

BORGES AND BUDDHISM

THE QUESTION OF KARMA

Introduction

Since Schopenhauer's time in the nineteenth century many western writers have written about Buddhism. Scholars have traced its history, elucidated its doctrines, and done sociological studies of communities shaped by it. Philosophers have probed and praised its ideas. Poets have been moved by its personalities and the legends attaching to them. Lafcadio Hearn wrote sympathetically about the Buddhism of Japan, and others have done likewise for other Buddhist countries. To my knowledge however, only one major western literary figure has devoted a whole book to Buddhism in its entirety, the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) whose *Qué es el Budismo?* appeared ten years before his death. It is a short book but admirably comprehensive thanks to Borges' power of compression and the clarity of his style when dealing with abstruse ideas. Its interest lies both in its content and its authorship, since Borges was one of the last century's most gifted and most intriguing writers. I suggested its translation to a Buddhist publisher some years ago, but to my knowledge there has not been an English version. Brought out with an appreciative introductory essay it would be a notable addition to Buddhist literature in English. But as things stand, although there must be many Anglophone Buddhists who know some Spanish, I have never seen or heard the name of Borges mentioned in a Buddhist connexion in the three decades since the publication of *Qué es el Budismo?*.

It was not the only thing that Borges wrote about the Dharma. Years earlier he produced an essay, *Forms of a Legend*, on the mysterious presence of the Buddha in Christian hagiography, in the story of Barlaam and Josaphat, the origin of which latter name is said to be the word 'bodhisattva'. And the year after the publication of the book he gave a lecture on Buddhism which may be taken as his last word on the subject. It forms the centrepiece of a series of seven lectures delivered in Buenos Aires, the others ranging from the *Divine Comedy* to *Blindness* (Borges had lost his sight finally in his fifties, more than twenty years previously). Although not a Buddhist then or before or later, he had acquired through reading an extensive knowledge of the Dharma; which was enhanced not long after by a visit with his part-Japanese second wife to 'the beautiful labyrinth' of Japan. The phrase is an arresting one for Borges is, above all, the poet of the labyrinth, though not as a symbol of beauty. For all that, the infirm 80-year old found the country to be a place of wonder and delight, charmed by everything, from the ritual of the tea-ceremony to the doctrines of Shinto. He sat through nine hours of Noh-drama spellbound in his darkness. He would have known that, about a century before, ex-President Grant came away from a performance of Noh saying to his imperial hosts, 'You must not lose this', at a time when the modernizing spirit was sweeping traditional things into oblivion.

He spent a night in the holy city of Nara, where what is reputedly the largest statue of the Buddha has its abode. Later he would mention Nara in a poem as one of his '*patrias*', homelands, with a small number of other places, among them Buenos Aires, where he was born, and Geneva, where he had spent some of his boyhood years and where he would die.

He met a Buddhist nun and questioned her in a quite personal manner. He had a searching conversation with a zen monk with experience of satori. Zen seems to have been the form of Buddhism which most appealed to Borges. He thought it the closest to the original teaching, and of course its rich artistic history and influence meant much to him. He liked it that in Zen the most common acts could be infused with a religious spirit to the enhancement of everyday life.

Biographical

As said above, Buenos Aires was the birthplace of Jorge Luis Borges, in 1899. He was very conscious of his nationality and of the distinguished family into which he was born. His father was a writer, although an unfulfilled one, and encouraged his children's artistic development: his daughter Norah would become a noted painter and illustrator of magazines and books, among them her brother's. The household was bilingual, the paternal grandmother being English. From an early age Jorge was reading books in English — Mark Twain, Stevenson, Rider Haggard among them. He developed a special admiration for Kipling, whose stories he would eventually rate above those of Henry James and Franz Kafka.

Early in 1914 the family sailed to Europe and settled in Geneva. Later in that year the Great War broke out and they had to stay in neutral Switzerland for the duration. Jorge learned French and German and became adept at Latin, which he continued to read until his sight failed.

He seems to have only gradually woken to the reality of the war, whose trenches reached from the English Channel to the Swiss border. Now he discovered Expressionism and its revulsion from the carnage being wrought upon the youth of Europe. This movement would have an enduring effect on his ideas.

After the war the family moved to Spain, where the young Borges became part of the literary *vanguardia* and immersed himself in the culture of the mother-country of his homeland. Returning to Argentina in 1921 he set about spreading the new ideas he had absorbed, founding a magazine, *Prisma*, and pasting its progressive pages on the walls of Buenos Aires. Among his ideas was the Buddhist-sounding rejection of 'the superstition of the self'. In this he was not alone; at that time some of the more adventurous spirits in the intellectual life of Argentina were similarly disposed, and two of them had a major influence on him. These were Macedonio Fernandez, a stimulating if disorganized thinker, and Xul Solar, a painter and inventor of languages and games. (It would be wrong to

infer from this that their only point of interest is their connexion with Borges. They are serious figures in their own right.)

Even in his most modernistic phase Borges avoided extremes. He seems not to have gone through a communist phase, nor was he susceptible to the brassy appeal of Futurism or other trends urging a radical break with the past and worship of the machine. He was a humanist first and last, a lover of history and of ideas for themselves, not without scepticism as to progress whether in the arts or in politics.

His first book appeared in 1923, a collection of poems, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. The title tells us something important about him: that he is primarily an urban writer. He strays into the pampas now and then and was an admirer of the gaucho epic *Martin Fierro*, but the city, and Buenos Aires above all, is the locus of his creativity. Cities are of their nature labyrinthine, not only on account of their often chaotic streetscapes, but also because in cities are found great libraries, labyrinths in themselves, and through their books generators of labyrinths in the mind. Most appropriately Borges became a librarian.

For the next twelve years he devoted himself to poetry and essays, their subjects ranging from James Joyce and Unamuno to a plea for the integrity of the tango, the music of the brothels, whose essential qualities were being compromised by a new breed of sentimental composers. His love of this music was abiding, and forty years later he published a collection of tangos and milongas (another native genre) which were set to music and recorded

In the 1930s Borges entered his major creative phase and began to produce the stories that would make him internationally famous. Alternative worlds, strange states of consciousness, intellectual vagaries, learned mystifications are found in them, often presented by means of labyrinths and mirrors. Philosophy and theology — ‘forms of fantastic literature’ as he called them — are also represented, reminding us that one of the earliest and most lasting influences on Borges was Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753), who held that all phenomena are ‘appearances in the soul or mind’. It may be that Borges’ failing sight increased his sympathy with a philosophy that called the reality of the visible world into question. Those developments of Buddhism which cast doubt on the substantiality of things and the reliability of perceptions would prove to have a special appeal to him as he advanced in study of the Dharma.

But if this was a time of creativity, it was also a time of suffering. A failed love affair drove him almost to suicide. Generally speaking, his amatory career brought him little satisfaction. His first marriage was unhappy and ended in separation.

Borges was celebrated abroad before he was properly recognized at home. This is typical of a provincial society, as Argentina was in those days. Eventually international fame would make him a national treasure.

Politically he was a controversial figure, being both anti-fascist and anti-democratic. On the one hand, he was opposed to Mussolini, Hitler and Franco in the 1930s, when they had many admirers in Argentina, and to Juan Peron in the '40s and later. On the other hand, he approved of the military rule of General Videla and General Galtieri at home, and of the Pinochet regime in Chile. This, along with a certain suspicion of racism, alienated many of his admirers and may well have cost him the Nobel Prize. Later he would distance himself from the excesses and follies of the Argentinian military junta, and declare himself an anarchist. The Falklands war outraged him. 'Two bald men fighting over a comb', he famously described it, but its seriousness for its participants was not lost on him. He lamented in verse the dead of both sides, and began to think approvingly of pacifism.

This was in 1982. He was an old man then. Four years later, in Geneva, he died. There he was buried. On one side of his headstone was engraved an image of warriors from an ancient English shield; on the other an image of a Viking longship with a line from the Icelandic *Volsung Saga*.

On his deathbed he received the consolations of both a Catholic and a Protestant clergyman, ambiguous to the end. The funeral was held in the Protestant cathedral, though he had never been a Protestant. He is buried near John Calvin, the apostle of predestination, or theological determinism.

Themes and Images

When Borges was a child he was taken to the zoo in Buenos Aires and there he encountered a caged tiger. Not the South American *tigre*, the jaguar, but an Indian beast, a '*tigre de las margenes del Ganges*', as he would put it in a poem many years later. The tiger, black stripes on gold, became one of his symbols, along with the mirror and the labyrinth. As said above, his name is associated especially with the latter, such is its importance in his work.

The House of Asterion deals with the first labyrinth, that designed by Daedalus to enclose the Minotaur, Asterion. The story was suggested by a painting of George Frederick Watts' which shows the bull-headed creature gazing pensively over a wall of his prison. Death will be his only release, and Theseus' sword is his deliverance. In that story the labyrinth leads in its unexpected way to a fortunate, if bloody, outcome. In other stories it is not so, and a solitary man may wander lost, confused, frustrated among paths designed for that purpose, and be reduced to helplessness and humiliation. Then the labyrinth seems to be taken beyond story-telling and to become a symbol of the human condition, and not

only of man's mundane concerns but of what might be called his cosmic predicament. All those galaxies and constellations and light-years — everything stupendously vast — and on this one planet a race of little people gravitating from one folly to the next almost without respite.

Among these people, however, there will always be found a few individuals endeavoring to make sense of the enigma, with all sorts of beliefs and systems and formulae. In Buddhist terms it might be said that they are trying to change the labyrinth into a mandala.

But a labyrinth is not only a place where one is lost; it is also a place where at every turn one has to make a choice. Left, right, forward or back — the immediate small choice. But also the large choice: does one move at all, or stay put and make the best of it? Now the leader, the prophet, the savior calls out, 'Stay with me here, follow my rules (which are God's rules) and you will be better off than going your separate ways'. In different parts of the labyrinth diverse groups settle. Some will grow into societies, functioning satisfactorily, but gradually forgetting that they are still in the labyrinth, prisoners. This group mentality does not satisfy everyone and a few individuals go on in their singular ways. 'If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise': thus William Blake, who sang as he sought and maybe found the door. Or did he belong to that other series of individuals who question the actual nature of the labyrinth and come to see that its wearisome byways and heartbreaking deadends are things of our own creation and would cease to be if we did not want them there? In other words, that 'labyrinth' is another name for 'the mind-forged manacles' of Blake's poem, and that it would cease to be a prison if we were not content to be prisoners, and more at ease in chains than free.

As Buddhists we are called to liberate ourselves from the labyrinth, where we not only wander but may die and be reborn, over and over again. Liberation may be found by persisting in the effort to find the egress, or by transformation. 'Nirvana and samsara are the same' says the Mahayana: it is the person that changes. This is a problematical idea: that the 'vale of tears', as we learned to call the world in earlier days, is not really what it appears to be, but to the true perceiver is really something else, and that in all the fret and busyness there is an essential, inviolable peace. Our senses and our intelligence, our knowledge of history and our notions about the future, these all insist it is not so. But that other faculty, the *mano*, as it is called, the sense behind the senses, the mind behind the intelligence, intuits another order and seeks to bring it about. The Dharma teaches that we go wrong and get lost because of the falsity of our idea of self. In the other order, this idea fades and with it the labyrinth, so that where there was gloom there is light, and where walls, open country. If we will have it so.

Mandalabyrinth

One of Borges' most famous stories is *Death and the Compass*. It might almost be called a theological detective story, the plot being based on the Tetragrammaton, the four letters of the Hebrew alphabet that signify the name of God. Its denouement occurs in the decayed mansion of Triste-le-Roy, whither the cunning criminal Dandy Red Scharlach has lured his pursuer Lönnrot. The house abounds in symmetries and repetitions: a feature on one side — balcony, stairway — is matched by the same on the other. Matching statues of Diana the Huntress might have caused the erudite detective to ask himself, who is the hunter, and who the quarry here? For Scharlach proves more than a match for his enemy. To the reader, and perhaps unconsciously to Lönnrot, the house in its mirror-augmented insistence on perfect balance, suggests a mandala. But when Scharlach springs his trap and has the detective in his power and reveals how, by clues that played on the latter's imagination, he has enticed him to his doom, he calls the operation the weaving of a labyrinth. Thus the mansion of Triste le Roy is turned into something the opposite of itself, and a place of harmony and balance becomes a place of death. Three letters of the sacred name, cunningly planted, have led Erik Lönnrot here. Scharlach's pistol utters the fourth.

Borges gave *Death and the Compass* first place in his *Personal Anthology*, a collection of stories, poems, essays and vignettes which is the best introduction to his work. The surreal duel between the protagonists not only shows him at his most imaginative but is a compressed compendium of his themes and concerns. Before Scharlach delivers the *coup de grâce*, he and Lönnrot promise to repeat their duel in another incarnation. To the end of his life Borges believed that what he called 'transmigration' offered the most reasonable prospect of future existence. His problem was not with rebirth but with karma, which seemed to him, '*el occidental*', both '*arbitrario y difícil*'.

Borges was the quintessential man of letters. He not only used but he respected words, as not all writers do. His deep knowledge of them can sometimes cause a reader trouble, for he will restore its original sense to a word, and this can be mystifying, especially if the reader does not know the word's classical root. His discussion of karma, not surprisingly, begins with the word itself, its etymology, its Sanskrit root, and its original meaning: to do, to create. His view of the idea denoted by the word comprehends not only Buddhism but the Indian tradition in general. He writes that 'all' a person's acts, words, thoughts, perhaps even his dreams, produce after death another body, another destiny, and goes on to suggest that karma may be described 'as an ethical interpretation of the law of causality', as if it were human deeds, in each cycle of the universe, that create mountains and rivers and all the rest of the world's geography.

Turning again to the term ‘karma’, one finds Borges observing that, by virtue of being a substantive it suggests an autonomous entity, whereas, he writes, we are dealing with a quality inherent in acts: the ability naturally to produce happy or unhappy consequences. This is reminiscent of a passage in his essay *A New Refutation of Time* where he refers to Berkeley’s assertion that perception of material objects does not imply a permanent substance, matter, which, in reality is only a word. So the word ‘karma’ exists; but it has no metaphysical correspondent above and beyond the actions of living beings. He quotes the celebrated popularizer of Buddhism in the West, Christmas Humphreys: the wrongdoer is not punished for his misdeeds — they are what punishes him.

The idea that *all* acts, words, thoughts, perhaps even dreams, have karmic consequences is very extreme, and would seem to indicate the limitations of Borges’ understanding of Buddhism. In the lecture he actually says that the essential thing about Buddhism is ‘that we believe our destiny has been preordained by our karma’. By this time Borges had been blind some twenty years: this was karma, he said. His being there in the hall that night addressing that audience: this also was karma. From his birth in Buenos Aires to the moment of death ‘there is not a single fact of my life that has not been preordained by my previous life’. Rather irrelevantly he refers to Gandhi and his opposition to the building of hospitals, the Mahatma’s argument being that such philanthropic endeavors only delay the karmic process, ‘the paying of a debt’. But Gandhi was not a Buddhist and it is doubtful if his and Borges’ understanding of karma is to be found among the Buddhist schools, even those of the Tibetan tradition, which is probably the most deterministic of them all.

Not surprisingly, Borges found the lamaistic understanding of transmigration more congenial than that of ‘orthodox’ Buddhism, meaning the Theravada presumably. Direct succession seemed closer to a western understanding of the process as found in Pythagoras and Plato. Curiously for such an omnivorous reader, although he refers to Rudolf Steiner, he does not mention the volumes in which the Styrian seer claimed to have discerned the ‘karmic connexions’ of famous people across the centuries.

Borges takes an extremely deterministic view of karma, as the above quotations indicate. But he is mistaken when he calls it a Buddhist view. The ‘essential thing’ about Buddhism is not ‘that we believe our destiny has been preordained by our karma’, but its belief as to what actually gives rise to our karma, and that is intentionality. Not *all* our acts, words, thoughts, but only those done with conscious intention have karmic as distinct from natural consequences. This is one of the major features that distinguished the Buddha’s message from the Brahmanism of his day, as it does from any system which holds that certain actions, harmless in themselves, cause

spiritual injury to anyone who inadvertently does them, the injury requiring the agency of a priest and maybe the performance of a sacrifice for its removal. In Buddhism, one might almost say, nothing is spiritually good or bad but intention makes it so. However unfortunate the objective consequences of an action may be, its karmic effects are determined by intention. Which is not to say that thoughtless action is blameless. Attention counts, too. Its enhancement is one of the chief aims of Buddhist meditation, but not merely so that the practitioner shall be more sensitive to the movement of his breath, or any other physical process. This would be to justify the charge of 'biologism' which has been levelled at Indian systems generally. The purpose of meditation is mental discipline, moral improvement and spiritual development; and attention to the vagaries of the mind is the principal requirement. Attention implies consciousness of where we are and what we do; it braces against slackness and makes for insight and for clarity of intention. (It may also provide a key to the understanding of that word so common in Buddhist discourse: *kusala*, usually translated as 'skilful', a term which sometimes seems curiously reductive in a moral or spiritual context.)

There is another aspect of karma with which Borges deals rather less than adequately. We do this great concept less than justice if we fail to see it as an agency of justice, albeit working in a larger timescale than that of the individual human lifespan. In other systems a deity is associated with justice and its dispensation. In ancient times Ma'at, Shamash, Dike and other divinities were honoured with the office. Justice is claimed as one of the attributes of the Abrahamic god, and Allah is called Lord of the Day of Judgement, when final justice will be dispensed. Down the centuries, Buddhism has made concessions to theism, beginning with the gods of the Indian pantheon; then going on to the syncretic Zoroastrian Buddha-Mazda, and under pressure from Islam, to the Adi-Buddha, each a virtual 'monotheos'. But the characteristic Buddhist way has been to see justice as inherent in the nature of things, requiring no external divine power to dispense it, whether presently or at the end of time. This being so, every day may be considered a day of judgement, with our nature so constituted as to be able to administer and to receive justice in itself, with final reckoning at the time of death.

As we do less than justice to karma if we fail to see it as an agency of justice, we do likewise to human nature if we fail to see it as embodying, however, imperfectly, what may be called the spirit of justice. In individuals we call it simply a sense of justice, and tend to take it for granted as the most natural thing in the world. In so doing we may be open to the charge of complacency, for surely it is a wonder that members of a race capable of such horrors as history and the daily news present us with should also have this most precious virtue seeded in its heart.

Because of its emphasis on *dukkha*, the unsatisfactoriness of life as ordinarily lived, Buddhism may be supposed to have a negative outlook on the world and a low estimate of mankind. Not so. A single extended simile in the Pali Canon tells decisively against the supposition. The Buddha compares the purification of the heart to the process of refining gold. The crude metal found in the earth is gradually cleansed of impurities coarse and fine, until only the pure gold remains, which, melted in the crucible gives a beautiful pliable substance fit for the goldsmith's hand. So with human nature, grounded among the roots of *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*, the three fundamental flaws —self-interest, ill-will and delusion — but capable of rising to the highest spiritual level with proper discipline and effort. In other words, essentially good as gold. A feature of this goodness is our sense of justice, of which the evidence is the faculty, universal though never entirely successful, to make laws and to create legal systems which will safeguard life, liberty, property and reputation, protecting the weak and the unwary against the strong and the unscrupulous. Such systems, being the products of imperfect individuals and societies, cannot always satisfy the hunger for justice in the human heart. Even under the best-ordered systems, innocent persons are condemned and great wrongs go unpunished. Then a whole range of unhealthy emotions may be aroused, from resentment to vengefulness. The belief that there is something greater than any human system in operation is a protection against such feelings, the more so if it is believed to be an unceasing, inevitable process inherent in the nature of things.

The possible detraction from this lofty position is the danger of complacency, and the weakening of the natural impulse to help the victims of wrong, whether it be criminal or judicial. One may become inclined to see 'the fell clutch of circumstance' as the visible evidence of karma, and allow apathy to replace compassion. But this was not the Buddha's way, nor has it any sanction from the tradition, which is rooted in the altruistic virtues.

Whenever an impersonal system of justice is posited, there regularly follows the question 'What about mercy?' It can seem as if in some minds justice and mercy were virtually conflicting principles, or as if mercy requires some blurring of justice, this being envisioned as always clear, hard and inflexible. It may be that we too readily confuse the ideal of justice with fallible legal systems that attempt to comprehend it, never with more than partial success. The argument might be made that true justice — the sort associated with karma — *is* true mercy, and that only our imperfect understanding divorces them: the *avijja*, ignorance, which is at the bottom of so many ills. One may also point to the mercy of oblivion, the forgetting of all that has gone before when a new life begins; for, to be even dimly conscious of earlier lives would be intolerable to most minds, as memory so

inclines to dwell on griefs and passes lightly over happy times, when it allows for them at all.

Conclusion

In his lecture Borges says that although he has spent years in the study of Buddhism he understands it only a little. This is modesty on his part, a considerable understatement. One is unlikely to meet many people, even among Buddhists, who know anything like as much as this sympathetic non-believer. And, right or wrong, everything he has said or written on the subject is of interest. He was especially appreciative of Buddhist tolerance. This is a virtue now generally recognized as such, though it has not always been so in the West. There have been long periods when tolerance was considered as no better than indifference, and zeal, in religion so often a synonym for intolerance, was the quality admired. Intolerance had a long history in Latin America. Borges' lifespan saw the growing challenge of Protestant evangelism there to the Catholic establishment, and the response of the latter, which still proclaimed the doctrine that 'error has no rights' and did not always hold back from persecution. The roots of intolerance lie deep in all the Abrahamic faiths; they have no place in the Buddhadharma.

If Borges was extreme in his view of karma, it is a view shared by others, even within the Buddhist community. One cannot then say that it was his remaining outside the community that precluded a full and true understanding of the Dharma. Those who have accepted it as their way continue to struggle with ideas that are still difficult and strange. They can perhaps hope for no more than a true understanding of a part of it and what might be called, without facetiousness, a true misunderstanding of the rest. But even this would be something. Anything that can be described as true is not to be dismissed, perhaps not even misunderstanding.

Finally, it is notable that, quite apart from his appreciation of its tolerance, Borges is never less than complimentary to Buddhism. This may well be the reticence of courtesy, for there are things of which he might have been critical. One of these down the centuries has been a tendency to grandiosity and grandiloquence, especially in the Mahayana. A stylist such as Borges must have found some of these very lengthy texts a little trying on occasion. 'Myriads of *kotis*' of celestial entities, 'numerous as the sands of the Ganges' — these and similar plethorisms are endlessly repeated as if such repetition were an essential criterion of scriptural authority. Likewise with the sculpture, as if the virtue in a statue were also to be affirmed by repetition, as in Borobudur, or by size, as in Bamiya or indeed in Nara, where Borges went. The most alarming instance of this tendency would seem to be looming in the proposal of some Tibetan leaders in exile to erect a supercolossal image of Maitreya in India. The cost of this metal statue will

be enormous, and the money will be spent at a time when there is said to be so much hardship among the Tibetan diaspora. Not less questionable is the argument that the monument to the Future Buddha of Loving-kindness justifies the removal of families from the land on which it is to be erected. This sort of thinking is disturbing for both ethical and historical reasons. It awakens memories of regimes, Communist China among them, which have proclaimed that, for the sake of the future of humanity, any present distress is to be gratefully borne. Idolization of the future means devaluation of the present. Time, effort and indeed money would surely be better spent promoting the simple, fundamental, vital message of Gautama than raising a vast invocation in bronze to his successor.

POSTSCRIPT

Back in 1947 Borges published on its own a long essay titled *A New Refutation of Time*. Fourteen years later he included it in his *Personal Anthology*, and I have found no evidence that he rejected its arguments in his last years. It is a remarkable piece of work, although he calls it ‘an anachronistic *reductio ad absurdum* of an earlier system or, worse, the feeble artifice of an Argentinian wandering lost in metaphysics’. With references to Zeno’s arrow, the chariot in the *Milinda Pañha* and the *Visuddhimagga*, Chuang Tzu’s butterfly, ‘the fifth paragraph of the fourth chapter of the treatise *Sanhedrin* of the Mishnah’, and a list of intellectual luminaries from Heraclitus to Bernard Shaw, it pushes close to the bounds of pedantry. As so often, Berkeley is his guiding light, and by means of his and Hume’s dialectics he arrives at Schopenhauer’s position, that the present is the form of all life, its inalienable possession, and in support he quotes the *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path to Purity*) and Plutarch’s statement that the man of yesterday died in the man of today, who in turn will die in the man of tomorrow.

‘*And yet, and yet*’...he muses (in English), ‘to deny temporal succession, the ego, the astronomical universe, is to have secret consolation amid seeming hopelessness. Our destiny (unlike the hells of Swedenborg and Tibetan mythology) is not frightful by being unreal, but by being irreversible and ironcast. Time is the substance of which I am made; a river carrying me away, but I am the river; a tiger savaging me, but I am the tiger; a fire consuming me, but I am the fire...’

Does he mention Emerson anywhere? It would be strange if he did not, for this is surely Emerson’s Brahma under the name of Time.

*They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.*

On the strength of this it might almost be tempting to call Borges the last of the Boston Brahmins, however removed in space and time. The poem corresponds to Borges' view at the end of the unrepudiated essay. The totalistic vision is the same, the terms only are different. There is no escaping Brahma — more, there is nothing other than Brahma. There is no escaping time — there is nothing other than time. What Borges describes would seem to be an absolute time-materialism, at variance certainly with Buddhism which insists on a dimension other than time, nirvana. Even if we hold to the earlier mentioned Mahayanin dictum that nirvana and samsara are the same, it does not mean that they are coterminous. Time may be the same as nirvana as far as it goes, but it does not go all the way. Nirvana comprehends it; is arguably its justification; what ultimately makes sense of it.

But the hope of heaven may be a step on the way, and represent a questioning of the totality of time. When Borges summoned the two clergymen, Catholic and Protestant, to his deathbed, it may be that he did so out of this hope, though, as a modern western man, eschewing the consolation of certainty.