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**THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF MEMORY: FROM *HAMLET*,
PRINCE OF DENMARK TO JORGE LUIS BORGES'
*SHAKESPEARE'S MEMORY***

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Abstract: *The Romantic poet Novalis once rhetorically asked: “Where are we really going?” “Always home.” For a Shakespearean scholar like Borges’ Sörgel in “Shakespeare’s Memory”, the path towards “home” turns out to be the exploration of a most unusual gift, the very memory of the great Elizabethan. The process is similar although not identical in scope to Hamlet’s attempt to realign time through keeping alive the memory of his murdered father. My aim in this paper is to explore the process of preserving memory and its relation to identity, mourning and dread in “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” and Borges’ “Shakespeare’s Memory”. The theoretical framework is defined by the concept of “eternal return”, as examined by Nietzsche and Mircea Eliade.*

Keywords: *curse, Eliade, eternal return, Nietzsche, memory*

1. Introduction

The literary critic’s ontology of labour is to trouble ‘the dead’ or, in Greenblatt’s finer formulation, to commence any interpretational exercise

“with the desire to speak with the dead” (Greenblatt 1988:1). The voyage Shakespearean critics eagerly undertake towards the great Elizabethan’s literary house is an act of worship accompanied by one of incessant remembering of the creation in the absence of the creator. Thus they come to resemble Mircea Eliade’s ‘ancient man’ who ritually re-enacts the elemental, cosmogonic myths believed to have shaped his own reality, with the aim – albeit in all probability unconscious – of defining his position in the world by understanding his relation with the source, the arché, the creator/s and their makings. In Eliade’s words:

If one goes to the trouble of penetrating the authentic meaning of an archaic myth or symbol, one cannot but observe that this meaning shows a recognition of a certain situation in the cosmos and that, consequently, it implies a metaphysical position (Eliade 1959:3)

Incessant remembering sets out to prevent the potential fallacy of declaring Shakespeare’s works exhausted of meanings, given the staggering amount of critical works already in existence. Failing to prevent it would signify the acceptance of the ‘death’ of Shakespearean studies and would jeopardise not only their future but also their past. For, to have lived once is not to have lived at all; for it to have been the focus of intense interpretational exercise only once (or a *finite* amount of times) is to declare the very ‘non-being’, or ‘tragic absence’, or ‘death’ of Shakespeare’s oeuvre. “Einmal ist keinmal” says the German proverb, which translates as “one occurrence is not significant”. Then, what about *the man* Shakespeare? What about the possible single “occurrence” of his life as an individual, not as a writer? How dreadful is the sentence of singularity in this case?

With these preliminary questions in mind, this paper sets out to discuss Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* and Jorge Luis Borges’

Shakespeare's Memory as texts which address similar themes: the complex process of memory preservation (personal in the former, professional through personal in the latter), and its relation to identity, mourning and dread. The theoretical framework is defined by the concept of "eternal return", as examined by Nietzsche and Eliade. This first part of our paper will offer a synopsis of the theoretical framework employed, while the second will focus on the discussion of the two chosen texts. The second part also aims at establishing a reading of Borges' short story as a variation on and an extension of some of the most important themes and concepts raised by *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, albeit with a different focus.

2. Eliade's Myth of Eternal Return and Nietzsche's Myth of Eternal Recurrence

Although a brief volume, Eliade's 1949 *Le mythe de l'éternel retour: archetypes et répétition* (translated in 1954 as *The Myth of the Eternal Return*) was quite influential in the academic world (notwithstanding later criticism) and has come to constitute a reference point for critics from different disciplines who have a vested interest in comparatism as a method. At the heart of Eliade's critical thought lies the distinction between 'the sacred' and 'the profane'. In his view, "traditional societies [...] revolt against concrete, historical time" and display "nostalgia for a periodical return to the mythical time of the beginning of things, to the "Great Time" (Eliade 1959:xi). Such societies show "hostility toward every attempt at autonomous "history", that is, at history not regulated by archetypes" (Eliade 1959:xi). The distinction between 'the sacred' and 'the profane', centred as it is on the concepts of the sacredness and the profanity of "space" and "time", serves to also delineate that between "the

archaic/traditional man” and the “historical man”. The former of these is able to distinguish between two levels of existence: (1) the Sacred (Gods, mythical ancestors, or any other beings to whom the world’s structure is owed) and (2) the Profane, concerned with the linear world of historical events. For the “objects and acts” to “acquire a value” and thus “become real” the traditional man has to see them as participating “in a reality that transcends them” (Eliade 1959:3-4). By contrast, the “historical man” whom Eliade considers the product of “post-Hegelian philosophical currents – notably Marxism, historicism, and existentialism” – sees this “certain metaphysical “valorization” of human existence” as faulty, since he is convinced that he himself “*is insofar as he makes himself, within history*” (Eliade 1959:xi; emphasis mine). In this imagined conflict between “the traditional man” and “the historical man”, Eliade sides with “the traditional man” who is well aware of the inability of history to represent experience for him. Thus, he chooses various paths to abolish it periodically, either by metamorphosing it into “transhistorical myths and archetypes, or by endowing it with “metahistorical meaning (cyclical theory, eschatological significations, and so on)” (Eliade 1959:150-1).

Although focused on the same model which has possibly informed human existence since “*illo tempore*”, that of ‘repetition’, ‘return’, ‘re-creation’, Nietzsche’s ‘eternal recurrence’ differs from Eliade’s ‘eternal return’. This is a theoretical difference made more poignant by the German philosopher’s inclusion of human feelings of anxiety shading into dread at the mere thought of endless re-enactments of events past; moreover, it is precisely this relentless interrogation of the said feelings which constitutes one of the constants of Nietzsche’s philosophy. One of the most-quoted

paragraphs in *The Gay Science* advances his hypothesis on the eternal repetitiveness of every detail of human existence:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence -- even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine"? If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are, or perhaps crush you. (Nietzsche 1974:341)

The confessed overpowering and inescapable dread at the mere thought of such inexhaustible occurrence also appears in *The Will to Power*, where Nietzsche discusses the possibility of "the world as a circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game ad infinitum", with "no permanence, no duration, no once-and-for-all" (Nietzsche 1968:549). The solution that Nietzsche formulates so as to reconcile humanity to the Sisyphean task of endlessly replicating existence is in itself a test, at times not less dreadful than the malady of the circular movement. Yet this is for him an unequivocal affirmation of life, even more, an opportunity for greatness. When he pleads for "freedom from morality", for reinventing pain as instrument, as the originator of pleasure that is able to dissolve the cumulative consciousness of displeasure, and for "amor fati",

i.e. the desire for “nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity” (Nietzsche 1968:545-546), he is actually celebrating life as it is, not as it should be. Fate, therefore, is not Being, but Becoming, thus possibly an endless chain of opportunities. If embraced, this obviously stoic and unreserved acceptance of the circularity of life encapsulated by the Nietzschean concept of “amor fati” is able to create a universe marked by the “Dionysian [...] of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight”, what the philosopher calls “my “beyond good and evil”, “without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal” (Nietzsche 1968:550).

3. Hamlet – unwilling slave of Mnemosyne

As Lees-Jeffries argues, generally Shakespeare’s plays “are mnemotechnic”; as such, they represent “(necessarily memorable) events as something repeatable, even re-liveable; they represent completed events, whether based on ‘real life’ or not, in real time” (Lees-Jeffries 2013:6). The “pictorial style” of “the dark habited young man gazing contemplatively into the sightless eyes of a skull he is holding”, his overpowering grasp on “our critical and theoretical memories”, claim *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* as one of the most haunting and haunted plays of all times (Carlson 2001:5). This archetypal play on memory is activated by the Ghost’s famous plea “Remember me!”, followed by a no less anguished reply/plea “Must I remember?” and the almost inaudible addition: “and if so, how?”. I would suggest here a reader’s extension of Hamlet’s thought and a shifted focus; from the modalities of preserving memory to the content of what is worthy of preservation. This shifted emphasis allows me to comment on how the universe of the play seen through Hamlet’s eyes has to become an archaic

world, functioning on the constant re-playing of archetypal events. As I aim to establish, it is through the emphasis on the *facts* to be remembered that Hamlet simultaneously accomplishes (arguably unwillingly at first) the sacralisation of his father, his placing into the realm of the gods and archetypal heroes, and his own refusal to be confused by the pettiness of the present, the profane “now” as opposed to what Eliade would have called the sacred “*illo tempore*”, the time of the fathers.

Significantly, the mythologising of Hamlet senior is initiated even before the fateful encounter between the young prince and his father’s ghost. Thus, Marcellus and Bernardo ‘recognize’ “the very armour he had on/When he the ambitious Norway combated” (1.1.60-61), together with the way he “frown’d when, in an angry parle/ He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice” (1.1.62-63). That is to say, the physical attributes of the first Hamlet as recalled by those who accompanied him into battle are those of a mighty hero who can effortlessly vanquish his enemies; thus, to employ Eliade’s words, he comes to constitute a “paradigm”, an “exemplary model”, a “myth” of prowess and valour, worthy of emulation. The appearance of this paradigmatic ancestor consequently superimposes on Hamlet the agonising duty to remember and compels him to become “the archaic man”, at odds with the trivial immediacy of history. Nonetheless, from the very onset of the play, the anguish and the barely disguised dread which accompany Hamlet’s act of remembering made compulsive by his father’s ghost both bear witness to the *curse* quality of memory. It therefore suggests a Nietzschean despair, since the boundary line of ‘enough’ memory to cherish the dead may easily be transgressed so that one reaches the point of *becoming* the dead, perhaps melting into the dead and endlessly replicating “every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything

unutterably small or great” in life, “all in the same succession and sequence” (Nietzsche 1974:341).

A key scene in the play is the emotionally-charged dialogue between Gertrude and Hamlet in the Queen’s chamber, the famous closet/bedroom scene. There the stark physical contrast between the dead father and the usurping Claudius (described in detail by Hamlet) is instrumental in reinforcing the image of a noble, handsome, omnipotent warrior-king whose successor is unworthy and vile. In his son’s eyes, the dead king is elevated to the realm of the immortal gods and even surpasses them, since he is a sum of their most significant attributes: “Hyperion’s curls”, the front of Jove himself, An eye like Mars, to threaten and command, A station like the herald Mercury” (3.4.56-58). By contrast, Claudius, the new husband, is “like a mildew’d ear/Blasting his wholesome brother” (3.4.63-64), a deadly but contemptible antagonist who, also because of his pathetic exterior, both confirms and erases the ‘weight’, the significance, of the primordial clash of the Titans against the Olympians and transforms it from a cosmic battle into a cowardly act of betrayal. Clearly, this Claudius is Seth nailing down the coffin of his noble brother Hamlet/Osiris.

Another example supporting my reading of Hamlet as “the archaic man” who rejects the ‘trade’ of “the historical man” is the young prince’s constant repudiation of Claudius’ and Gertrude’s repeated entreaties to give up mourning his father. Thus, I agree with Kostic’s inspired suggestion that we should read *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* as an indirect reply to Castiglione’s *The Courtier*. As she details it, for Castiglione “the court represented the new secular setting for the cultivation of genuinely courteous or virtuous men” who should practise “sprezzatura” – a manner that has the appearance of ease and spontaneity, but is in fact, carefully

calculated and studied” (Kostic 2013:2). Hamlet’s Elsinore is a micro-universe of “power games and murderous intrigues” where “sprezzatura” as “the cynical strategy of survival” actually becomes “tragic self-betrayal leading to madness and death” for the prince (Kostic 2013:2). In view of my theoretical reading I interpret Hamlet’s refusal to conform to the stifling rules of “sprezzatura” as a ‘declaration of independence’ of “the archaic man”, forever at odds with history, in this particular case history made by a ‘modernising’ Claudius for the advancement of his own interests. Thus, Hamlet as “the archaic man” distrusts the ability of Claudius, wedded as he is to history, to envisage a world inhabitable by all, for the benefit of all, in spite of the newly-installed king’s attempts early in the play to pose as chief mourner of his brother, compelled by personal and state obligation to shoulder the burden of his inheritance. In Eliade’s words:

It is becoming more and more doubtful if modern man can make history. For history either makes itself or it tends to be made by an increasingly small number of men who not only prohibit the mass of their contemporaries from directly or indirectly intervening in the history they are making (or which the small group is making), but in addition have at their disposal means sufficient to force each individual to endure, for its own part, the consequences of this history, that is, to live immediately and continuously in dread of history. Modern man’s boasted freedom to make history is illusory for nearly the whole of the human race (Eliade 1959: xxiii).

As previously suggested, my reading of Hamlet as an “archaic man”, whose values are fundamental for the re-construction of an ancient and sacred society, is entirely dependent on the constant re-playing, hence remembering of archetypal events. In a passage from *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser’s heroes visit a castle in the shape of a human body, with three

interconnected chambers: the chamber of imagination, with the eyes as windows full of buzzing flies moving in front of fantastical wall paintings, the middle room, that of reason's, and the chamber of memory, an ancient library provided with the services of a librarian and a 'fetcher'. As Lees-Jeffries argues, both Spenser and Sir Thomas Elyot (in his "The Castle of Health") show how "the workings of the mind were thought of in spatial, physical terms in the early modern period", when "reason, memory and imagination were seen as interrelated and interdependent" (Lees-Jeffries 2013:14). It is my contention that, as a play-within-a-play, "The Mousetrap" acts as a "fetcher", a "librarian" designed to counteract the possibly lethal effects of the "buzzing flies in front of fantastical wall paintings" of imagination (Hamlet's and others' fears for the health of his mind) and restore the supremacy of the middle or "reason" room. Thus, this play that the young prince stages and carefully adapts in the hope of bringing about Claudius' full confession of guilt is memory "not just as a matter of remembering as a simple storage, but of the organization and orderly retrieval of what is remembered" (Lees-Jeffries 2013:14). It is also a sacred re-enacting of a primordial event and as such it constitutes Hamlet's 'solution' to how to prevent the degrading present from taking over the sacredness of the past. Significantly, Claudius as "the historical man", well-versed in the world of texts, letters, and intrigues which can be carried on through letters, fails to identify "*things*, the matter or sentiments which those words express"; furthermore, "his lack of response to the overt staging of the scene of the murder in the dumb show, as opposed to the ornately expressed sentiments in the play over, makes this clear" (Lees-Jeffries 2013:34; emphasis in the original text). Those *things* are, in my reading as inspired by Eliade, sacred things, sacred archetypal events, for which the

poisoned/poisoning mind of Claudius, “the historical man” can find no factual employment.

Nevertheless, the tragic ending of the play demonstrates the man Hamlet’s failure to exist as “archaic man” and escape from the multiple traps laid by history into the time of the fathers. We would do well at this point to remember that a play on memory such as *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* should remember its beginnings; interestingly, in spite of a fated accumulation of events, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* only manages to come full circle, with its dénouement faithfully replicating its commencement. Thus, the prince’s failed attempt to annihilate present history by taking refuge in the world of the glorious past is foreshadowed in his very first soliloquy (1.2.129-59) on the problems of memory and its instability. As pointed out by Lees-Jeffries, Hamlet’s attempts to draw parallels between his father and Hyperion, Claudius and a satyr, half-man, half-beast, his mother and Niobe, and himself and Hercules, classic commonplaces as they are, prove insufficient (19). However:

[...] they have become negative exemplars: Claudius is not like the sun-god, Gertrude is not like the archetypal mourning woman, and Hamlet himself is not like the strong-man demi-god of classical mythology. The speech’s choppy syntax reinforces this sense of disjunction: Hamlet’s mind is well-furnished with his store of commonplaces, but in his grief he can no longer deploy them appropriately (Lee-Jeffries 2013:20).

Hence, the substance of the play centres on Hamlet’s endeavours to restore the value of the commonplaces and rescue them from the denigrating effects of a “time out of joint”. His failure to reinstall cosmic order so as to counteract the chaos of immediacy anticipates the crisis of modern man and

justifies the barely contained despair at the heart of Eliade's *Myth of Eternal Return*.

4. Herman Sörgel – willing slave to Mnemosyne

This King Shakespeare does he not shine, in crowned sovereignty, over us all, as the noblest, gentlest, yet strongest of rallying-signs; indestructible; really more valuable in that point of view than any other means or appliance whatsoever? We can fancy him as radiant aloft over all Nations of Englishmen, thousand years hence. From Paramatta, from New York, wheresoever, under what sort of Parish-Constable soever, English men and women are, they will say to one another, 'Yes, this Shakespeare is ours; we produced him, we speak and think by him; we are of one blood and kind with him. (Thomas Carlyle, *The Hero as Poet*, 1841).

The paragraph above can be safely used as the motto of Borges' short story, which is my second focus in this paper. To further my analysis, I will commence with a synopsis of *Shakespeare's Memory*. At a conference in London, Shakespeare scholar Hermann Sörgel is introduced to Daniel Thorpe. After a night at a pub, Thorpe, a strange, melancholic man, offers Sörgel a most unusual gift, the very memory of William Shakespeare, which, in his capacity as an army doctor, he himself had accepted from a dying enlisted man. For the gift to work, both the offer and the acceptance must be made out loud. Sörgel accepts and gradually starts remembering Shakespeare's bits and pieces of existence and experience in a fragmentary and chaotic manner. The man's memories do not make the poet, though, and any potential professional ambitions of Sörgel's remain unfulfilled. Soon, the memories of the man Shakespeare become overwhelming, to the point of alienating Sörgel from his own modern world. Crushed under the unbearable weight of another's recollections, Sörgel decides to transfer the

gift to someone else. He starts calling people at random, although he hangs up when women or children answer. Finally a man's voice answers and accepts the offer. In a postscript, a chastised Sörgel, miraculously cured by the power of the music of Bach, informs the reader that although he is now a Professor Emeritus who shuffles around the library, at dawn he has the distinct feeling that the person dreaming is that other man.

My contention here is that Borges' story can be read as a variation on and an extension of some of the most important themes and concepts introduced by *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, albeit with a different focus. Both Hamlet and Sörgel are exposed to the perils and the unbearable weight of memory, notwithstanding differences in method and aim. For a Shakespearean scholar and not only for such people, as Carlyle's paragraph states and Borges' story illustrates, the royal poet Shakespeare determines the fate of those who make it the purpose of their lives to ensure his eternal glory and fame. Shakespeare thus transcends "kingship boundaries" and becomes the cosmos for Sörgel, the Shakespearean scholar who, when offered the playwright's memory, feels "as if he had been offered the ocean" (Borges 2001:124). In Eliade's words:

[...] of course, for the man of the archaic societies, the Cosmos too has a "history", if only because it is the creation of the gods and is held to have been organized by supernatural beings or mythical heroes. But this "history" of the Cosmos and of human society is a "sacred history", preserved and transmitted through *myths*" (Eliade 1953:viii; emphasis added)

Furthermore, this "sacred history" can be reiterated *ad infinitum*, with myths as representations for ceremonials that "periodically reactualize the tremendous events that occurred at the beginning of time" and "preserve

and transmit the paradigms, the exemplary models, for all the responsible activities in which men engage” (Eliade 1953:viii). In the present reading, the many fragmented memories belonging to Shakespeare that Sörgel is gradually able to access can be seen to constitute so many *ad hoc* myths; chaotic and random as they are, they confess to a desire, intensely felt by the protagonist, to transform them into what Eliade would describe as potential sacred material, “paradigms” for life and possibly for scholarly success. Sörgel’s panegyric on the great Elizabethan foreshadows this most unusual plot, with him stating that his “fate has been Shakespeare” (Borges 2001:122). By contrast, his own academic accomplishments are enumerated in a quasi-self-deprecatory tone intended to evoke the deeply felt dissatisfaction of the scholar with the quality and/or quantity of his work:

The curious reader may have chanced to leaf through my *Shakespearean Chronology*, which I once considered essential to a proper understanding of the text [...] Nor is it beyond the realm of possibility that the reader will recall a protracted diatribe against an emendation inserted by Theobald into his critical edition of 1734 [...] Today I am taken a bit aback by the uncivil tone of those pages, which I might almost say were written by another man. In 1914 I drafted but did not publish, an article on the compound words that the Hellenist and dramatist George Chapman coined for his version of Homer [...] A scattering of critical and philological “notes”, as they are called, signed with my initials, complete, I believe, my literary biography. Although perhaps I might also be permitted to include an unpublished translation of *Macbeth*, which I began in order to distract my mind from the thought of the death of my brother, Otto Julius, who fell on the western front in 1917 (Borges 2001:123)

I have quoted this passage almost in full because its significance is bound up with the sense that we are hearing the story of a man disenchanted with his personal life/history and that becoming another holds a promise of

true greatness, of unencumbered access to what matters most. Scattered, trivial, unpublished material can potentially be replaced with the micro/macro myths of the man Shakespeare and his memories which, insignificant as they might be, may yet surpass in value and intensity those of Sörgel. The passage also reiterates the motivation for Sörgel's later passionate acceptance of Shakespeare's memory. Thus, it anticipates a mute longing, a desire to break free from the manacles of mediocre academic *history* and "perchance" become "the traditional man" whose life is meaningful since it centres on a continuous re-enactment of archetypal events, in this particular case, Shakespeare's memories.

Sörgel's reaction when offered the unusual gift is a logical consequence of previous bitter self-assessments: "I sat thinking. Had I not spent a lifetime, colorless yet strange, in pursuit of Shakespeare? Was it not fair that at the end of my labors I find him?" (Borges 2001:125). This is very close to Hamlet's acceptance of his father's ghost and the burden that comes with it: "Ay, thou poor Ghost, while memory holds a seat/In this distracted globe. Remember thee! Yea, from the table of my memory/I'll wipe away all trivial fond records" (1.5.96-100). In fact, it surpasses Hamlet's conflict defined by mere filial duty, since Sörgel is actually willing to erase himself and *become* Shakespeare: "I would possess Shakespeare, and possess him as no one had ever before – not in love, or friendship, or even hatred: I, in some way, would be Shakespeare" (Borges 2001:126).

In arguably his most famous novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera describes Nietzsche's "myth of eternal recurrence" in the following terms:

Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful or sublime, its horror, sublimity and beauty mean nothing. (Kundera 1999:3)

Kundera's analysis of Nietzsche's ideas reinforces my perception of an intertextual dialogue between *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* and *Shakespeare's Memory*, complete with speculations on the idea of endless recurrence. As already stated, the connection between the Ghost and Hamlet is replicated in that between Shakespeare and Sörgel, with the Ghost and Shakespeare cast as the source and the reason for what Greenblatt calls "compulsive remembrance" (Greenblatt 2001:214). Moreover, the very scarcity of sources regarding Shakespeare's *inner* life, the lack of any autobiography, diary, memoirs (or, for that matter, any reliable biography), has troubled his exegetes and admirers, Borges among them. Therefore, I suggest that Borges' granting Shakespeare a life by engineering minutiae of existence can be read as Shakespeare's own fictionalised "call for remembrance". As stated by Borges, granted with reference to a more and more anguished Sörgel 'inhabited' by the character of Shakespeare: "The wish of all things, Spinoza says, is to continue to be what they are" (Borges 2001:130). Failing that, this short story seems to suggest, one can continue being if being is repeated *ad nauseam*, a perspective that Nietzsche discusses in his works.

By proposing a Nietzschean lens as instrumental in deciphering Borges' story, I choose to go for the latter as the author who takes a determined stance away from Alfred Corn's interesting assessment of Shakespeare's own grim epitaph, perceived as:

[...] the first expression of what was later to become a fear often mentioned by writers: the fear of having the record of their deeds recalled and discussed after death. Anxiety concerning the judgment that posterity is likely to make explains all the burning of letters, diaries, and “Aspern papers” we know about, from Byron to Henry James to Auden, and is encapsulated in Wilde’s acute comment: “Modern biography has added to death a new terror.”(Corn 2011)

Shakespeare’s Memory consciously breaks the curse contained in the epitaph, originates an initially trivial hagiography, and presents it as material that can be transmitted from generation to generation, travelling across East and West, informing the minds of ordinary people, motivating them and ultimately coming to possess their own lives. The harmless first memories (a string of words from Chaucer’s ABC, a simple melody, the harsh *r*’s and open vowels of the sixteenth century, apparent instances of inadvertence) are “in spite of the splendour of some metaphors, a good deal more auditory than visual” (Borges 2001:126). Jacques Derrida reminds us that in *Phaedrus* Plato equated speech with presence and writing with absence, and that the very presence of the speaker validates authority, unlike the presence of the written text which, open as it is to multiple interpretations, ceases to both author and authorize (Derrida 1997:135). In Borges’ story, the protagonist who starts to sound as Shakespeare did, listen to what Shakespeare did and recite what Shakespeare did actually does more to *re-live* him than any focusing on scholarly commentaries on his written works could have possibly achieved. Through this initial audio dimension of Shakespeare’s memory Sörgel regenerates the great Elizabethan and establishes him as presence, as exemplary hero.

Progressively audio metaphors transmute into visual nightmares, and with them “the gradual transformation of my dreams” (Borges 2001:127),

“regions, broad regions of shadow” (Borges 2001:128), and even “one morning [...] a sense of guilt deep within his memory” (Borges 2001:129). Sörgel experiences increasing alienation, as “the great torrent of Shakespeare threatened to flood my own modest stream”, starts to gradually forget the language of his parents and, “since personal identity is based on memory”, comes to fear for his own sanity (Borges 2001:130). In Nietzsche’s words:

Imagine the most extreme example, a human being who does not possess the power to forget, who is damned to see becoming everywhere; *such a human being would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself*, would see everything flow apart in turbulent particles, and would lose himself in this stream of becoming; like the true student of Heraclitus, in the end he would hardly even dare to lift a finger. All action requires forgetting, just as the existence of all organic things requires not only light, but darkness as well.’(Nietzsche 1995:132; emphasis mine)

Shakespeare’s Memory is not the only Borges text that can be read from a Nietzschean perception of the possible dread contained in the myth of “eternal return”. One of his earlier stories, *Funes, the Memorious*, also focuses on the character’s inability to rescue meaning from the hectic and randomly juxtaposed acts of our lives. In that sense, Funes’ life is rendered as impossible as Sörgel’s by the terrible dread and anxiety of this dilemma. The solution both in *Funes, the Memorious* and in *Shakespeare’s Memory* lies in what may be called with a Nietzschean twist ‘the will to forgetfulness’. In Ronald Christ’s words:

Our principal antidotes to universality and immortality are death and forgetting. Because they confirm our mortality and our individual identity, death and forgetting are what make the universe bearable, real for us (Christ 1986:53)

The erasure of Sörgel as an individual with an identity distinct from Shakespeare's, or alternatively of him irreversibly becoming a split subject, two in one, is only just prevented by means of a last deliberate act. The Shakespearean scholar transfers the gift/curse of Shakespeare's memory onto someone else, a random voice at the end of a telephone line, although having once been 'infested' with the Other (regardless of the invader's greatness) he fears that "the guest, the spectre, would never abandon me" (Borges 2001:131). There is a painful admission of defeat contained in this barely suppressed dread of permanent haunting. It is the defeat of the scholar who finally comprehends that the attempt to live as a re-enactment of Shakespeare, regardless of how valuable the experience may be, signifies erasing his own identity and signing his own death sentence.

5. Conclusion

In this brief study, my aim was to read the characters of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, and Shakespearean scholar Herman Sörgel as protagonists whose literary trajectory may be described by their various attempts to evade history, so that, in Eliade's words, they come to experience "hostility toward every attempt at autonomous "history", that is, at history not regulated by archetypes" (Eliade 1959: xi). This convoluted flight from actuality, elevating as it appears to be, nevertheless nurtures the seeds of an overpowering anxiety, that of becoming what they invoke and thus losing their own identity in the process. Both Hamlet and Sörgel, after experiencing the problematic ecstasy of the encounter with "the sacred",

‘embodied’ by father and literary hero, are crushed by the very magnitude of the archaic. For both, therefore, time will implacably remain “out of joint”.

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