of objectivity that allows them to establish the veracity of their perception of the external world.

We might think of “The Writing of the God” as a kind of thought experiment about the disparity between the concept of objective certainty and our limited personal perspectives illustrated by the problematic nature of Tzinacán’s subjectivity. His isolation eliminates his ability to distinguish between the noumenal and the phenomenal, but perhaps if he were able to

interact with someone of a different perspective (for example, the Spanish), he would be able to notice the errors in his understanding and reestablish a more objective view of the world. “The Writing of the God” is unique among Borges’s fictions since it is the only one to take up the setting and themes of the Spanish *Conquista* and the cataclysmic encounter of these two radically different cultures and their corresponding worldviews. Thus, the insurmountability of the problem of interpretation, illustrated in Tzinacán’s attempts to read the writing of the god, outlines the problem of objectivity while the very “otherness” of the story (compared to the rest of Borges’s work) points to a possible solution through a triangular interaction between the self, the Other, and the external world.

The story begins with Tzinacán’s description of the draconian prison and its three primary focal points like the apices of a triangle: himself, the jaguar in the adjacent cell, and the trap door above through which the jailor feeds the two of them. As an isolated prisoner with access to neither the outside world nor to any other human beings, Tzinacán loses all track of the passage of time and even the ability to discern between days and nights, dreams and reality, a fact which Balderston notes would be extremely traumatic for a priest whose primary role was to keep track of time as recorded in the Mayan “Long Count” (78). His lack of any sense of context makes his sensory perception meaningless and so he drifts aimlessly through his own memories until he suddenly recalls his religion’s legend of the writing of the god. It is a text which, if discovered and deciphered, would allow him to overthrow his oppressors and become like a god himself, allowing him to escape his captivity and effectively reverse the tragedy of his people. He begins to consider the practically infinite ways in which a god could have hidden or encoded²

² In another of Borges’s stories, “La biblioteca de Babel,” the universe is represented as a library which contains every book that could possibly be written. Some “librarians” seek out books containing the answers to the fundamental questions of the universe but the narrator points out that even texts which seem meaningless could be written in code or in an unknown (or yet to be invented) language. If their interpretive efforts are fruitless since the

their script, when he makes the connection “one of the names of the god was jaguar” (251). Given the fact that there is a jaguar in the adjacent cell, he views this as a sign from the god and resolves to interpret the writing hidden in its spots.

Even after having narrowed his search to a specific object, however, he soon comes to realize just how daunting his task of interpretation is. Among the problems he notes are the difficulty in distinguishing how the spots come together to form distinct symbols (“some made circles; others formed transverse stripes on the inside of its legs; others, ringlike, occurred over and over again—perhaps they were the same sound, or the same word” [252]) and the even more baffling issue of how a god would choose to express himself (“a god, I reflected, must speak but a single word, and in that word there must be *absolute plenitude*” [252, emphasis in original]). Faced with these seemingly insurmountable difficulties, Tzinacán screams at the vault of his prison’s ceiling that such a text must be impossible to decipher, and yet he continues to try.

The story takes an important turn when (perhaps subconsciously inspired by the apparent impossibility of his goal) he dreams of a single grain of sand on the floor of his cell which begins to multiply infinitely until it fills the entire prison and suffocates him beneath its weight. He tries to wake himself though his efforts are futile, and a disembodied voice tells him, “you have not awakened out of sleep, but into a prior dream, and that dream lies within another, and so on, to infinity, which is the number of the grains of sand” (252). Tzinacán looks to be on the brink of death or madness when he is suddenly awakened by a brilliant light as the jailor opens the trap door to bring his food and water. This brings him back to reality but also triggers what he refers to as “a union with the deity,” in which he has a vision of a great wheel which represents the

apparently inane may actually contain deep, hidden meaning, how much harder would it be for Tzinacán whose text is the whole world with no clue what is symbolic and what is not?

entire universe³ with all its causes and effects (253). It is this union which finally allows him to read the god's script, but the story ends with a typically Borgesian twist in that he chooses not to speak it out loud and thereby foregoes his opportunity to restore his people and overthrow his oppressors. This unexpected resolution generates a diversity of readings of the text and creates a tension in the reader which calls into question the validity of the reader's own subjective understanding of the story and of the world in general.

The entirety of the story takes place in this austere setting but this apparent simplicity belies the complexity of the philosophical discourse which can be extracted from the text. It is precisely this economy of images that allows Borges to control for all the variables of the experiment and present such a powerful exploration of the relationship between the self, the Other, and the external world. Ultimately, it shows how, due to the problem of interpretation, the isolated subject is insufficient to establish objective truths about the external world and so must appeal to interaction with the Other to confirm or correct his own beliefs. Yet as we will see, this interaction with the Other is not without conditions if it is to be productive and reliable: discourse itself relies on an affective ethical relationship ontologically prior to language.

This paper reads "The Writing of the God" through the lens of Donald Davidson's theory of triangulation as an allegory for the relationship between subjectivity, as portrayed in the first-person narration from Tzinacán's perspective; objectivity, represented in the god's script hidden in the jaguar's spots; and the Other, as symbolized by the jailor and the Spanish invaders. The story-as-thought-experiment introduces the problem of interpretation by showing how it constantly intervenes and precludes a completely objective understanding of the world by an individual. Davidson posits that the three-way interaction between the self, the Other, and the

³ For a similar narration of a character seeing from the infinite, perfectly objective perspective, see Borges's story, "El Aleph."

world they share is what gives rise to language and our sense of objectivity in general. However, we will see that, while Davidson's method does provide a means by which people are able to intelligibly communicate about aspects of the world, it does not explain what gives rise to the faculties necessary to accomplish this, nor is it infallible. To supplement Davidson's idea, we will turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas who explains our concepts of self and objectivity in terms of the phenomenological effect that the face of the Other has on the individual. According to Levinas, it is the ethical relation to the Other (as presented in their face) which first instantiates us into a shared world and undergirds all questions of ontology. In a sense then, we can read Borges as triangulating between the objective (as explained by Davidson) and the subjective (as explained by Levinas) through the narration of the story.

I argue that the three narrative focal points (the "I," the Other, and the external world), the content of Tzinacán's vision, and his ultimate decision not to speak the words of the script point towards an ethical resistance in line with Levinas's theory, rather than a total surrender, in his ultimate refusal to speak the words and kill the conquistadors. Thus "The Writing of the God" can be read as an exploration of the insufficiency of the self to understand the world and the asymmetrical nature of our responsibility to the Other as, despite the atrocities committed against him and his people, Tzinacán cannot reciprocate this violence from his final position of perfect understanding.

The Case for Triangulation

Donald Davidson responds to the problem of interpretation and the hyperbolic skepticism it entails in a number of essays which have been collected in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (2001). Davidson argues that the mechanisms by which we arrive at understanding are

largely shared and so it is impossible that two people could have incommensurate understandings of the same external event. In order to reconnect the self to the external world he posits his theory of “triangulation:” at some, “prelinguistic, precognitive” level, we train ourselves to react to changes that we notice in the world, but also to react to others’ reactions and to associate their reactions with correspondent changes in the real world (128). Claudine Verheggen provides a concise elucidation of Davidson’s argument by breaking it up into two parts. The first part involves what Davidson refers to as “primitive triangulation” and, according to Verheggen, it diagnoses the problem which necessitates the more robust triangulation which he explains in the second part (97). Essentially, primitive triangulation reveals that an isolated subject (*S*) cannot make objective statements about the world (or if they do, it is by chance) due to the fact that *S* has nothing to compare his or her subjective understanding against to verify its validity. As such, any interpretation that they make of their sensory experience would be equally valid as, “*S* succeeds in ‘communicating’ [or assigning meaning] with himself in whatever way he draws the line between correct and incorrect responses. *S* never has to draw it in one way rather than another. But this, in effect, is to say that *S* can never be in a position to draw it objectively” (101, emphasis in original). This problem is evident in Tzinacán’s perception while in solitary confinement and his efforts to interpret the world as symbolized in the writing encoded in the jaguar’s spots, as well as his efforts to pin down his own identity in his new circumstances.

Interpretive Problems Between the Self and the External World

The central symbolic problem of the story is expressed in Tzinacán’s effort to “see” the world as it truly is by correctly deciphering the text hidden in the jaguar’s spots, a symbol for the noumenal universe independent of subjectivity (Pérez 145). Balderston reinforces this reading by

citing a passage from the Mayan creation myth, the *Popol Vuh*, in which the gods command their creations to look upon the world and “try then to see.” Thus, “by obeying the creator god’s injunction to see, Tzinacán has broken out of an intellectualized stupor; though in prison, he is, as the god instructed, contemplating the world” (Balderston 75). Moreover, the hemisphere with an aperture in the center of the dome through which light passes recalls the form of the human eye and cements the symbolic importance of seeing clearly as equivalent to true understanding. The fact that Tzinacán describes the shape of this structure as “something less than a great circle,” and that the metaphorical “iris” of his prison is only briefly opened once each day highlights the limits of the first-person perspective (Borges 250). His condition is a brilliant illustration of the veil of perception and perfectly summarizes the epistemic problems raised by idealist philosophers like Berkeley: Tzinacán is a symbolic mind living within an eye (i.e. physical body) that serves as the means of experience but simultaneously filters it and separates him from direct access to the noumena. Holloway also points out implicit symbolic readings within the metaphorically charged description of the prison such as the word “bóveda,” or vault, which evokes a clear comparison to the “vault of the heavens,” and indicates that this space forms the entirety of his world (335). This symbolic reading of Tzinacán’s circumstances allows us to universalize his experience in his unusual prison and problematize subjectivity and interpretation in general: his prison is his world, the roof his sky, and the same problems that he faces in deciphering his perceptions of that world are faced by all people.

Considering that Tzinacán’s problem is ultimately one of separating the “real” from what merely appears to be real, Álvarez’s comparison of the prison to Plato’s allegory of the cave is highly insightful (464). Plato uses the cave to illustrate the place that human beings occupy in relation to the primary substance of reality in his theory of the forms. According to Plato, the

forms pertain to an ontological primacy inaccessible to us here in the world, and so all things which we experience are merely simulacra (shadows on the wall of the cave) of those forms. Tzinacán, like the people in the cave, is trapped in darkness and his experience is filtered in various ways (e.g., through the barred window which allows him to see the jaguar, the limited bursts of light from above, and his own memories and cultural perspective) and thus reflects the fact that all perspectives are limited and therefore may exclude infinitely more than they include (Giskin 73). Tzinacán dedicates his life to interpreting the text encoded in the jaguar's markings, but his days are dominated by darkness and he is only allowed a glimpse of it each day: "During the course of each blind day I was granted an instant of light, and thus I was able to fix in my mind the black shapes that mottled the yellow skin" (Borges 252).

This sentence clues us into a subtle substitution of symbols in which the text to be interpreted, or the "yellow skin" of the jaguar, is exchanged for the mental image Tzinacán forms from his phenomenal experience of it (i.e. the shadow on the wall of the cave rather than the object which casts it). Earlier in the story, when he has not yet remembered the legend of the god's script, he talks somewhat disparagingly about how he wasted what felt like years trying to remember everything he knew, "to possess those things I no longer possessed" before he realizes how pointless it is (251). Later on when he begins searching for the script, but before remembering the divine symbolism of the jaguar, he is undaunted by his bleak surroundings and states, "I might have seen Qaholom's inscription thousands of times, and need only to understand it," implying that perhaps one of those many memories he had needlessly re-viewed was in fact the key to his salvation (251). Yet the passage stating "I was able to fix *in my mind*" (252, emphasis mine) signals a gap between Tzinacán's perception and his memory of his perceptions and calls into question Balderston's claim that Tzinacán is able to truly contemplate the world.

The fundamental problem here—which the idealists drew attention to—is that Tzinacán is not actually interpreting the jaguar’s print but merely *his memory of the print*. To conclude that he interprets what is really there is based on the misguided assumption that his memory is complete and infallible when in fact there are infinitely more details that are missed in any given observation than are noticed, not to mention those that are forgotten over time.⁴

The first-person subject is irreconcilably separated from the content of the noumenal world due to the intervention of interpretation at every step in its cognition. To interpret is “to fix the meanings of one’s thoughts and utterances,” the assigning of meaning to otherwise unorganized sensations, impressions, and ideas (Verheggen 96). Davidson argues that “to endow one’s utterance with meaning, one is supposed somehow to connect it to its typical [external] cause,” but a subject isolated from birth would be unable to do so due to the indeterminate number of possible causes present in any given perception, or the metaphorical “distance” of the cause from the subject (Verheggen 98). Thus, before Tzinacán can interpret symbols as the god’s script, he must interpret the jaguar’s spots as symbols—but before he can do that, he must interpret his memories as representative of the jaguar’s spots—but before he can do that, he must interpret his raw sensory experience into the mental image which he forms of the jaguar. Even then, there may be infinite interpretive subcomponents of that perception in between each interpretive step (e.g. interpreting the interplay of light and shadow as being fur, interpreting the colors as delineating specific shapes, etc.) which goes to show just how daunting Tzinacán’s task

⁴ This is not to say that a perfect memory would allow him to escape this problem either. In Borges’s “Funes el memorioso,” the titular character cannot forget anything he has experienced. He tries to form a language in which each of these experiences corresponds to a specific symbol, thus a dog seen in profile would require a different word than the same dog seen head-on (and so on, requiring infinite symbols). The narrator’s assessment of Funes is grim: “Sospecho, sin embargo, que no era muy capaz de pensar. Pensar es olvidar diferencias, es generalizar, abstraer” (*Ficciones* 134). Language is useful due to the capacity for finite symbols to represent nearly infinite concepts, rather than requiring a one-to-one correspondence. For a similar exploration of this issue, see Borges’s “Del rigor en la ciencia.”

really is. Davidson argues that such interpretive identifications rely on a concept of objectivity as he illustrates with his example of looking at a giraffe: “I could not believe I see a giraffe if I did not know that some things are correctly identified as giraffes and some things are not. To know this is to know that some classifications are true and some false” (Verheggen 100). To fix meanings is to create an identification between signs and their referents, and by saying what something is, one also implicitly specifies what it is not (i.e. anything other than the stated identification). In this sense then, some basic concept of objectivity is, according to Davidson, necessary for language or even thought in general (Verheggen 96).

At each step between perception and understanding, interpretation, or the assigning of meaning, is necessary to create the connection between the sign (the phenomenon) and its referent (the noumenon). But this process of fixing meanings may be more complex than the simple identification demonstrated in the example above. As Joan Copjec points out, “There is a gap, a distance between the evidence and that which the evidence establishes, which means that there is something which is *not* visible in the evidence: the principle by which the trail attaches itself to the criminal” (178, emphasis in original). Although she is specifically talking about the detective of noir literature, for our purposes we could substitute “evidence” and “criminal” with “sign” and “referent” for the same effect (or as Levinas phrases it, “signification is to perception what the symbol is to the object symbolized” [357]). She goes on to say, “interpretation means that the evidence tells us everything but how to read it,” which shows that whatever meaning is derived from an experience is not present in the evidence itself but in the way that the subject experiences it (179). Meaning therefore necessarily involves a subjective element; by excluding the subjective, perfect objectivity necessarily precludes meaning as well. While subjectivity and objectivity are both necessary to assign meaning, the fact that neither is sufficient highlights their

complex, almost paradoxical, relation and calls into question the value of the work of objectivity in removing the subjective from statements.

Interpretation presents such an insurmountable problem for epistemology and the concept of objectivity in general due to the fact that there is not a one-to-one connection between signs and their referents. In Davidson's giraffe example for instance, it could be that what we believe to be a giraffe is merely a cardboard cutout of a giraffe and so our interpretation of it as real misattributes the referent to its corresponding sign. At the beginning of his description of his union with the divine, Tzinacán states, "Ecstasy does not use the same symbol twice; one man has seen God in a blinding light; another has perceived Him in a sword or in the circles of a rose. I saw a Wheel of enormous height" (Borges 253). Here we have four symbols (radiance, a sword, a rose, and a wheel) all pointing to the divine ecstasy, not to mention the fact that any of these could also have many symbolic referents, such as the wheel symbolizing the infinitely divine as well as the cyclical nature of time as depicted in the Mayan calendar. Tzinacán muses on this problematic multiplicity of connections between symbols and their referents as he states, "to say 'the jaguar' is to say all the jaguars that engendered it, the deer and turtles it has devoured, the grass that fed the deer, the earth that was mother to that grass, the sky that gave light to the earth" (252). In effect, meaning is not objective but relative as in order to explain the meaning of a given word, we are left with no choice but to appeal to other words which also require explanations until the entirety of language is subsumed in the definition of a single term.

In attempting to decipher the god's script, Tzinacán comes to realize that one would need to be a god in order to do so, since a god's language would have to be commensurate with their power and understanding and thus, "every word would speak that infinite concatenation of events," which presents the perfect understanding of the relation between all things (252). Due to

our finite minds and finite language, we see through the glass of interpretation darkly that which God sees directly, and since our respective understandings of the world are so radically different, it is doubtful whether we would even understand the world if we could see it through God's eyes. Giskin points out that Tzinacán's mystical experience near the end of the story is infinitely enlightening but transcends the contexts of normal experience and so is completely ineffable⁵, incommunicable to someone who did not experience it firsthand (71). As communication is necessarily symbolic, the best he can do is appeal to the "shadows or simulacra" of human language to describe it (Borges 252). True understanding then, on the level at which Tzinacán experiences it, requires one to bypass the symbols and "see" the world as it truly is; to attempt to communicate this understanding undercuts it as the symbols and their subsequent chains of signifiers could never do justice to the sublime nature of the vision.

Problems with the Self Interpreting Itself

The problematic nature of these chains of signifiers, or words which always refer to words and never to the noumenal object which they supposedly designate, is even evident in the identification of Tzinacán himself. Balderston points out that Tzinacán, like Pedro de Alvarado, was a real historical figure whose name was actually "Ahpozotzil (meaning 'the Bat King' or 'Keeper of the Bat Mat')," but that the Spanish gave him the name, "Sinacán, from the Nahuatl Tzinacán which also means 'bat'" (72). Note the chain of signifiers here: Sinacán from Tzinacán from "bat" from Ahpozotzil which means "Keeper of the Bat Mat." Even in this relatively short chain, there are already numerous errors introduced, not just orthographically but also

⁵ This ineffability also relates to the imprecise nature of signs and their referents. In describing his infinite vision of the universe, the protagonist of "El Aleph" says, "Cada cosa... era infinitas cosas, porque... la veía desde todos los puntos del universo" (*El Aleph* 205). For him to relay this in the way he experienced it, he would need to attach infinite symbols to every object, yielding the same problem that Funes has.

semantically, for example the fact that the references to “king” or to the “Mat” are lost in translation, leaving only “bat” as the ultimate meaning (poetically symbolic perhaps of Tzinacán’s imprisonment in a dark prison/cave). Calderston takes this sliding of meaning seriously and points out the way that separation of the signifier of his name from its initial referent of the “Bat Mat” (a term for the *Popol Vuh*) reflects Tzinacán’s separation from his people and culture which no longer exist (80). From this chain of only four or five signifiers, it can already be seen how quickly meaning can change or be lost and it stands to reason that, given a long enough chain, any given word could entail any other word, recalling Tzinacán’s observation that “there is no proposition that does not imply the entire universe” (Borges 252). In this case however, Borges brilliantly uses the malleable nature of these sliding signifiers to create a meta-symbol for the changing of Tzinacán’s identity caused by the corresponding changes in the context on which his identity was based.

The story is full of details that show that Tzinacán’s ontological status as a subject is in fact predicated on the existence of the Other. Laraway points out that in the wake of the cataclysmic encounter between two distinct worlds (the European world eclipsing the Mayan) Tzinacán, “finds himself now obliged to self-identify in an essentially negative way, his very mechanism for self-identification predicated upon a certain failure, upon a criterion that no longer obtains in the new world in which he finds himself” (295). At the beginning of the story he refers to himself as “I, Tzinacán, priest of the Pyramid of Qaholom, which Pedro de Alvarado burned,” constructing his personal identity on a fundamental lack, the empty space where the pyramid once stood (Borges 250). But what’s more, the chain of signifiers is at play here again as even this identification is not self-sufficient and he must appeal to the Other; the pyramid he refers to is not just any pyramid but the one which *Pedro de Alvarado*, symbol *par excellence* of

the Other from Tzinacán's perspective, burned. There is a certain hint of resentment in the debasing of Tzinacán's identity through the destruction of his people and culture, and this underlying sentiment provides the basis for the reader's expectations of resistance which are subverted in his final refusal to speak the words and overthrow his oppressors.

All of these details demonstrate how truly hopeless Tzinacán's task is, as well as illustrate the severely limited capacity of the first-person subject to understand itself or the world objectively with only one's own resources to draw upon. The implications of these epistemic limits cannot be understated; as subjective interpretation intervenes constantly in our understanding the world, it allows for paradoxes since mutually exclusive perspectives of the world are equally "true" without some external and reliable source of information to compare them against. Such a condition calls into question the very concept of "truth" (since an assumed paradox implies all other contradictory statements) and reduces all ontology to phenomenology. Accordingly, any statement that the isolated subject makes becomes unfalsifiable due to the access problem of consciousness. The fundamental question of the idealists about whether the external world even exists is rendered unanswerable for the isolated subject and as such, opens the door for a type of hyperbolic skepticism which can never be fully refuted. In the face of these insurmountable issues, it seems impossible to consider the "I" as anything more than a useful fiction created through interpretation of our perceived continuity of existence and memory through time, an arbitrary assigning of meaning to perceptions which we cannot ultimately verify to be accurate representations of reality.

The Ontology of Triangulation

Davidson's theory of triangulation borrows at least some of its inspiration from the real-life practice of using triangulation to determine the position of something in the world, and the geometry behind this technique provides a useful illustration of this reasoning. The isolated subject can be thought of a single, contextless point in geometric space with very little we could say about it. In interacting with the world, a line is formed between the subject and object, now requiring the first dimension to describe it. But a single perspective is unable to pinpoint the position of this object since there is no way to determine where along that line the object falls (similar to the way that human depth perception requires both eyes as a form of real-world triangulation). This is the "distance" which Davidson uses as a metaphor to describe the uncertainty of the isolated subject's perception of the world (Davidson 129). Determining this distance is only possible through the addition of another perspective, that of the Other, which requires an additional dimension to describe and thus gives us the 2D figure of the triangle. The external object exists at the intersection of the lines formed between each perspective and the object itself. In the example above where what one thought to be a giraffe was actually a cardboard cutout, the additional perspective of the Other would allow them to recognize the illusion. This is what Davidson means when he says that "triangulation is necessary... both to fix the meanings of one's thoughts and utterances and to have the concept of objectivity" (Verheggen 96).

While the unreliability of our senses calls into question any statement we might make about the world, Davidson's method provides us with a mechanism to check our perception of the world against that of the Other, providing a second opinion which can either support or contradict our own. When he is alone, Tzinacán's interactions with the world, symbolized by the jaguar, lead him into an infinite interpretive regress and the inescapable doubt furnished by

hyperbolic skepticism represented in his infinitely nested dreams. However, after the jailer wakes him from the dreams he is returned to an awareness of the world which they both share and states, “from that indefatigable labyrinth of dreams, I returned to my hard prison as though I were a man returning home” (Borges 253). Compared with the nightmare of the “I” completely isolated within its own thoughts, the prison—and the jailer which simultaneously implies and is implied by it—becomes more than welcoming. Tzinacán’s oneiric experience calls into question Balderston’s interpretation that he “wakes himself up through a sheer act of intellectual will” since it seems to miss a few crucial details about the dream (75). For instance, before hearing the disembodied voice, Tzinacán realizes on his own that he is dreaming and states, “with a vast effort I woke myself. But waking up was useless—I was suffocated by the countless sand” (Borges 252). Hence while Tzinacán is able to discern the fallibility of his primary experience and wakes himself with great effort, his individual effort only moves him one step along the infinite chain of dreams (or signifiers) and he is unable to “wake... out of sleep” and resolve the doubt as to whether his experience is real or merely an illusion (252). The dream illustrates that the individual intellect is fundamentally incapable of resolving these issues on its own and in this case it takes the disembodied voice of god⁶ (i.e. the perspective of the Other⁷) to explain the dreams to him and make him see the futility of his individual effort. Thanks to the third perspective which the Other provides, first from the voice and then from the jailor waking him, he is able to re-contextualize his experience and discard that which is illusory, namely the

⁶ A quote from another of Borges’s stories makes this connection clearer. In “El milagro secreto,” the protagonist hears a voice in a dream remembers that, “son divinas las palabras de un sueño, cuando son distintas, claras y no se puede ver quién las dijo” (*Ficciones* 181)

⁷ Levinas on Descartes: “The ontological argument lies in the mutation of this “object” [infinity] into being, into independence with regard to me; God is the other” (360).

suffocating chain of signifiers within his dream, thus re-establishing not only his connection to the real world but also the veracity of his own existence.

One of the possible objections to Davidson's theory of triangulation is that it relies on a shared world to which both the self and the other react in some kind of predictable way, and so by ruling out the possibility of incommensurate perspectives he may be begging the question. Laraway provides a Heideggerian reading of the story by noting that the *Conquista* may be regarded as a fundamental transition of worlds (or world views) in which the European concept of reality eclipses that of the Mayans (291, 294)⁸. Triangulation relies on the fact that the subject and the Other react to the same events in the world they share, but under these conditions in which two radically different cultures come to meet for the first time, it is doubtful that their interpretations and corresponding reactions would coincide in such a way that either would be able to derive useful information from triangulation with other. This can be seen in their differing reactions to the jaguar as symbol for the noumenal world. The Mayans believed that all events in time recurred in astronomically long cycles (as shown in the layout of their calendar as wheels within wheels) and so fixated on the study of the past as a means of predicting the eventual future (Balderston 78). However, this cyclical time also implies that even if they were able to predict the future, there would be nothing they could do to change it as it must repeat the events of the past. The Mayan fascination with time was therefore not an instrument for individuals to gain some advantage in the future but rather a way "to discover the design implicit in the unfolding of history" (79). To Tzinacán, the universe would be something to be venerated and

⁸ Laraway notes that the eclipse is "a remarkably apt mechanism for dramatizing the decline of one world while foreshadowing, is it were, the emergence of another of a different order" (296). It is interesting to note how this symbol is inverted in Tzinacán's captivity: instead of the sun being briefly obscured, it is only briefly visible to him when the jailor opens the trapdoor overhead. Perhaps (with some interpretive license) this could be read as supporting Davidson's argument since the Other provides these brief moments of "enlightenment."

studied, not subjugated or bent to his will; power, according to his world view, would come in the form of his understanding of why things must occur as they do, not from his ability to alter those events. The Spanish, on the other hand, were motivated to fight for their god, gold, and glory, and as such viewed not only the indigenous, but also the universe as a whole as a means to an end. Civilizations were conquered for their gold while nature was conquered for its resources, hence the reason we find Tzinacán and the jaguar imprisoned in identical conditions: from the Spanish perspective, both are mere objects.

Davidson is careful to point out that errors can occur in the correlations which we assign to the Other's reactions and to the events which we assume to have caused them, but this seems to leave his argument open to the same rebuttal from radical interpretation (Davidson 129). In her book, *Jorge Luis Borges, Post-Analytic Philosophy, and Representation*, Silvia Dapía cites several Borges stories which seem to explore a similar line of reasoning to that of Davidson's triangulation, but emphasizes the fact that Borges never presents an issue from just one perspective. In one chapter she argues that "El congreso" supports triangulation while also pointing out that stories like "Emma Sunz" or "El etnógrafo" show that the limited nature of personal perspectives call into question the possibility of agreement between subjects from widely varying backgrounds (138). She argues that, while triangulation relies on applying the principle of charity (assuming the other's perspective to be reasonable and trying to find the reasons in the external world which give rise to it), Davidson fails to account for how different "logics" (i.e. methods of interpretation) ultimately give rise to that understanding of the Other. The problem she suggests is that by assuming that the Other's statements are reasonable we force them to cohere to *our* reason and so, "we are not so much interpreting the Other as projecting our own thoughts, desires, and beliefs on her" (Dapía 137). According to her, this reflects an

“underlying cultural imperialism” (a perfect symbolic mirror for the political imperialism of the Spanish) which precludes us from truly being able to understand those who conceptualize the world differently from us (137). This would add an additional condition for Davidson’s triangulation to be successful as not only does it require the self and the Other to be reacting to the same events in the world but also presupposes a certain degree of sameness in the way each forms those reactions (based on their culture, education, personal experience, etc.), without which no mutual understanding would be possible.

Verheggen responds to this objection on behalf of Davidson by arguing that our sense of objectivity, or the “awareness, no matter how inarticulately held, of the fact that what is thought [or said] may be true or false” is precisely this “sameness” required for communication, even among the radically different (96). As seen above (e.g., in the giraffe example), objectivity is a necessary condition to attribute meaning and Davidson states: “triangulation also gives us the only account of how experience gives a specific content to our thoughts” (129). Language functions as the bridge (the line connecting points of the triangle) between people of diverse perspectives by creating a symbol and fixing to it the same meaning as that which was attributed to the thought, thus allowing those thoughts to be communicated. Language and objectivity are therefore both necessary conditions for triangulation, without which meaningful communication cannot occur. A lack of adequate communication such as in the objection cited by Dapía would not be due to some “radical difference” between the self and the other but rather the fact that, if one or the other of these conditions were missing, one of the interlocutors would simply not be capable of forming meaningful ideas.

But what are we to interpret as a symbol? Borges takes this question to an extreme in “The Writing of the God” as literally any perception could be symbolic of the sacred sentence.

We interpret our own sensory perceptions to derive meaning from them and act on that information, and since our perception of the Other's words and reactions to the world are also sensory, they are also subject to a certain level of interpretation to tie them to the real-world events that they supposedly signify. Triangulation depends on a consistent correspondence between the reactions of the Other and the events in the world which cause them but, due to the access problem of consciousness, the nature of the Other is characterized by its resistance to this coherence or, "the very *unforseeableness* of his reaction" (Levinas 351, emphasis in original).

However, this does not present a serious issue for Davidson as triangulation counterintuitively works best when the Other and the self do *not* agree about causes in the external world. Returning to the example of the giraffe: if, for instance, I and the Other both look at it and we are not sufficiently far apart from one another for one of us to see that it is actually a two-dimensional image rather than an actual giraffe, we would agree in our statements about the external world but both still be wrong. This superficial agreement prevents us from distinguishing that which *is* and that which merely *appears to be* but "this distinction is 'forced' upon them... when further responses to a shared situation no longer correlate. In this case it cannot be simply up to one or other interlocutor to decide which of the responses is the correct one" (Verheggen 101). This suggests that interaction between the self and the Other is subtler and more complex than a simple confirming or denying of one's own beliefs. When the Other disagrees with my statement about a given external cause, I apply the principle of charity in order to see where I may have erred and form a new statement based on any corrections I make. If the Other still does not agree with that corrected statement, the process is repeated until we produce one about which we can both agree, thus refining our understanding of the meanings behind each other's symbolic expressions until we are sure of mutual comprehension.

This process seems highly productive but two possible objections might be raised. First, we have seen how triangulation depends on disagreement to refine our statements and “fix meaning” to them but that is not to say that after an arbitrary number of disagreements, our final agreement will be conclusive evidence that we have understood each other or the world correctly. It could be that we have gotten closer to understanding but may have fallen short once more since, as soon as we agree, the process of refining the precision of our statements comes to an end.⁹ Since there are an indeterminate number of features of any object which may have given rise to the reaction (rather than the object itself being the cause), this might imply that triangulation could only reach perfect objectivity through an infinite series of disagreements asymptotically approaching the truth but never fully arriving at it.¹⁰ Second, since triangulation relies on the principle of charity, it also relies on a good-faith relation with the Other. If (returning again to the case of the cardboard giraffe) I say I see a giraffe and the Other I am talking to is the one who put that cardboard giraffe there in the first place to deceive me, he will agree with me despite having a different understanding, thus undermining the usefulness of triangulation for establishing facts about the world. Given this second objection, it becomes clear that triangulation relies not only on language and objectivity but also some ethical relation to the Other which must precede them both.

The Ethics of Triangulation

⁹ Another quote from “La biblioteca de Babel” highlights this same potential issue: “Un número n de lenguajes posibles usa el mismo vocabulario; en algunos, el símbolo biblioteca admite la correcta definición ubicuo y perdurable sistema de galerías hexagonales, pero biblioteca es pan o pirámide o cualquier otra cosa, y las siete palabras que la definen tienen otro valor. Tú, que me lees, ¿estás seguro de entender mi lenguaje?” (98-99). Even if our ultimate agreement seems to make perfect sense it is not to say that it is not the product of a misunderstanding between the interlocutors.

¹⁰ This interminable chase is reminiscent of Zeno’s paradoxes, another of Borges’s favorite recurring symbols. See his essays “La perpetua carrera de Aquiles y la tortuga” and “Avatares de la tortuga.”

Davidson's triangulation relies on objectivity and language but also states that the two are interdependent: objectivity is necessary for language while language is necessary for objectivity. This has opened his theory to the criticism that it falls back on circular reasoning, but Verheggen argues that it is not that the relation between the two is circular but rather that they both must emerge simultaneously (99). Davidson claims that this triangulation precedes thought making the very interaction between the self and the Other the cause that gives rise to language and objectivity, but he does not elaborate on the mechanism by which this occurs (Davidson 130). In order for triangulation to function correctly, these two concepts must be based on at least one other that precedes them. Given the second objection to triangulation mentioned above, this underlying concept may be explainable in terms of Levinas's theory about the ethical relation which arises in the presentation of the face of the Other to the self. Levinas states that the transcendental presentation of the face of the Other "can occur only by the opening of a new dimension" and so we can think of him as adding a third dimension to Davidson's theory, turning the triangle into a pyramid (351). Since the presentation of the face is phenomenological and affective, it precedes our concepts of language and objectivity and can be seen as giving rise to both of them. As Levinas concisely states, "preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane" (353).

The Face as the Grounding of Objectivity

The Other is necessary to ground the subject's knowledge but may also be a requirement to provide the basis for its ontology. The cartesian *cogito*, separated from the context in which it exists, seeks to take the place of a *causa sui*, an uncaused cause which breaks the infinite regress and allows for the universe to exist. In the Mayan ontology, the priest played a critical role as

timekeeper in maintaining the Long Count, as the continued connection between space and time was essential for the existence of the universe and so, in some ways similar to the *cogito*, the existence of the universe was predicated on the existence of the individual (Balderston 78). To lose track of one would entail the doom of the other, a fact which renders Tzinacán's admission of having "lost count of the years" apocalyptic (Borges 250). This admission is also a resignation in that Tzinacán realizes that he as an individual is no longer capable of serving as the conduit that unites space, time, and humanity and Balderston notes that in such a scenario, "he must be annihilated; the universe must also be annihilated and then created anew" (78). The fact that the universe is not destroyed in the story implies that while Tzinacán may have lost count, someone or something else must not have, in this case the jaguar that, "with secret, unvarying paces measures the time and space of its captivity" (Borges 250). As Tzinacán finds that the isolated individual and its perspective are insufficient to establish a firm connection to the existence of an objective, external world, some intervention by a third party is necessary.

Where the jaguar ("one of the names of the god" (Borges 251) serves as the witness which allows for the continued existence of Tzinacán's universe and as part of the creation story narrated in the *Popol Vuh*, the gods¹¹ command humanity to "try then to see" (Balderston 75). This first presentation of the face of the gods to man and the command to go and see is a fundamental part of the creation of mankind. Similarly, Levinas argues that it is the effect that the presentation of the face of the Other has on the self that calls that self into existence. Davidsonian objectivity is most simply described in terms of identifications and the awareness

¹¹ Deity is always referred to in the singular in the story ("the god") despite the fact that the Mayans were polytheistic. Balderston cites Recinos's translation of the *Popol Vuh* which points out that divinity was understood as duality: the creator god is actually two gods, the creator, Alom (the mother) and the maker, Qaholom (the father) (73-74). Thus by referring to "the god," he may be implying that the otherness within the same is a fundamental attribute of the god he worships.

that these identifications may or may not be correct. Objectivity is therefore based on the finitude of the object identified; since the infinite subsumes all which is finite (every object), to judge something as infinite would preclude the possibility that this judgment could be wrong since there is nothing outside the infinite which that object could be. According to Levinas then, the first identification is the one which the self makes of itself in seeing the face of the Other, “which without this presence would be ignorant of its own finitude” (359). The face of the Other breaks through the “consciousness whose ray emanates from the I,” or the continuous experience of the isolated subject who has no reason to distinguish itself from the world at large, and turns that ray back on itself by calling it into question (349). In essence, the face of the Other singles out the self from the world around it and acts like a mirror through which self-awareness is possible. Once the self has been identified, simultaneously delineating what it is and what it is not, the same principle can be applied to all other objects and give rise to a concept of objectivity, but this first identification is not possible without the intervention of the Other.

It is interesting to note how Tzinacán is finally stirred from the hopelessly infinite regress of his dream: “A bright light woke me. In the darkness above me, there hovered a circle of light. I saw the the face and hands of the jailer, the pulley, the rope, the meat, and the water jugs” (252-253, emphasis mine). It is the Other—especially the embodied Other, his face and his hands—which wakes Tzinacán from the infinite dive into his subconscious and reconnects him to the real world. At the beginning of the story, Tzinacán describes his prison with its three focal points (himself, the jaguar, and the door in the ceiling) and his description of the jailor is notably nebulous compared with the rest. He refers to him simply as “a jailer (whom the years have gradually blurred);” he is basically an empty signifier devoid of content beyond his otherness (250). Now however, he sees the face of the Other which calls him back to reality and causes

him to change the way he identifies himself. Tzinacán determines his identity and ontological status in the world through his interaction with the face of the jailor: “The face is the evidence which makes evidence possible” (Levinas 355). Where at the beginning of the story he is forced to define himself in terms of his loss of culture and the antagonistic Other that took it from him, after the dream he states, “Little by little, a man comes to resemble the shape of his destiny; a man is, in the long run, his circumstances. More than a decipherer or an avenger, more than a priest of the god, I was a prisoner” (Borges 253). It is the face of the Other that causes him to renounce what he was and accept what he is, and as bleak as his condition as a prisoner might be, the act of establishing his own identity shakes him from the illusory world of the dream. And it is this first identification on which his concept of objectivity is based.

The Face Gives Rise to Language

As Levinas describes the presentation of the face of the Other in terms of its affective impact, it is not subject to the problem of interpretation simply because it cannot be interpreted: it “remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign” (Levinas 349). Levinas states that this “resistance” of the other “does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical” (350). The presentation of the face includes a form of communication which predates language; it calls to the self purely through affect and its mere existence implies the commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” The face gives rise to language as in its presentation, the Other “commands me as a master. This command can concern me only inasmuch as I am master myself; consequently this command commands me to command” (361). This command or helpless plea, “Don’t kill me,” calls the subject to “bear witness to oneself, to respond through language to the implicit ethical nature of the reciprocal presentation of two faces: “This

attestation of oneself is possible only as a face, that is, as speech” (353). Thus, “the other... does not limit the freedom of the same; calling it to responsibility, it founds and justifies it” (350). The fact that the Other exists at all (as implied in its face) calls me into being and provides for my own existence. The implicit call in the face of the Other subtends the ethical nature of the relation between us. It allows for my agency to be expressed in my reciprocation of this presentation and the speech which arises from this primordial, affective discourse of the face to face. This is what he means when he says that the command of the face of the Other “can concern me only inasmuch as I am master myself;” the first communication which gives rise to language itself is the vulnerability of two subjects coming together, each with the capacity to kill the Other, while each of their faces pleads to the other for peace.

Shlomy Mualem argues that the otherness which allows for the subject’s self-identity (and its objectivity) can occur in the “trans-substantiation” of a writer creating a character. Mualem agrees that the existence of the subject “lies outside itself,” but seems to argue that this distance may originate in our very self-awareness, “in the Other who is the same within him” (338). According to him, the author “creates himself anew as alterity or magnification during the act of writing without relinquishing his original self” like the peculiar mix of self and otherness between a father and his children (336). From this he concludes that “the external Other, the fellow man, is completely unnecessary for the creation of alterity in relation to the self... If this is in fact the case, aesthetics might replace ethics as first philosophy” (339-40). But as we have seen from Davidson, triangulation is a necessary condition for the objectivity that allows us to make propositional statements. Mualem’s claim that writing makes the external Other unnecessary short-circuits itself because the very act of writing would be impossible without the external Other; the isolated subject would not be able to write because he would not be able to

attribute meaning to words. As Levinas states, “speech proceeds from absolute difference” (349). Mualem’s ultimate conclusion appears to rely on a perplexing circularity (or perhaps simply begs the question) in which the author experiences difference through the act of writing but the act of writing presupposes this difference. Trans-substantiality is possible “during the introvertive move of the author and his writing” but only because the author has interacted with radical alterity in the form of the external Other with whom he first uses language to triangulate (339). Here I reappropriate the words of Levinas and reaffirm that “preexisting the plane of [aesthetics] is the ethical plane” (Levinas 353).

“The Writing of the God” seems to echo Levinas by suggesting that the question about why he does not speak the words of the god’s script at the end is not a matter of ontology (or aesthetics) one but of ethics. Laraway views Tzinacán’s silence not as a defeat but as a potential gesture of a tacit resistance since, “any striving now on our part—precisely as an instrumental endeavor—would only serve to enmesh us further in our current world-system” (297). By refusing to participate in the world-system of conquerors and the conquered, Tzinacán’s resistance stands outside of and ungraspable to the European perspective and therefore resists it by calling it into question. His otherness with respect to the Spanish and to the reader mirrors Levinas’ argument about the way the Other is presented to the self, since by calling into question the universality of our perspective, it creates the discourse which allows that perspective to exist. Tzinacán is unable to communicate the content of the vision because the infinite resists the grasp of our finite minds. Similarly, the face of the Other as a signifier of the infinite presents itself as an “ethical resistance” in that its radical difference can never be enveloped within the same, and yet it defines the existence of the same as fundamentally relational, a relation “whose first word is obligation” (353). Levinas states that “The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill,” but

having seen how both he and Pedro de Alvarado fit as mere parts serving the same whole (the grand design of the universe), to kill the Other would only serve to damage himself and subvert the mystical understanding which the vision granted him (351). “To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely” (Levinas 351). But since Tzinacán states of his vision, “the mere sight of that Wheel enabled me to understand all things, without end,” he is brought to a perfect understanding of his obligation to the other, regardless of the crimes which that other may have committed against him (Borges 253). Murder and this perfect understanding are mutually exclusive and now that his understanding is infinite, now that he has seen¹² Pedro de Alvarado in the vision, both his face and how he truly is without the mediation of symbols and interpretation, he cannot possibly speak the words and kill him.

Conclusions

Borges conditions the reader to expect a certain outcome after Tzinacán learns to read the god’s script but, true to his authorial style, this expectation is frustrated on a fundamental level. This is accomplished through the portrayal of Tzinacán’s narrow perspective on which his actions seemed justified, juxtaposed with the infinite perspective of the divine union which shows them to be completely irrational. When he says, “Forty syllables, fourteen words, and I, Tzinacán, would rule the lands once ruled by Moctezuma,” we want him to say the words because the first person narrative and the sympathy which we feel for him as a character frame him as the “hero” of the story (Borges 253). The twist typical of so many of Borges’ stories

¹² Among the infinite object which the protagonist of “El Aleph” (who is called “Borges”) sees he states: “vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo... vi mi cara y mis vísceras, vi tu cara” (*El Aleph* 205-207). Both he and Tzinacán saw literally everything. Since “Borges” sees infinite eyes, or faces, and even the face of the reader, it seems safe to infer that Tzinacán must have seen Alvarado’s face as well as that of every other conquistador.

comes in the frustration of this desire and the tension caused by the gap between the reader's reaction to the narration and Tzinacán's own reaction. As Laraway states, "the abolition of the autonomous modern subject opens up new ways of (re)thinking subjectivity and the ontological level at which political resistance is properly undertaken" (305). The subversion of the reader's expectations is a perfect symbol of the problem of interpretation with regard to the Other and creates a sort of scale symmetry which transfers the epistemic doubts from the fictional plane to the plane of the reader's lived experience. We begin reading the story by identifying with Tzinacán as the first person subject with relation to whom the Spanish are the Other and project onto him our own sense of morality and justice. But the fact that his ultimate actions do not cohere with our moral schemata alerts us to his actual otherness (with respect to us as readers) and makes us aware of the ways in which we have misinterpreted him.

Borges evokes the uncanny unlike any other author by manipulating our perspectives in such a way that whatever existential problem the fictional characters experience is ultimately turned on the reader; to quote from his famous poem, "Chess," "God moves the player and he the piece." In a sense, he is the "faceless god who is behind the gods" which Tzinacán sees in his vision (253). Tzinacán believes himself to be a "player" (a subject) as he interprets the writing of the god but once he has seen the grand design of the universe, he finds himself to be merely a "piece" (object). The subject/object duality is inherent to his being, as well as that of his god as they are all creations within the nested universes of Borges's fictions. What of the reader? Are we players or pieces? Maybe the only way to answer this would be to step back and see from the infinite, all-encompassing perspective described in "The Writing of the God," or rather, the writing of Borges.

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