

“Old, Old Words, Worn Thin”

On the Manuscript of Borges’s “El inmortal”

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines a probable second draft of the Borges story “El inmortal”, originally published as “Los inmortales” in *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* in February 1947, and subsequently included as the lead story in the short story collection *El Aleph* in 1949. The manuscript, which is now in Special Collections at Michigan State University Libraries, includes late revisions, though it seems to have been the copy sent to the compositors for *Los Anales*. There are several printer’s marks that indicate where to place the illustrations, two by Amanda Molina y Vedia and one by the writer’s sister, Norah Borges. This manuscript does not contain bibliographical references in the left margin, a feature of some other Borges manuscripts from this time, although the story itself includes acknowledged and unacknowledged quotations from a variety of sources.

IN MY RECENT BOOK *HOW BORGES WROTE* I STUDY IN SOME DETAIL a variety of Borges manuscripts, from reading notes and outlines to first drafts (often with numerous alternatives above and below the line and in the margins), through second drafts, and extending to revisions on published versions. The project extended over ten years, and the corpus of manuscripts to which I had access grew and grew, eventually topping two hundred. Needless to say, in the course of preparing and revising the book for publication, I had to leave out quite a number of interesting manuscripts. One, which I mention only in passing in *How Borges Wrote*, is what I believe to be a second draft of the famous story “El inmortal”, first published in *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* as “Los inmortales” in February 1947 and then included, as the lead story, in *El Aleph* in 1949.

With “El Congreso”, published much later, it has the distinction of being Borges’s longest story, divided into an introduction, five chapters and an epilogue. It is also one of his most complex stories. Ronald Christ studied it in some detail in *The Narrow Act: Borges’ Art of Allusion* (1969), and many

LOS INMORTALES

Salomon saith. *There is no new thing upon the earth. So that as Plato had an imagination, that all knowledge was but remembrance; so Salomon giveth his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion.*

FRANCIS BACON: *Essays*, LVIII.

EN Londres, a principios del mes de junio de 1929, el anticuario Joseph Cartaphilus, de Esmirna, ofreció a la princesa de Lucinge los seis volúmenes en cuarto menor (1715-1720) de la Iliada de Pope. La princesa los adquirió; al recibirlos, cambió unas palabras con él. Era, nos dice, un hombre consumido y terroso, de ojos grises y barba gris, de rasgos singularmente vagos. Se manejaba con fluidez e ignorancia en diversas lenguas; en muy pocos minutos pasó del francés al inglés y del inglés a una conjunción enigmática de español de Salónica y de portugués de Macao. En octubre, la princesa oyó por un pasajero del Zeus que Cartaphilus había muerto en el mar, al regresar a Esmirna, y que lo habían enterrado en la isla de Ios. En el último tomo de la Iliada halló este manuscrito.

El original está redactado en inglés y abunda en latinismos. La versión que ofrecemos es literal.

Figure 1. *Los Anales de Buenos Aires*, February 1947, p. 29.

others have worked on one aspect or another of it.¹ No one, however, has studied the manuscript of this story, which recently entered the Special Collections at Michigan State University Libraries. It offers a fascinating look at Borges's compositional process, though the genetic dossier is incomplete, making it impossible to reconstruct previous stages in the writing of the story. Even though incomplete, this genetic dossier permits us to see Borges's obsessive rewriting of certain elements of the story, particularly those that have to do with place names, languages and the idea of destiny. Also, as we shall see, he labors to provide a precise translation of a hidden quotation.

As I observed above, the "El inmortal" manuscript is a second, not a first, draft.² Several formal features of the manuscript justify this assertion. First of all, it offers relatively few variants when compared to Borges's

1. Other studies of "El inmortal" include ALONSO ESTENOZ (2011), CASTILLO DE BERCHENKO (1989), CÉDOLA (1987, 135–50), JULLIEN (1995) and MEJÍA (2009).
2. Elsewhere I have studied multiple drafts of several stories, including "La espera", "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan", "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "Emma Zunz" (as well as two drafts of *Evaristo Carriego* and four drafts of the poem "A Francisco López Merino"); see, for example, BALDERSTON 2014a, 2014b, 2015.

first drafts, which generally propose many. This pattern is exemplified in Borges's first and second drafts of a paragraph of "Tlön":

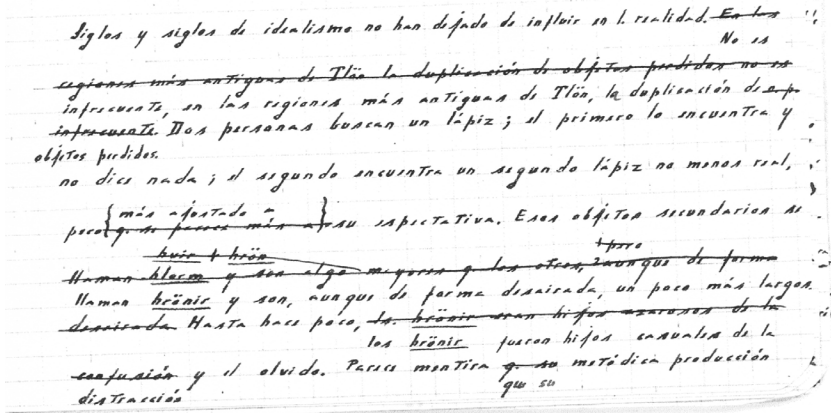


Figure 2a. Fragment of first draft of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (private collection).

Siglos y siglos de idealismo no han dejado de influir en l. realidad. En las
 No es
 regiones más antiguas de Tlön la duplicación de objetos perdidos no es
 infrecuente. en las regiones más antiguas de Tlön, la duplicación de o. p.
 infrecuente; Dos personas buscan un lápiz; el primero lo encuentra y
 objetos perdidos.
 no dice nada; el segundo encuentra un segundo lápiz no menos real,
 ———{más ajustado a }
 pero {q. se parece más a} su expectativa. Esos objetos secundarios se
 huir + hrön ————— 1 pero
 llaman hlorm y son algo mayores q. los otros, 2 aunque de forma
 llaman hrönir y son, aunque de forma desairada, un poco más largas.
 desairada. Hasta hace poco, ls. hrönir eran hijos azarosos de la
 los hrönir fueron hijos casuales de la
 confusión y el olvido.
 distracción

The second draft of this passage looks quite different:

Siglos y siglos de idealismo no han dejado de influir en la realidad. No es infrecuente, en las regiones más antiguas de Tlön, la duplicación de objetos perdidos. ▲ Esos objetos secundarios se llaman hrönir y son, aunque de forma desairada, un poco más largos. Hasta hace poco, los hrönir fueron hijos casuales de la distracción y el olvido. Parece mentira que su metódica producción cuente apenas cien años, pero así lo declara el Onceno Tomo. (Bodmer MS 16)

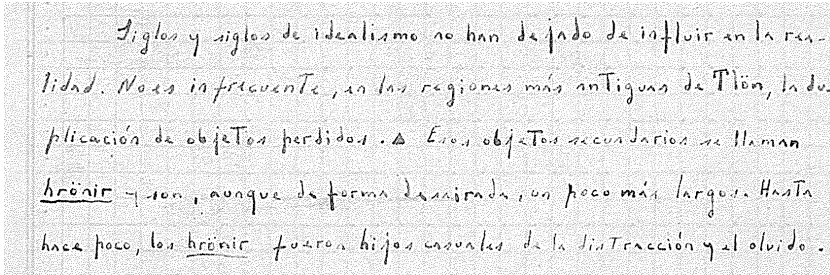


Figure 2b. Fragment of page 16 (Borges's numbering) of the second draft of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", published in Michel Lafon, ed., *Deux fictions* (p. 99).

Here the triangle indicates an insertion upside down at the top of the page, with the missing bit that Borges had apparently forgotten to copy from the earlier draft:

▲ Dos personas buscan un lápiz; el primero lo encuentra y no dice nada; el segundo encuentra un segundo lápiz no menos real, pero más ajustado a su expectativa.³

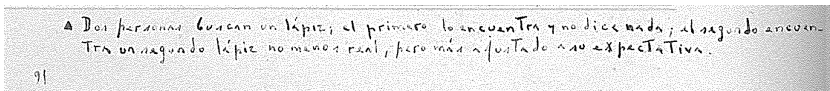


Figure 2c. Fragment of page 16 (Borges's numbering) of the second draft of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", published in Michel Lafon, ed., *Deux fictions* (p. 99).

3. James Irby's translation is as follows: "Centuries and centuries of idealism have not failed to influence reality. In the most ancient regions of Tlön, the duplication of lost objects is not infrequent. Two persons look for a pencil; the first finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but closer to his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hrönir* and are, though awk-

Third, there is a printer's mark on the first page of the story, which implies that it was this manuscript that was delivered to the compositors of *Los Anales de Buenos Aires*. Borges did not know how to type, and many second drafts that survive have printer's marks and sometimes notes by Borges identifying the periodical to which he was sending the fair copy. His printers must have been very patient, as this is not a true fair copy: there are portions that are extensively rewritten, notably in the first and last paragraphs of the story.⁵

Here is the first page of our manuscript:

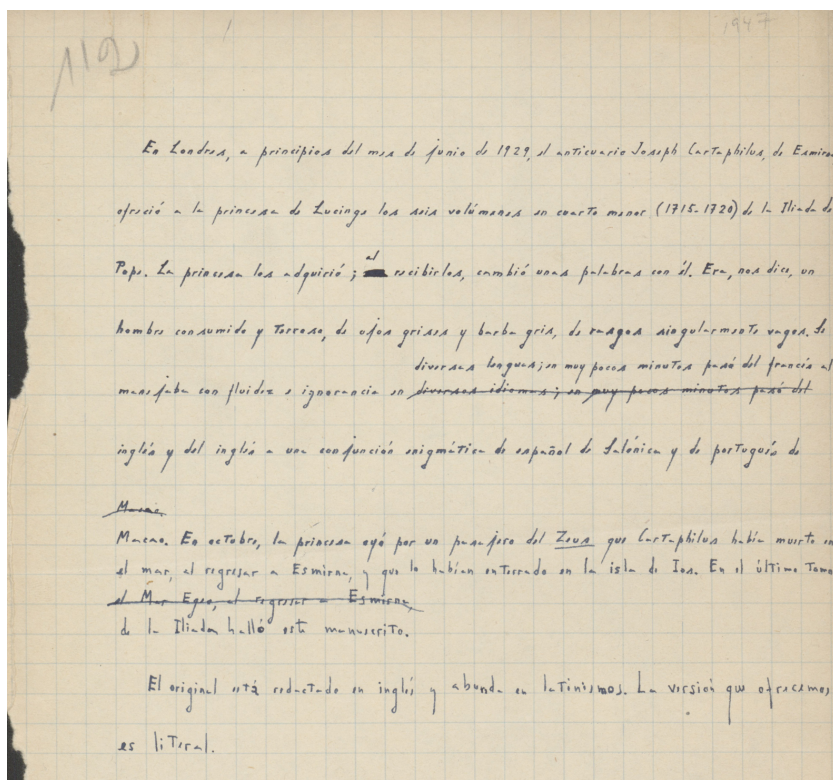


Figure 4. First page of manuscript of “El inmortal”, reproduced with the permission of the Special Collections, Michigan State University Libraries.

5. Nora Benedict studies the relation of Borges to his printers in the section “Borges Behind the Scenes: Crafting the Physical Book” (51–8) of her forthcoming book manuscript *Borges and the Literary Manuscript*.

The printer's mark I referred to is at the upper left corner:

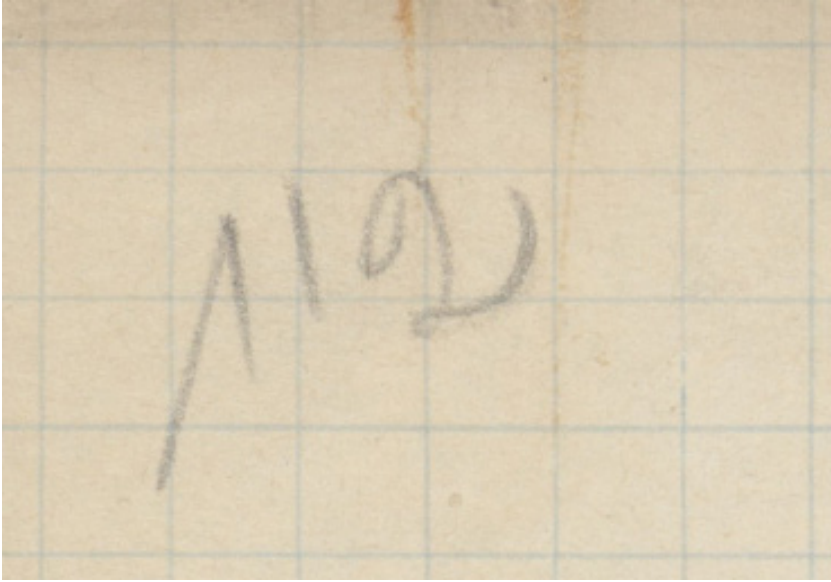


Figure 4a. Detail of the first page of the manuscript from Michigan State; reproduced with the permission of the Special Collections, Michigan State University Libraries.

While this first page includes a fair amount of rewriting (which is also true of the last one), much of the rest of the manuscript is close to a fair copy, as we shall see. This is fairly typical of second drafts; in *How Borges Wrote I* study rewritings of crucial passages of “La muralla y los libros” (141–3) and “El pudor de la historia” (143–5). But rewriting continues even after publication (BALDERSTON 2018a, 203–9), suggesting that Borges did indeed believe that there is no such thing as a definitive text (BALDERSTON 2018a, 20, 210).

Many of Borges’s first drafts, by contrast, have notes in the left margin that show what sources he consulted as he was writing.⁶ For instance, the first draft of “El hombre en el umbral”, besides showing that “Christopher Dewey” is a fictional character, not “nuestro amigo”, and that there was no need to refer to Bioy Casares in the reference to a particular kind of short sword from Indostan because there was an image of that kind of sword in

6. See for instance the manuscripts of “La secta del Fénix” and “El hombre en el umbral”, both discussed in BALDERSTON 2018a, 36–40 and 45–9.

the article “Sword” in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, also shows that there is indeed an interpolation from Kipling in the story, and that the interpolation is drawn from the Kipling poem “Evarra and His Gods”.⁷ If what we had before us were a first draft of “El inmortal”, we would surely find here the precise reference — a title and a page number — for the allusions that Borges explicitly tucked into the story: those from Pliny, Descartes, Shaw and De Quincey.⁸ It was Borges’s practice to check quotations and references, and the system of bibliographical references in the left margin of the manuscripts of many of his essays and a few of his stories are tightly tied to the notes he kept in the back of the books he read, as revealed by Laura Rosato and Germán Álvarez in *Borges, libros y lecturas*.⁹ If this were a first draft, a note would appear not only next to the explicit allusions (those made explicit, I should note, in the epilogue to the story) but also to a variety of others. The most interesting of these is the last line of the story: “Palabras, palabras desplazadas y mutiladas, palabras de otros, fue la pobre limosna que le dejaron las horas y los siglos” (BORGES 1974, 544). This is an unstated translation of a line from an important Conrad preface, that to the novel *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, which reads:

[I]t is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour; and the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words; of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage. (1979, 146)

Since the plagiarized defense of plagiarism is, like the interpolation from Kipling in “El hombre en el umbral” or the reference to John Stuart Mill’s

7. See BALDERSTON 2018a, 45–9.

8. These are the allusions that Ronald Christ studied in his book, although he also makes passing reference to a variety of other works, including Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, a poem by Ben Jonson, a reference to Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, and an obscure source, *Marcus Flaminius; or a view of the military, political and social life of the Romans: in a series of letters from a patrician to his friend; in the year DCC.LXII. from the foundation of Rome to year DCC.LXIX* by Ellis Cornelia Knight, a work mentioned by De Quincey in a review; see CHRIST 1969.

9. See ROSATO and ÁLVAREZ. [2010] 2017. For instance, the reference to Juvenal in the first paragraph of “El hombre en el umbral” is connected to a note in Borges’s copy of a bilingual (French-Latin) edition of the satires; see also BALDERSTON 2018a, 45–8.

A *System of Logic* in "El escritor argentino y la tradición", not explicitly marked in the published text, the manuscripts allow us to recover parts of Borges's use of his sources that would be difficult to recognize otherwise.

In the Conrad passage we can see that Borges had not quite finished the story when he copied it into this second draft. The version of this sentence in the manuscript reads:

A mi entender, la conclusión es inadmisibile. Cuando se acerca el fin, escribió Cartaphilus, ya no quedan imágenes del recuerdo; sólo quedan
desplazadas
palabras. Palabras, palabras confundidas y barajadas,
 desplazadas y mutiladas,
~~palabras de otros, fué lo que le dejaron~~
~~palabras de otros, fué la~~
 palabras de otros, fué la pobre limosna que le dejaron las horas y los siglos.¹⁰

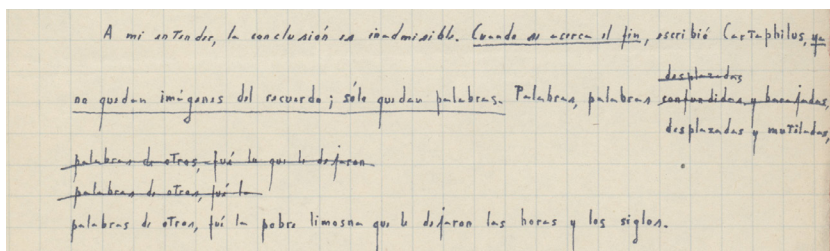


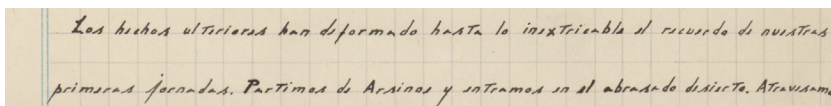
Figure 5. Second draft of "El inmortal", initially numbered 2 by Borges, then struck through, then renumbered 18, though the pages numbered 17 and 18 come after the page numbered 23 in the manuscript (and in the story).

When this passage is compared with other passages in which Borges is translating from a printed source — e.g., the quotation from Goethe at the beginning of "El pudor de la historia" or the quotations from Paul Deussen

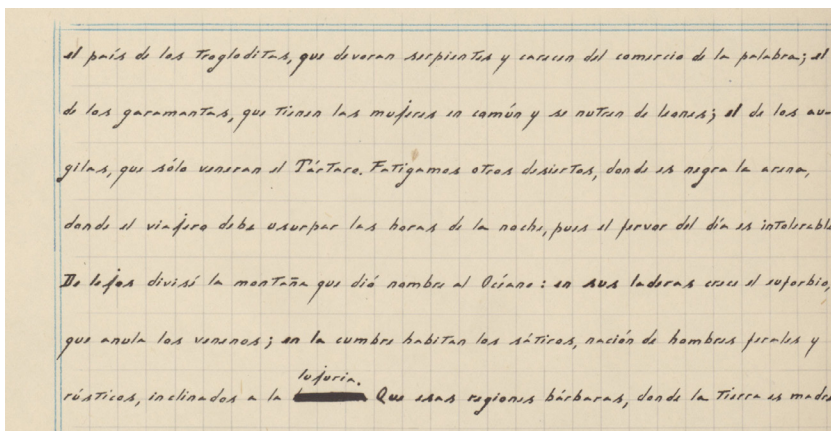
10. Irby's translation is as follows: "In my opinion, such a conclusion is inadmissible. 'When the end draws near,' wrote Cartaphilus, 'there no longer remain any remembered images; only words remain.' Words, displaced and mutilated words, words of others, were the poor pittance left him by the hours and the centuries"; see BORGES 1964, 149.

in “Historia de la eternidad” — we can see that the series of alternatives here show Borges considering how to refashion the Conrad quotation to provide a fitting conclusion to an epilogue about plagiarism. In Borges’s translation practice there is a consistent tendency toward the proliferation of textual possibilities: he proffers many alternatives, resisting pressure to close a text during the process of composition.

Now, to show that the manuscript in our sights is a second, not a first, draft, let’s look at one of the “intrusiones, o hurtos” that are named in the epilogue. As Ronald Christ has shown (1969, 216–19), the first of these is an extensive borrowing from Pliny’s *Natural History*. Here is the relevant portion of pages 3 and 4 of the manuscript:



Las historias ulteriores han deformado hasta lo inextricable el recuerdo de nuestras
primicias farradas. Partimos de Arcinas y entramos en el abrasado desierto. Atravesamos



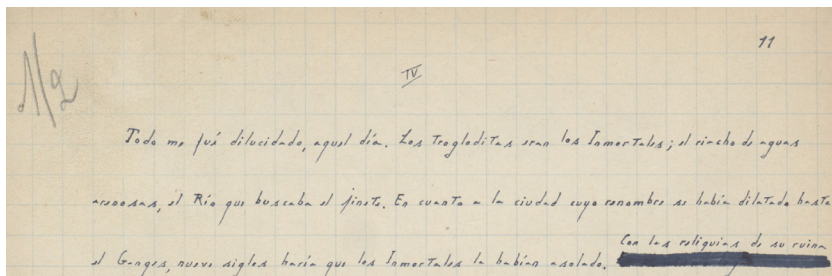
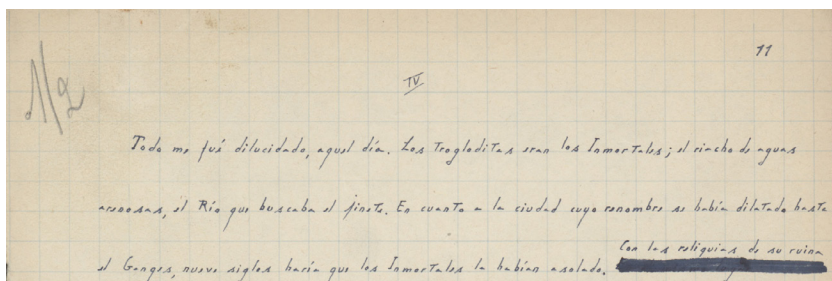
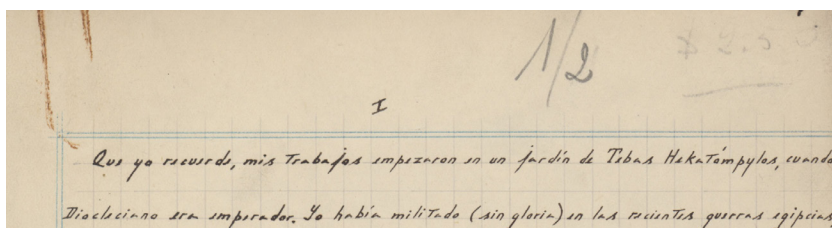
el país de los Trogloditas, que devoran serpientes y caracoles del comercio de la palabra; el
de los Garamantas, que tienen las mujeres en común y se nutren de leonas; el de los au-
gilas, que sólo usan el Tártaro. Fatigamos otros desiertos, donde se negra la arena,
donde el viajero debe usurpar las horas de la noche, pues el fervor del día es intolerable.
Una lefía dividió la montaña que dió nombre al Océano: en sus laderas crece el superbia,
que anula las venenosas; en la cumbre habitan los sátiros, nación de hombres feroces y
rústicos, inclinados a la ~~lujuria~~ ^{lujuria}. Que sean regiones bárbaras, donde la tierra es madre

Figure 6a and 6b. Second draft of “El inmortal”, numbered pages 3 and 4 in Borges’s hand.

It is easy to see how different the treatment of this “borrowing” is from Borges’s translation from Conrad: the sentences concerning the Troglodytes, the Garamantes and the Augilae are a fair copy from an earlier draft, without any annotations in the left margin about the sources (Pliny, but also, as Christ has shown, De Quincey on Pliny [1969, 218]). In fact, the

only correction in this passage is a change from a word that is probably "lascivia" to its synonym "lujuria". Borges's manuscripts are still surfacing, so perhaps the first working draft exists somewhere. Still, that a story that consists famously of a web of quotations should only survive in a manuscript that is shorn of all the references is fascinating: were we to have access to the first draft there would surely be clues to more hidden quotations than the ones discovered so far, since this is a story about originality and plagiarism.

There are similar printer's marks at the beginnings of sections I and IV of the story and at the beginning of the epilogue:



Figures 7, 8 and 9. From the second draft of "El inmortal", pages numbered 1, 11 and 17 in Borges's hand.

Since these marks do not correspond to page breaks in the story as it was published in *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* — all three of these sections begin in the middle of pages of the *Anales* publication — they most likely indicate the need for spacing within the pages.

As noted earlier, the version of the text published in 1947 in *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* was titled “Los inmortales”, not “El inmortal”. The two titles play with the idea of the one and the many (as the titles of “Tema del traidor y del héroe” and “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva” play with the motif of the double). In fact, near the end of the story the narrator wonders whether he is one or many: “postulando un plazo infinito, con infinitas circunstancias y cambios, lo imposible es no componer, siquiera una vez, la Odisea. Nadie es alguien, un solo hombre inmortal es todos los hombres” (BORGES 1947, 541).¹¹ The bits of interpolated text from Pliny, Descartes, De Quincey and Shaw (all of which are explicit), and the hidden bits of Conrad and others, suggest that authorship is decentered and called into question.

Borges was seriously interested in the visual arts: he was a skilled draughtsman.¹² In the case of *Los Anales de Buenos Aires*, as editor he was at liberty to commission illustrations; in this case there are two illustrations by Amanda (Mandie) Molina y Vedia that accompany the text. The first is a Roman centurion speaking with a man on horseback: a direct illustration of the dialogue near the beginning of the story when Marco Flaminio Rufo first gets news of the City of the Immortals:

11. Irby’s translation is as follows: “if we postulate an infinite period of time, with infinite circumstances and changes, the impossible thing is not to compose the *Odyssey*, at least once. No one is anyone, on single immortal man is all men”; see BORGES 1964, 145.
12. I discuss this in “Borges: Portrait of an Unexpected Artist”, a contribution to a festschrift for the late Donald Yates; see LABINGER and YATES 2019.

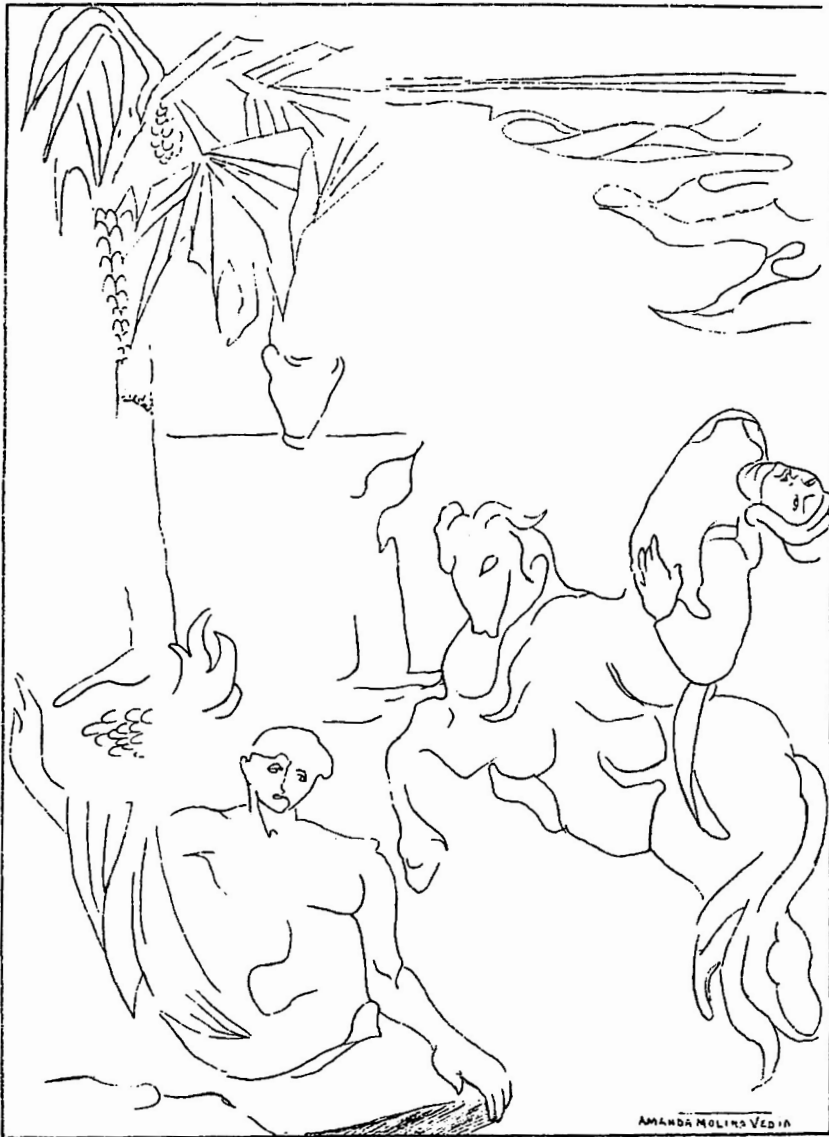


Figure 10. Illustration by Amanda Molina y Vedia, "Los inmortales", *Anales de Buenos Aires*, p. 31.

The second illustrates the dizzying labyrinth that is the City of the Immortals:

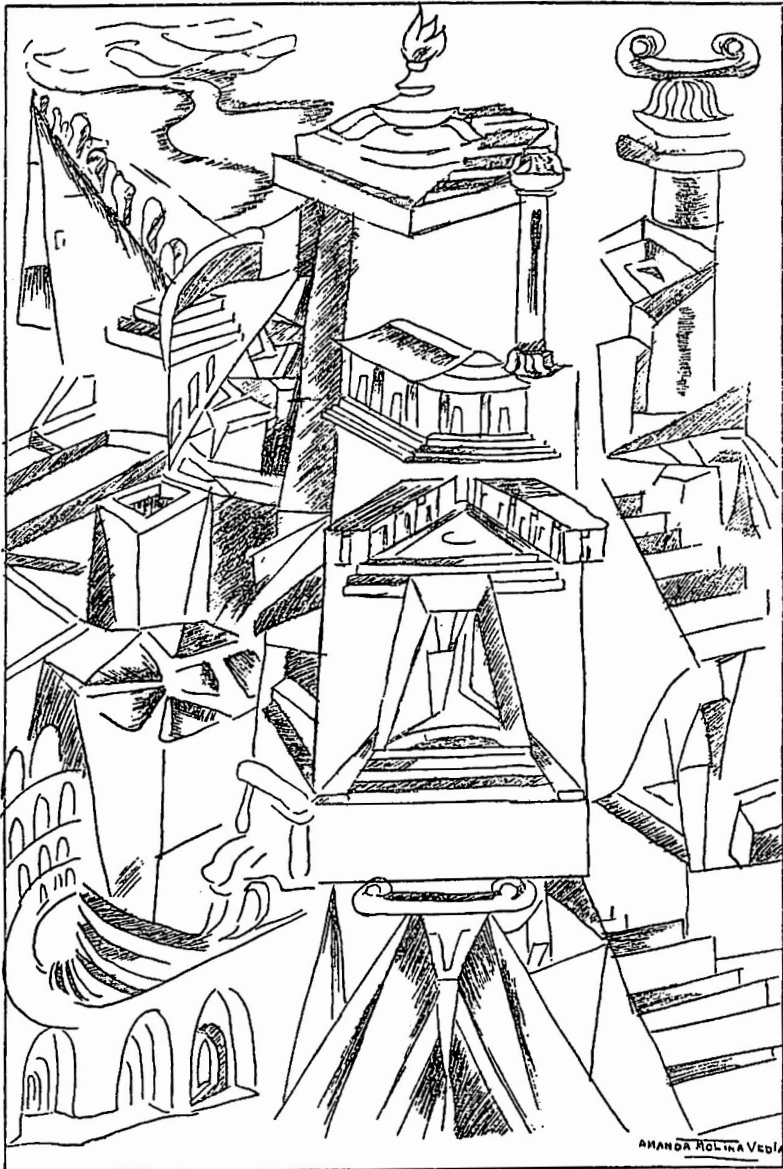


Figure 11. Illustration by Amanda Molina y Vedia, “Los inmortales”, *Anales de Buenos Aires*, p. 35.

Finally, one more drawing appears at the end of the text, just after the final paragraph of the story and below the name of the author. This one, however, is signed by Norah Borges, not by Amanda Molina y Vedia, and it picks up on the Hellenic theme of the story:

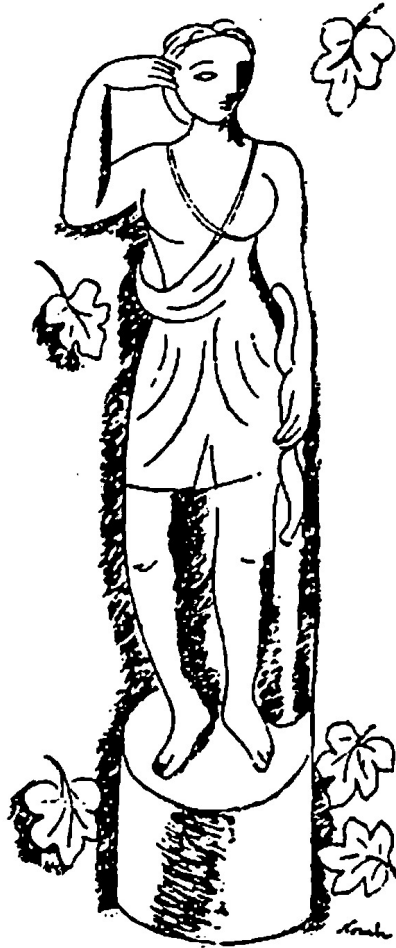


Figure 12. Illustration by Norah Borges, "Los inmortales", *Anales de Buenos Aires*, p. 39.

These collaborations between the writer and his sister, and with Amanda Molina y Vedia, show Borges's close relation to the visual arts. Indeed, many of Borges's manuscripts contain drawings made by him that are of a high quality; I have surmised elsewhere that he never published any of his drawings so as not to compete with his sister. In any case, "El inmortal" is a story full of what Robert Louis Stevenson, so important to Borges's ideas about narrative, called "visual scenes",¹³ so it is unsurprising to see that it was illustrated in its first publication.

To return, for a final time, to the manuscript. Most pages of the manuscript are fair copy, with few or no corrections. So, for instance, is the page numbered 23, which tells of the recognition of "Argos":

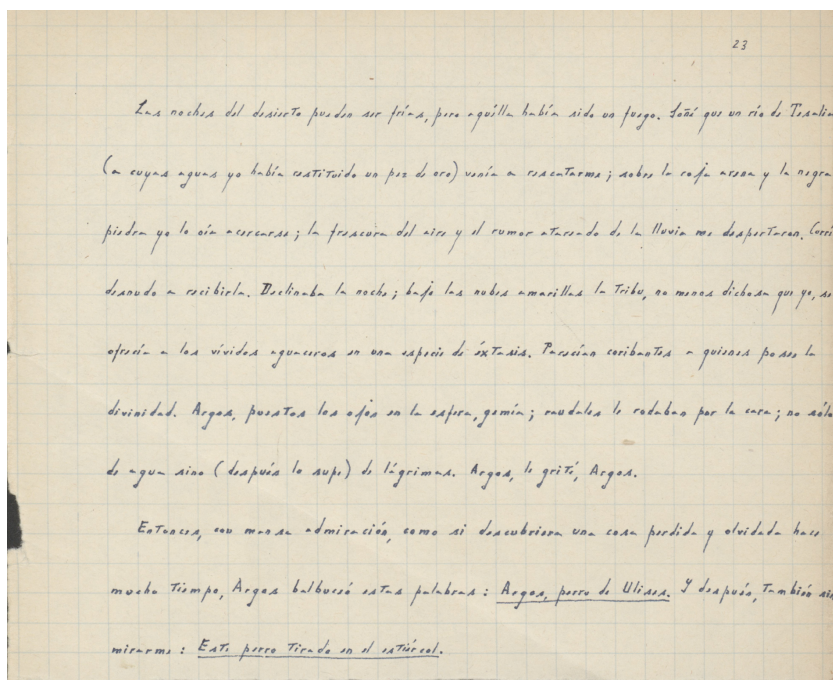


Figure 13. Second draft of "El inmortal", numbered page 23 in Borges's hand.

Others have corrections in black rectangles of ink that are impossible to decipher from a photocopy, which is all I have been able to work with thus

13. On Stevenson's influence on Borges, see BALDERSTON 1985.

far. This means, of course, that it is not possible to see the verso of the pages, to decipher words that have been struck through (as the first alternative to "lujuria" was, as already mentioned), or to try to guess at the brand of the notebook and its probable number of pages (before Borges cut out the fragments of pages that are left now). For example, here is the page that comes just after, numbered 24:

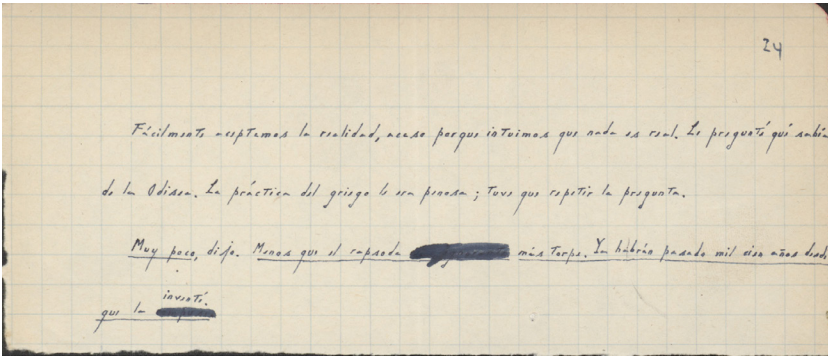


Figure 14. Second draft of "El inmortal", numbered page 24 in Borges's hand.

Here Borges blotted out words in a way that only can be deciphered with a light table or, as Nora Benedict has shown, with multispectral imaging. Another characteristic of several manuscripts of Borges's stories, observed for instance in the New York Public Library's manuscript of "La lotería en Babilonia" and the University of Virginia's manuscripts of "El muerto" and "La casa de Asterión", is that he cut many of the pages to eliminate evidence of some hesitation or change of mind. Another moment in the fifth part of the story shows his concerns again with places and dates:

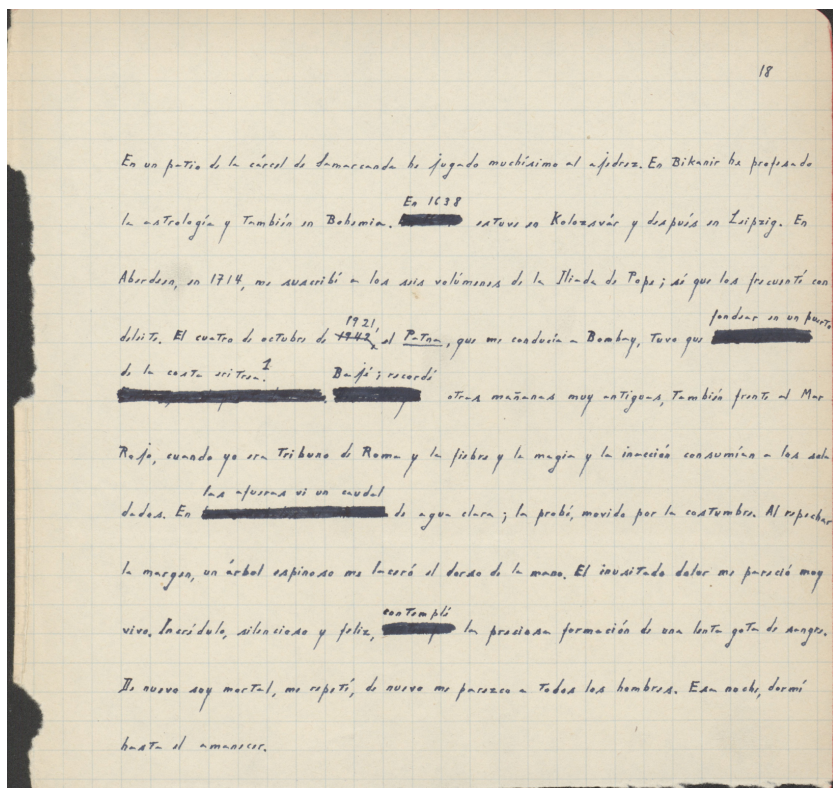


Figure 15. Second draft of “El inmortal”, numbered page 18 in Borges’s hand.

The places and dates mark Cartaphilus’s journeys, defining his identity by where he was and when. And the Patna, of course, is the ship in Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, confirming that connection.

In three places Borges notably departs from his practice of blotting out text, a practice that renders it unrecoverable, and elects instead to cancel words and phrases with strikethroughs that leave the canceled text at least still partially visible.¹⁴ The first instance appears at the opening of the story, in the initial description of Joseph Cartaphilus:

14. See BENEDICT 2018. Nora Benedict has studied Borges’s strikethroughs and blottings in “Digital Approaches to the Archive”, in which she uses multispectral imagining to recover some of the canceled text in “El muerto” and “La casa de Asterión”.

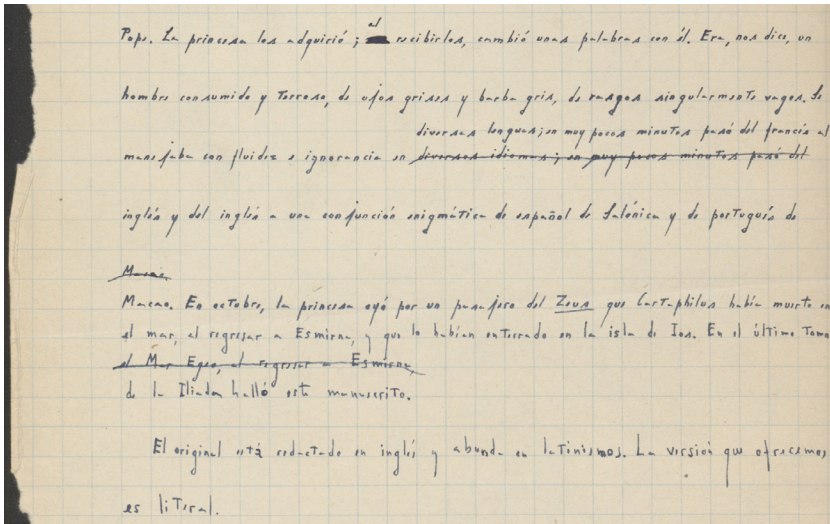


Figure 16. Unnumbered first page of second draft of “El inmortal”.

The vacillations here have to do with whether to call the various languages that Cartaphilus mixes together “idiomas” or “lenguas”, a moment’s hesitation about the place name Macau, and the hesitation between “había muerto en el mar, al regresar a Esmirna”, or whether to name that sea, “el Mar Egeo”. As on numerous other occasions, he writes “mar”, then considers “Mar Egeo”, then crosses the latter name out: “mar” will be the definitive reading. The second moment of uncertainty comes at the end of the fifth part of the story, the end of Cartaphilus’s narrative (which is also his expression of uncertainty about whether he is both Homer and Marco Flaminio Rufo):

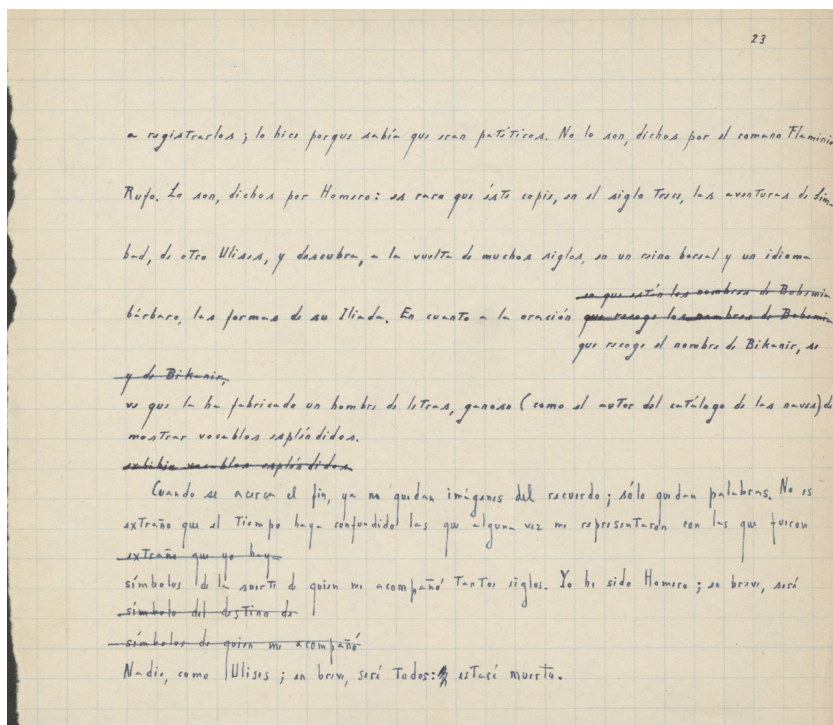


Figure 17. End of second draft of “El inmortal”, numbered page 23 in Borges’s hand.

Here the uncertainties have to do with how to name Bikanir as one of the places that Cartaphilus visits, whether the man of letters desires to “exhibit” or to “mostrar vocablos espléndidos”, and how to name his strange “destiny” and its “symbols”. The third and last moment of great hesitation comes, as we have already seen, at the end of the story, with Borges’s translation from Conrad.

By itself, this manuscript would not tell us enough about Borges’s composition practices: the first drafts tend to tell us more about Borges’s use of his sources, his radical uncertainties about particular segments of a text (often including the beginning and the end), changes in place names and personal names, reordering of sections, and rewriting of some sections on separate sheets. In the second drafts much of his radical uncertainty as a writer is concealed. A similar problem was faced by Michel Lafon when he edited, for the Fondation Martin Bodmer and Presses Universitaires de France, the manuscript of “El Sur” and what he knew to be the second

draft of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius":¹⁵ he mentions that he knows of the existence of an earlier draft but was not able to study it. That also meant that he did not have sufficient knowledge of Borges's compositional practices to recognize features of the manuscript of "El Sur" that are common, not anomalous (BORGES 2010a, 28).

Suffice it to say that Borges had to provide legible handwritten copies for his printers, since he did not know how to type and did not have a typist at hand (except on rare occasions, such as the typescript of "Emma Zunz" that is at Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas¹⁶). In this case, the printer clearly worked directly from this manuscript, marking it in several places. Even so, the continued care that Borges shows at several moments is reminiscent of the poetics of possibility that he discusses in "La supersticiosa ética del lector" and "Las versiones homéricas"; and even in what is close to a fair copy we see him hesitate, consider several possibilities, and revise.

This manuscript does not have the title of the story. It is impossible to know whether it was "El inmortal" or "Los inmortales" in the first instance. It also has no bibliographical references in the left margin, but enough is known about Borges's writing practices in the late 1940s for us to imagine an earlier draft, one full of uncertainties and possibilities, and one that gives a clear account of the sources in the left margin.

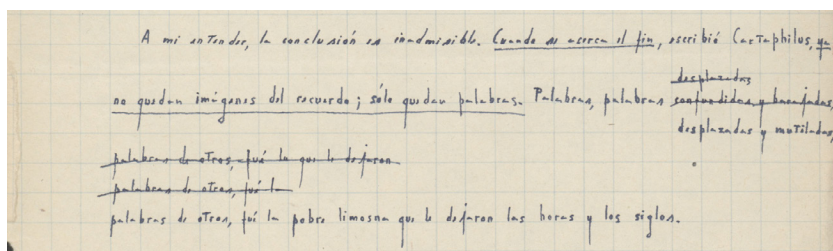


Figure 18. End of the second draft of "El inmortal", initially numbered page 2 by Borges, then renumbered 18.

The "palabras confundidas y barajadas", then "desplazadas", then "desplazadas y mutiladas", are his own words but they are also "palabras de

15. I have discussed the first draft of "Tlön" at length; see BALDERSTON 2017.

16. On this typescript, see BALDERSTON 2018a, 184–9.

otros”, emphatically, three times, in the final paragraph of the story. Muddled identities, muddled languages: the uncertain itineraries and dates that mark Cartaphilus’s journeys, taking him from his initial identity as Marco Flaminio Rufo, then back to Argos and Homer, and then forward to the Christian legend of the Wandering Jew, confirm that this is a story concerned intimately with space and time, and one that suggests that any imprecision about those coordinates will result in uncertainty about personal identity itself.

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