CHAPTER 2

BORGES’ AESTHETIC OF BLINDNESS

Blindness exercised the mind of Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) over a long period of time, as he dealt with progressive loss of sight, finally becoming almost completely blind in his late 50s (Manguel 15-6). Thus, he spent two thirds of his life as a visually-impaired person. In his 1977 lecture entitled “Blindness” (Selected Non-Fictions 473-83), Borges describes his blindness with the poignant metaphor “slow nightfall,” in the sense of night descending slowly over the world. This gradual loss lasted “more than three quarters of a century” (Selected Non-Fictions 474-75). In his long life ‘with blindness,’ he developed a complex set of shifting attitudes towards it, and varying ways of dealing with its consequences. This chapter will examine the various phases in the development of Borges’s aesthetic of blindness as evident in his narratives.1 At the heart of this aesthetic is a dialectical movement perceivable in the responses to blindness written into his short fiction from the 1940s and ‘50s. Borges had a long writing career spanning more than six decades. Efrain Kristal writes in his introduction to Poems of the Night (2010) that Borges “began writing poetry during World War I as a teenager living with his family in Geneva,” and continued writing up until 1985, a short while before his death (x). I divide Borges’s career into three periods: the early period that begins with the publication of his first collection of poetry Fervor de Buenos Aires (1923), and runs up to 1940; the middle period that includes two decades from the publication of the short story “Tlôn, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” in

1. These phases in Borges’s aesthetic of blindness mirror the evolution of his self-conception as a blind man. To substantiate this claim, I would point to David Laraway’s statement (quoted in this chapter) which explains Borges’s appropriation of the mirror as a symbol of art (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 311).
1940 to the publication of the collection *El Hacedor (The Maker)*\(^2\) in 1960; and the late period from 1960 to his death in Geneva in June 1986. I base this division on the engagement with blindness in selected prose writings by Borges.

Alberto Manguel\(^3\) writes in his memoir *With Borges* (2006) that Borges’s “was a blindness expected since his birth, because he always knew that he had inherited feeble eyesight from his English great-grandfather and his grandmother, both of whom died blind; also from his father, who had gone blind at about the same age as Borges” (16). This fact is important for Borges’s writings because the theme of blindness vends through them, colouring all with its presence. Since Borges had weak eyesight as a boy, and knew that he might lose his sight over time, the world of the blind was never far from his thoughts. We find a plethora of references to blindness – both direct and veiled – throughout his oeuvre, but the present chapter will focus on his narrative fiction.\(^4\) Max Ubelaker Andrade suggests that one way to approach Borges’s relationship with blindness is to consider it in terms of anticipation and direct experience (Personal interview).\(^5\) This idea may be aligned with the broad themes of metaphoric and experiential engagement with blindness as evident in Borges’s short stories. As Naomi Schor writes, “both real and metaphoric” manifestations of blindness “are bound up with each other” (83). I combine the themes of “anticipation” of blindness by Borges,

\(^2\) The two publications mentioned here form the milestones in the progress of Borges’s aesthetic of blindness.

\(^3\) According to the blurb of his memoir, Manguel “is an award-winning writer and translator.” Manguel says that in 1964, Borges engaged him to read aloud to him. According to him, Borges is “one of the world’s great readers” (Manguel 13). He writes that he had the good fortune to read to Borges from 1964 to 1968 (Manguel 12).

\(^4\) All references in chapters 2 and 3 to the short stories of Borges are from the volume *Collected Fictions* (1998).

\(^5\) Max Ubelaker Andrade and I had a conversation on 13 September 2014 via Skype on Borges’s short stories.
and his “direct experience” of it; that is to say, the way that blindness is a fact in his life, with its metaphoric and experiential forms in the narratives, respectively. This conceptual amalgam enables us to make the point that when Borges deploys blindness as a metaphor in many of his short stories, it informs the narratives with an anticipated sense of presence. As I endeavour to demonstrate in this chapter, when he in fact turns to blindness as experience in his works, this engagement reflects the achievement of creative excellence.

During the middle period of his life, due to advancing blindness, Borges experienced an evolving relationship with the world, as attested by his immersion in memorised texts. The fact that he assimilated a vast body of writing during the time he had enough sight to read is well-documented. Paul S. Piper states that Borges, who worked as a librarian from 1937 to 1946, read widely at the library where he worked, translated, and wrote a number of his short stories (56). In his “Introduction” (5-8) to Seven Nights (1984), referring to Borges’s “remembered library,” Alastair Reid writes that, after being dismissed from the Municipal Library of Buenos Aires in 1946, the Argentine man of letters found it necessary to give lectures to make a living. However, by then, he could not “read a written text” due to the encroaching blindness. He had to prepare his lectures with the help of his mother, and then “memorise his material.” In this way, he created “a considerable private library of reference and quotation” (Reid 5) in his capacious memory.

Borges’s self-conscious withdrawal into the erudite textual world signifies increasing perceptual limitations. I argue that his fictional practice during the middle
period embodies a dialectical movement between self-sufficient esoteric systems and the experiential world. The move into the archives of knowledge reflects withdrawal from the external world, while the turn to the experience of blindness symbolises creativity. Here I offer a reading of a few short stories that dramatise this dialectic, namely “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “The Library of Babel” (1941), “The Aleph” (1945), “The Zahir,” “The Writing of the God” (1949), and “The Maker” (1960). In the first two narratives, yielding to the impulse to disengage from the world, Borges offers an encyclopaedic detailing of the contingencies entailed by an ideal realm. For the author, the motivation to withdraw is his blindness. However, for those who are enamoured of various forms of idealism, it is the desire for systems of knowledge that would impose order in a chaotic world, and help them evade the complexities of human embodiment. The next three short stories are examples of narratives dealing with an inward turn, away from visual plenitude, and towards self-discovery. “The Maker” narrates the poet’s engagement with the experience of the world by imagining Homer’s experience as he progressively becomes blind. My contention is that Borges shows, through this dialectic of withdrawal from the world and the artistic turn to experience, the importance of engaging with corporeality and selfhood while grappling with life as a blind person.

In “Blindness,” Borges refers to “the pathetic moment” in 1955 “when I knew I had lost my sight, my reader's and writer’s sight.” At the end of that year, he was

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6. When Borges, responding to his growing blindness, withdraws from the external world into a hermetic ‘thought-world,’ his fictions display a penchant for the archaeology of knowledge, interest in scholarly archives, old traditions, and knowledge restricted to a small circle of scholars and concealed from the wider world. On examining the aesthetics of the narratives, we find that they are not merely short stories characterised by features typical to the genre, but also deal with deeply intellectual themes, and tend to be ‘extremely’ reflective, as I argue in this chapter. As a result of their subject matter, such short stories may be described as being esoteric fiction.
appointed the director of the National Library of Argentina. He says that he gradually “came to realize the strange irony of events” whereby he became almost completely blind at the same time as being given charge of “nine hundred thousand books in various languages” (Selected Non-Fictions 475). Piper adds that, on being named the director of the National Library, Borges referred in his “acceptance speech” to “‘God’s splendid irony in granting me at one time 800,000 books and darkness’” (57). Further, both Borges (Selected Non-Fictions 475) and Piper (57) refer to the “Poem of the Gifts,” which deals with that “splendid irony” in a poignant and masterful manner. I would pair with this poem the short story “The Maker” for its rich aesthetic engagement with the experience of blindness and the resulting creativity. Both the poem and the short story appeared in 1960 in the collection entitled The Maker. Therefore, I propose that the aesthetic shift suggested above by Ubelaker Andrade, which forms part of the dialectical movement that may be identified in Borges’s writings, occurred during the five years between 1955, when Borges recognised that he had become blind, and 1960 when The Maker was published.

2.1. The Metaphoric Articulation of Blindness

Variations on the theme of blindness are present in many short stories by Borges, starting with the earliest anthology entitled A Universal History of Iniquity (1935) up to and including the last collection that was published nearly half a century later, Shakespeare’s Memory (1983). The references and allusions to blindness constitute a narrative exploration of sensory difference, and of the world of the blind.

7. Borges indicates that after receiving “the nomination” to the directorship of the National Library “at the end of 1955,” he came to recognise the inexplicable and ironic twist in his life and “wrote the ‘Poem of the Gifts’” (Selected Non-Fictions 475). Edwin Williamson suggests in Borges: a life (2004) that the author wrote “The Maker” in 1957 (338), at a time when he was in despair. These approximate dates for the two compositions agree with what I argue in my chapter.
Take, for instance, the brief appearance of “blind Danny Lyons, a towheaded kid with huge dead eyes” (26) in “Monk Eastman, Purveyor of Iniquities” (25-30) from the first collection. The words describing the blind man are befittingly graphic for a New York gangster-pimp. In the underworld of that city, Danny Lyons’s blindness is not a liability for the daily performance of his chosen activities. His end, which is brutal and which comes at the hands of one of his peers, testifies to the dangerous life he led. That world was also home to the gangster Dandy Johnny Dolan, who “wore [a ‘delicate copper pick’] on his thumb to gouge out his enemies' eyes” (26). This statement, with its brutal energy, gives us to understand that blinding was thought of as an act of cruel punishment, as revenge, and finally as a ritual of victory. Although the act is considered by the narrator and the fictional characters he portrays as a punishment that will devastate the victim, the presentation of the life of the blind gangster Danny Lyons shows that the criminal world could be shaped by its blind members as well.

Analogous to the power of the blind to mould the world is the power of tactile and auditory images (which allude to the world of the blind) to shape the narrative. The impersonal narrator lays stress on sound and touch in telling the story. This becomes evident in the description of Monk Eastman’s physical presence: “He had a short, bull neck, an unassailable chest, the long arms of a boxer, a broken nose; his face, though legended with scars, was less imposing than his body” (27). This description of the man is significant for its tactile imagery, although visual appreciation is undoubtedly possible. What is striking about the highlighted features of Monk Eastman’s physique (a broken nose and a body that is more imposing than the face) as well as about his activities such as the fatal blows he administered with knives and bludgeons (27-28) is that all these features are overwhelmingly physical in the sense of being tactile rather
than visual. The above quote is typical of the narratorial statements to be found in the short stories that point to a world without sight. Among the narrative statements that relate temporal events, we find descriptive phrases denoting sound or its lack. This feature strengthens the view expressed above: “the dance without music” and “telling the story” (25) concerning a knife fight in Argentina; “the senseless, deafening noise of a hundred revolvers” (28) characterising a savage gun battle between two criminal gangs of New York City; “The Crackle of Gunfire” (29) used as the title of a narrative section; and the narratorial indication “he [Monk Eastman] was heard to say” (30) used to report the gangster’s derisive opinion of the Great War, all stress the importance of hearing. It can, therefore, be said that vocalisation in this narrative is that of a blind narrator.

This mode of narration offers details in a way that suggests the relegated importance of sight. The aesthetic principle of blindness shapes other narratives as well. The events in “Man on Pink Corner” (45-52) – a short story about separate encounters between three knife fighters in the city of Buenos Aires – take place in the course of a night. Although vision and colours are mentioned in the narrative, they belong to the night. They are dark and sombre. The words ‘Night’ and ‘darkness’ in Borges’s art stand for blindness (Poems of the Night ix). There are quite a few scenes involving music, dance, the body, sound, and listening in the story. Talking about the physical appearance of Francisco Real, also known as the Yardmaster, the narrator-character says, “The man resembled the voice a good deal.” Here the voice has precedence both in time and importance, because the man’s voice is heard before he is seen. The narrator tells the reader how he pays attention to the body of his dance partner, describing her as “a girl that could follow like she could read my mind” (46). Narrative details such as
the tango which creates an atmosphere of “drunken dizziness,” “[t]he melonga [that]
ran like a grass fire from one end of the room to the other” (49), and the Yardmaster’s
soundless death (51) demonstrate the significance of corporeal presence, both in erotic
play and in mortality. They also highlight the significance of elements involving
sightlessness in this narrative. The presence of a blind violinist in the dance hall (where
a major portion of the action takes place) strengthens such an understanding. Also
noteworthy in this regard are narrative statements that exploit blindness as a metaphor –
a man “steps forward and stands there like he’s dazzled by all the women and all the
light” (48), and “He (the Yardmaster) stood there tall, and unseeing” (50). We can
discern blindness in its metaphoric form in this narrative in the contrasting behaviour of
the various characters. The knife fighter Rosendo Juárez refuses to fight the man from
the north, the yardmaster, who insolently challenges him to a duel, and instead throws
his knife out of the window. The way he does this indicates the insight he has gained:
“Then all of a sudden he reared back and flung that knife straight through the window,
out into the Maldonado” (48). This bold action is not that of a man without courage, but
of one who is disgusted with the meaningless violence indulged in by the macho men of
the streets. Metaphorically expressed, then, he sees the violent character of the life he
has been leading thus far for what it is, whereas the Yardmaster, La Lujanera, the
narrator, and the other tough people present in the dance hall do not see, or in other
words, are blind to the utter meaninglessness of such an existence.

In “Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv” (40-4), the protagonist Hakim uses the
two blind men who accompany him when he appears as the masked Prophet (41), the

himself, narrating the story from his point of view, says that this was what happened to him that evening.
leopard which is blinded (42), and later his “harem of 114 blind wives” (43) as signs which proclaim his power, which he declares was granted him by the Almighty (42). By putting out the eyes of the above-mentioned humans and animal, he intends to reduce them from living beings to mere signs that serve to glorify him. Thus, blindness becomes a potent symbol – in the eyes of the people of his land, one of sacred power; to the reader, that of brutality, because he does violence without compunction. Further, he uses his mask⁹ as well as his “extraordinarily sweet” (41) voice as means of keeping the world ignorant about his body. This is because it has been deformed by leprosy. In this way, he ‘blinds’ everybody. If he were to be honest and not deceive the world, he would be killed or banished from society into oblivion.¹⁰ Thus, for five years, from 158 to 163 Hegira, he succeeds in preventing the rulers of the land and the population from realising that he is an impostor and outcast masquerading as a prophet. Ironically, however, his downfall is brought about by the revelation made by one of his blind wives as she was being strangled to death for adultery: “she . . . screamed that the third finger was missing from the Prophet’s right hand, and that his other fingers had no nails” (44). This defiant act, performed as she was on the verge of death, restores to the blind woman her agency, while at the same time leading to Hakim’s assassination by two of his followers.

“Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv” also features the metaphoric use of blindness with reference to Hakim’s psychology as well as to knowledge of the state of affairs during the time of the veiled Prophet in Turkistan. At the end of the section

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⁹. Subsequently, he dons a rich veil that hides his face (42).

¹⁰. I shall discuss this point in detail in the next chapter.
entitled “The Scarlet Dye” (40-1), the narrator reports that among Hakim’s things found broken after his disappearance from “his native city” (41) of Merv is a brass mirror. We can safely conjecture that when he discovers that he is infected with leprosy, Hakim breaks the mirror so that he need not see the image of his afflicted face and body reflected in it – the view expressed in his cosmogony that “mirrors . . . are abominable” (43) is significant from this point of view. Similarly, he uses “a fourfold veil of white silk” (42) to hide his deformed face as much from himself as from the world. Thus, the breaking of the mirror and the donning of the veil enforce a kind of blindness in its wearer.11 At the same time, the broken mirror and the magnificent gemmed veil serve as symbols of deception that hide from the world – thereby blinding everybody to – his devious plan to win power and glory. Hakim’s reference to the divine gift of “words of such antiquity that speaking them burned one's mouth” (42), an allusion to the veiled Prophet’s “sweet” voice (41), Hakim’s practice of “tenor chanting of prayers” in battle, the “words” of “confidential friends of God,” the voice of fire in the hell of Hakim’s cosmogony which tortures those who deny the Prophet’s Word, and other similar instances demonstrate the stress the narrator lays on the voice and hearing to draw attention to the preclusion of sight, both real and metaphoric.

In certain short stories found in the section “Et Cetera” (53-63) of A Universal History of Iniquity, there is a more or less veiled, metaphoric use of blindness to indicate various defects in human character. In “A Theologian in Death” (53-4), the focalising character Melancthon12 is a theologian who writes “nothing whatever concerning charity” in the hereafter, which is “not heaven.” The house where he resides

11. Gandhari, the Kaurava queen of Hastinapur, voluntarily assumes this kind of blindness in the Mahabharata.

12. This is an allusion to the sixteenth-century theologian, Philip Melancthon.
after his death is “like that in which he had lived in the world,” and all the things in the room in which he awakens after departing from the world resemble his earthly possessions. Thus, they constitute a kind of mirror that confuses Melancthon, and keeps him ignorant of his current reality. He is, as it is, too arrogant in his scriptural knowledge to perceive this. He shows disdain towards charity, a virtue favoured by the angels. The first sign that he will soon learn of his folly is the initial obscurement and eventual disappearance of “the things which he used in his room” (53). This description mirrors the gradual advance of blindness, an experience to which Borges could easily relate. Later, when Melancthon cannot see what he has written about charity the day after he has committed it to paper as an expedient to protect himself from divine wrath (54), we are reminded again of blindness. We may cite certain words from the short story “August 25, 1983” (489-93), published nearly five decades later, to suggest that, for the author, the phenomenon of letters disappearing from the pages on which they are written symbolises blindness. In that narrative, the eighty-four-year-old double of Borges uses the expression “‘touch the books that have no letters’” (491) to allude to his blindness. Thus, Borges uses sightlessness in “A Theologian in Death” as a metaphor for the arrogance of the theologian.

“The Wizard that was Made to Wait” (57-60) is another short story that foregrounds the blindness of ecclesiastic arrogance. When a dean of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela arrives at the house of the wizard Illán in the city of Toledo “to learn the art of magic” (57), the latter informs “him that he had divined that his visitor was a dean, a man of good position and promising future” (58). Illán is a man with supernatural sight who can see into the future. His taking the dean by his hand, and leading him, metaphorically suggests his knowledge that the dean lacks sight, and thus
does not know the weakness of his character. Sight here is linked with self-knowledge, and acts as a metaphor for wisdom – an important thematic feature in much of Borges’s writings (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 308). The influence of this aesthetic principle becomes clear in the course of the present narrative when a dream acts as a mirror. As the wizard subtly guides the dean through a dream forecasting his future rise in the church, and his simultaneous neglect of his teacher of “the occult science” (59) Illán, the dean finally recognises his arrogant, ungrateful self.

“The Chamber of Statues” (54-6) is adapted by Borges from Sir Richard Burton’s *Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (*Collected Fictions* 531), and is a tale about forbidden sight and the consequences for the ruler of “the kingdom of the Andalusians” who violates this law. He must not open the gates of “a strong tower” (54) in the capital city of the kingdom, and see the things that are hidden within. This means that their sight and knowledge are prohibited. However, the wilfulness of the “evil man, who was not of the old royal house,” makes him ‘blind’ to the danger that threatens him and the realm when he enters the tower and views its treasures. As a means of alluding to the different kinds of blindness to be found in the story, the narrator paradoxically foregrounds corporeality and touch as a sensory modality suited to a blind person’s perception. Referring to the king’s act of opening the gates of the tower, he says that the man “pulled off the locks with his right hand (which will now burn through all eternity)”; the “figures of Arabs on their horses and camels [inside the tower] were round, as in life,” such that “a blind man could identify them by touch, and the front hooves of their horses did not touch the ground yet they did not fall, as though the mounts were rearing.” Both the “marvellous mirror . . . which had been made for Suleyman, son of David” (55) and the “terrible inscription” (56) that the king views in
the inner chambers of the tower indicate that he understands the folly of his action just before being vanquished and slain by the Arab conqueror Tarik ibn Zayid.

Thus we see that Borges makes variegated use of blindness to connote situations and traits of character. Schor observes that blindness appears in literary texts as a metaphor with unfailing regularity because it belongs to a “category of figures . . . to which language offers no alternative” (77). However, as already explained, this metaphoric figuring of blindness forms part of the dialectical movement between the ideal and the experiential, which is the topic of this chapter.

The unnamed narrator who opens “The Mirror of Ink” (60-2) describes Yāqub13 as “the cruelest of the governors of the Sudan” since he does not care for the welfare of his subjects. The former calls the governor “Yāqub the Afflicted” (60). The epithet, which makes an unflattering allusion to the man’s physical appearance, indicates that he has an ailment or disability. Yāqub is one of the two focalising characters of the narrative. Although both the first narrator and the sorcerer Abderramen-al-Masmud call Yāqub “the Afflicted” one, the reader is never told what the tyrant’s affliction is.

Abderramen-al-Masmud is the other main character of the narrative, and the one who narrates the manner in which Yāqub meets his end. By his repeated use of the above epithet, the sorcerer seems to hint throughout his narrative that Yāqub’s afflicted body represents his cruel personality. But Borges does not allow the completion of such a move in the reader’s mind, because, as mentioned above, we do not learn what Yāqub’s affliction is.

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13. The narrator who introduces this story, which he says is reported by Capt. Richard Francis Burton, renders this character’s name as “Yāqub,” and the sorcerer calls him “Yakub.” I use the former spelling in my analysis of the narrative.
Abderramen-al-Masmud possesses the skill to show Yāqub marvellous “forms and appearances” in a magical mirror. By means of the sorcerer’s craft, Yāqub encounters himself in the mirror of ink drawn in his “right palm” (60) as a “condemned man” (62) who is about to be executed. Although he is able to see his face and other appearances clearly in the mirror, he is unable to see past his worldly power and self-importance to discern his own cruel nature. Thus, the veil worn by “the Masked One” (61), who appears in the mirror of ink, reflects Yāqub’s inability to see. We may say, then, that the Quranic words concerning the unveiling of sight do not possess the power to enable Yāqub to see and know himself. For although he commands the sorcerer to show him the vision of “a just and irrevocable punishment,” he hides his eyes “[i]n fear and madness” when he sees that the guilty man who is to be put to death is himself. However, the sorcerer forces him “to look upon the ceremony of his death.” Thus, when the veil of the condemned man is “stripped from him” (60) in the mirror, Yāqub recognises himself by means of his face. As David Laraway indicates, “Only when his death is imminent does the revelation occur.” The critic explains, “The connections between death, the face, and a moment of self-revelation are to be found throughout Borges's works” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 320). However, the sight of his own visage does not enable Yāqub to achieve any insight into his own character because he is overwhelmed by the prospect of imminent death. In this recognition, as Laraway observes, “the figure of the face [acts] as a site where identity

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14. This striking phrase, besides signifying the magical mirror of the story, may also be interpreted as connoting a paradoxically veiled mirror which conceals even as it reflects, or reveals, appearances such as the faces that peer into it. Further, the words may also allude to writing, which is created by putting ink on paper. See below for my discussion of literature as a special kind of mirror.
is at once consolidated and undermined” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 309-313).\textsuperscript{15} The narrative importance of “the motif of the mirror” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 311) lies, then, not in enabling the tyrant to understand the self but in metaphorically showing his blindness with regard to himself. Thus, the prominent theme of the short story is the exploration of sight and its obscurement.

2.2. The Dialectic of the Ideal and the Experiential

The first move in the dialectical arc under examination is the withdrawal by the blind subject into the Ideal\textsuperscript{16} Realm. The narrator\textsuperscript{17} of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (hereafter “Tlön” [68-81]) opens his narrative by stating that he came to discover the “fiction[al]” “country” (69) of Uqbar with the help of “a mirror and an encyclopedia.”\textsuperscript{18} The combination of the two images is not a coincidence: they are deployed to serve the common purpose of reflection. The “mirror” and “The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia (1917)” (68) are meant to reflect the self and the world, respectively. Hence they act as twin symbols in the narrative, with a common role to play. We have seen that the mirror has been used as a symbol in a number of Borges’s short stories examined above, notably in “The Mirror of Ink” in a sustained manner. Laraway explains the reason for the author’s appropriation of “the well-worn trope that art is a kind of mirror”: “It is not the capacity of art to reflect the world that makes the mirror such a powerful symbol; it

\textsuperscript{15} On the importance of the face for self-recognition in Borges’s writings, see “Dissemblances” (52-4) and “The Blind Spot in the Mirror” (309-14).

\textsuperscript{16} The word “ideal” and its various forms appear in the chapter in three main senses: first, as that which relates to thoughts or mental phenomena which are non-material in character; secondly, in the related sense of linguistic phenomena such as words and literary expressions; and thirdly, in the sense of utopian conceptions of human society.

\textsuperscript{17} He is an alter ego of Borges.

\textsuperscript{18} In “Tlön,” Borges’s translator uses three spellings of the word “encyclopedia,” viz. “encyclopedia,” “encyclopaedia,” and “encyclopædia.”
is rather the mirror s [sic] unique ability to reveal to the viewer a perspective of him or herself that would otherwise be unavailable” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 311). (I will take up The question of fictional epistemology/ontology later in this chapter.) For Borges, then, the mirror acts as the reflective surface par excellence that enables “one [to] see one’s own face as others see it” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 312). It serves as a motif pointing to self-recognition from “a strictly visual standpoint” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 311). We can say, then, that the joint appearance of the mirror and the encyclopaedia – which, like the present narrative, is also an artistic work – symbolises the epistemological role of art.

Although the two devices are designed to help us gain specific kinds of knowledge, they fail to perform the functions they are meant to in a reliable manner. In the case of the encyclopaedia, the presence of an article in one of its copies about a country that does not exist on earth generates a doubt in the minds of the narrator and his friend, Bioy Casares. This doubt pertains not only to this particular encyclopedia, but it also calls into question, as will become clear below, the efficacy of the encyclopaedia as a class of books, and ultimately of language itself, to represent the world. The narrator’s passing remark about the misleading nature of the title of The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia, which is actually a “literal . . . laggardly reprint of the 1902 Encyclopædia Britannica” (68), hints at the misleading character of its contents. Borges’s distrust of the mirror as a device which would reflect his face, and reveal the self, is evident in his literary practice. In an interview conducted by Seamus Heaney and Richard Kearney, Borges says, “I am . . . obsessed by a dream in which I see myself in a looking glass with several masks or faces each superimposed on the other; I peel them off successively and address the face before me in the glass; but it doesn't answer, it
cannot hear me or doesn't listen, impossible to know” (77). Thus, as the narrator of “Tlön” says, the mirror can only “shadow us” (68). Moreover, the mirror is “inaccessible” to Borges as “a key to [his] identity” “in his blindness” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 312). The author’s deployment of the mirror and the encyclopedia as mediums that reinforce uncertainties about the self, and about the power of language to represent the world, suggests his anxiety about blindness and its consequences. It also demonstrates his desire to withdraw from the world.

The narrator further declares that the copy of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* which he and his friend Bioy Casares had found in the rented house in Ramos Mejia contained no mention of Uqbar. The same was the case with the copy consulted by Carlos Mastronardi in a Buenos Aires bookshop. An exhaustive hunt for any sign of the country “through atlases, catalogs, the yearly indices published by geographical societies, the memoirs of travellers and historians” proved to be fruitless as they yielded nothing. This bewildering absence is suggestive of the imaginary character of the land of Uqbar. This view is further strengthened by the vagueness of the article on it present in the “copy of the encyclopedia” (70) discovered by Bioy Casares. It is confirmed when the narrator recalls in part II of the narrative “a brief description of a false country” (71) in the encyclopedia. I suggest that this inability to locate the country in the maps of the world, and in the pages of various books about the world, parallels and implies the blind person’s inability to access “the visible universe” (italics as in the source, 69) and the optical image of the self in the mirror. This encourages him to dwell

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19. While an encyclopaedia is subject to revision (which requirement alludes to the provisional character of knowledge), the cumulative effect of not finding any mention of the country of Uqbar in the pages of a wide range of books deepens the mystery, and casts a doubt on the efficacy of the encyclopaedia and other reference material to represent the world.
in the ‘thought-world’ rather than in the physical, spatial world as the latter is inaccessible to him, and he is not able to sense objects and other details that are located far from his body. The result is that he loses a sense of control over his own life in the interactive human world, which is shaped by sighted people. This in turn motivates that person to withdraw from the experiential world into the mental – ideal – realm. Such a move allows him, in the words of John M. Hull, to retain “some kind of inner control,” at least in the sphere of the mind or “the introspective consciousness,” which gives him “a sense of being in an ordered environment” (Touching the Rock 53; On Sight 46). The reference in Part I of the narrative to Uqbar’s literature of the ideal, and the introduction to Tlön, indicate this withdrawal into the archives of knowledge. The article in question says “that its epics and legends never referred to reality but rather to the two imaginary realms of Mle'khnas and Tlön” (70).

Significantly, Part II of “Tlön” begins with yet another reference to the capacity of the mirror to reflect, which is quickly followed by the discovery of another encyclopedia by the narrator. Although its effectiveness in revealing the self to one who gazes into it is uncertain, the mirror still holds out a limited possibility of this. This explains the narrator’s “attachment to” “reflective surface[s]” in the story. According to Laraway, Borges displays a sustained fascination for “the problem of scepticism regarding the self” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 311-12). In his view, Borges regarded mirrors with an abiding fear due to “the suspicion that they might somehow

20. Hull dwells on the blind person’s desire to withdraw from the sighted world in the following quote: “I did not feel as if I wanted to withdraw from the world of sighted people and lose myself in the less demanding and more comfortable world of blind people who would understand me” (Touching the Rock 117; On Sight 104). But later, discussing the “poignant sense of loss” that assails him regularly, he writes, “It is rather as if an intention has taken the place of a feeling. The intention is to withdraw” (Touching the Rock 153; On Sight 135). The situation he describes here concerns his difficulties in playing with his children due to a severe lack of knowledge about certain games. This sense of lack is brought about by his difficulty in adjusting to the demands of blindness.
conceal a clue to his identity” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 312). Apropos of this, we should note the narratorial statement “that there is something monstrous about mirrors” (68). Thus we find the narratorial suggestion that “the illusory depths of the mirror” as well as the eleventh volume of “A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön” might actually constitute “key[s]” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 312) of different kinds – the former by providing “a clue to [the personal] identity” of the railway engineer Herbert Ash, and the latter by throwing light on “the universe” (72). The narrator’s emphatic words concerning the encyclopaedia reinforce this hope: “I now held in my hands a vast and systematic fragment of the entire history of an unknown planet” (71).

Due to the reference made in the narrative to “a brief description of a false country” (71) present in The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia, a doubt was raised earlier in the chapter about the effectiveness of the encyclopaedia to represent the world. We learn from the narrator’s summary of Tlön’s “conception of the universe” (72), as dealt with in the eleventh volume of A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön, that the realm is one composed of ideas. Thus, although the narrative mentions the southern and northern hemispheres of Tlön, there are no references to its countries, oceans, and other physical features. Instead, we have what amounts to a description of the combined intellectual achievements of many generations of thinkers. Thus, it can be seen that the encyclopaedia provides, to echo Borges’s words in the foreword to The Garden of

21 In the literary history of the Occident, we find the tradition of the encyclopaedic novel where miscellaneous data across disciplines is brought in. Some examples include a number of late mediaeval texts, The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel (1532-64) by François Rabelais during the Renaissance, and the novel Bouvard et Pécuchet (1881) by Gustave Flaubert as well as the works of James Joyce in modern times. These writers endorse a certain holistic approach to life. So they combine realms of experience which are wildly diverse (eschatology and scatology, the religious and the sexual, violence and the holy) in their works. Borges’s ‘fictions’ belong to this novelistic tradition. Therefore, his semi-biographical engagement with the senses has immense epistemological implications involving perception, memory, and imagination. Given the erudite framework of his oeuvre, this engagement also links up with the perennial Western motif hyphenating ‘blindness and insight.’
*Forking Paths* (1941), a diagram of the human mind, thereby drawing the reader’s attention away from the external world, and focussing it on idealist matters.

The narrator is clearly thrilled to discover the encyclopaedia dealing with Tlön, but does not want to reveal his “emotions” and, by extension, the story of his personal existence. His reference to “the irrecoverable colours of the sky” (71) is curious. Considering that he is an alter ego of Borges, it could be an allusion to his growing blindness, which prevents him from perceiving those colours. Therefore, he offers the following reason for his unwillingness to go into personal matters: “[T]his is the story not of my emotions but of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius” (71). It is thus important to note how, on finding the encyclopedia in the bar of “the hotel at Adrogué” (70), he quickly becomes absorbed in its pages, subsequently drawing other scholars into a debate on the existence of “later and earlier volumes” of the encyclopaedia (72).

On reading further, it turns out that Tlön, which is known “today” to be “a cosmos” whose “innermost laws . . . have been formulated, however provisionally so” (72), is a realm of Berkelean ideas. The narrator’s observation about Hume’s assessment of “Berkeley’s arguments” as thoroughly unconvincing is significant. That criticism is, he says, “entirely true with respect to the earth, entirely false with respect to Tlön” (72). The statement carries his conviction that idealist theories cannot explain fully the earth and earthly life, but they can elucidate Tlön totally due to its origins in human intelligence. Hume’s criticism of Berkeley’s philosophy is of a general nature because, as Richard H. Popkin points out, till the year 1964, when Hume’s three letters

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22. It is subsequently proved to be mistaken because it is belied—to a great extent—by developments between 1940 and 1947, which are narrated in the “Postscript” to the short story.

23. I am grateful to Max Ubelaker Andrade for clarifying the question of Hume’s criticism of Berkeley’s ideas.
to his “close friend Michael Ramsay” (774) were discovered and published in Poland, it was not known for certain if Hume had actually read Berkeley. This point assumes significance because the former is considered “as Berkeley's successor” (Popkin 773). In Hume’s “earliest letter” to Ramsay, dated August 26-31, 1737 (Popkin 774), Hume recommends that the latter read Berkeley among other philosophers so that it will be possible for him to “enter into them [his intellectual ‘Performances’] more easily . . . These Books will make you easily comprehend the metaphysical Parts of my Reasoning and as to the rest, they have so little Dependence on all former systems of Philosophy, that your natural Good Sense will afford you Light enough to judge of their Force & Solidity” (Popkin 775). The foregoing words hint at the difference of “the metaphysical Parts of [Hume’s] Reasoning” from “all former systems of Philosophy” including Berkeley’s system. This point is confirmed by Popkin when he states that, although Hume was aware of Berkeley’s philosophy, there is “little trace of Berkeley in Hume's writings. . . . Berkeley is mentioned only three times in Hume's total published works. No doctrine of Berkeley's is used by Hume to establish any of his own views, and where Hume and Berkeley come closest to discussing the same subject or holding the same view, Hume neither uses Berkeley's terms nor refers to him” (778). However, Popkin quotes a statement in his article from a letter written by one Lord Monboddo to one James Harris, dated June 18, 1769, which refers to Hume’s opinion of Bishop Berkeley’s ideas: “he [Lord Monboddo] says he read Berkeley after having heard ‘David Hume say that his [Berkeley's] arguments are absolutely unanswerable’” (775-76). We may conclude from this observation that, although on the surface of it the words seem to suggest the “Force and Solidity” of Berkeley’s philosophical arguments, Hume did not think highly of them.
Returning to the narrator’s observation about Hume’s opinion as it relates to Tlön, its implications are as follows. Everything basic to life in Tlön depends fundamentally upon two premises: first, the language of “the nations of that planet” is the source of “religion, literature, metaphysics”; and second, “their language” and “those things derived from [it] presuppose idealism” (72). From these metaphysical premises, we can draw three closely related conclusions about Tlön that structure my reading of the narrative. First, all “objects” in “the world” are, in A. C. Grayling’s words, “mind-dependent” ideas (178), that is to say, they are “‘made of mind-stuff’” (175). Second, language can be used in parallel ways to conceive objects and compose literary works due to the ideal nature of both types of entities. And third, idealism leads to totalising narratives that drain all meaning from the existence of individual subjects, and from the plurality of “systems of thought” despite their “countless numbers” in the “paradoxical” intellectual climate of the realm (74). Thus, as we learn in the closing paragraph of the “Postscript” to the short story, the “[temporally and spatially] scattered dynasty of recluses” who fashioned this idealistic planet has influenced reality (read our world), and the narrator predicts that the latter will “be Tlön” (81). Therefore, these inventors of that realm, which intrudes into our world as the narrative progresses, play the role that Berkeley assigns to the “causally efficacious” (Grayling 176), “single infinite mind — in short, God” (Grayling 166). This view is strengthened by references in the narrative to the “one and eternal” “subject of knowledge,” “the idea of the single subject,” and “a single author who is timeless and anonymous” (76-7). Thus Bishop Berkeley’s metaphysical theory of existence, which the philosopher offered as an elucidation of the world we live in, is realised in Tlön.
We will first take up the second conclusion above concerning the creative power of language. “[T]he world,” in Tlönian understanding, exists in time, not in space. It is, the narrator reports, “not an amalgam of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts” occurring in “successive” order. The “real object[s]” that exist in Tlön are thus equivalent to the “‘poetic object[s]’” created by poets there because both classes of objects are conceived by employing the diverse resources of language in an intricate manner (73). The absence of “nouns in the Ursprache[n]” of both the southern and northern hemispheres of the planet indicates the absence of spatial objects. Even when “nouns are formed by stringing together adjectives” in the latter hemisphere, says the narrator, “no one believes in the reality expressed by these nouns” (73). This state of affairs eloquently testifies to the mental character of what exists in Tlön. The following narratorial statement illustrates this point: “[T]he people of that planet conceive the universe as a series of mental processes that occur not in space but rather successively, in time” (73). This conception of the universe is purely intellectual because a series of thoughts occurring in time constitutes it.

Concerning the nature of this idealistic realm, let us turn next to the narrator’s speculation about “who, singular or plural, invented Tlön.” There the “‘brave new world’” (72) is identified with the volumes of A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön, whose number was unknown in 1940 (78). The references to “a secret society” of philosophers and artists of diverse pursuits, and a vast plan involving writing (72), are significant in this regard. The fact that the world of Tlön has been invented, and that it exists only in the form of writing in an encyclopedia, a written text, is evidence enough for its ideal character. The narrator’s conjecture is proved to be correct in March 1941 by the discovery of “a handwritten letter from Gunnar Erfjord . . . in a book by Hinton that
had belonged to Herbert Ashe [in which] the mystery of Tlön was fully elucidated,” and is clinched by the reference, made in the “postscript” as the one above, to “a systematic encyclopedia of the illusory planet” (79). This encyclopaedia is produced by the members of a secret society (78), and it would ultimately include forty volumes (79-80).

Earlier, I made a reference to the Tlönian conception of “the universe as a series of mental processes” (73), that is, ideas. What can be said about the objects that exist in that universe? This is critical for two related reasons – one metaphysical, the other political. Since the inhabitants of Tlön are idealists, they regard all objects as not having a “corporeal basis” (Grayling 167) with “spatial extension” (73), but as “mental state[s]” (74) or mind-dependent ideas. The foregoing position may be described as constituting immaterialism, which philosophical stance may be described in Berkeley’s words as follows:

Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes to see them. Such I take this important one to be, viz., that . . . all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world . . . have not any subsistence without a mind, that their being is to be perceived or known; that consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some Eternal Spirit . . . (Sec. 6)

The passage clarifies (1) that nothing can exist independently of a mind; and (2) consequently that all the bodies which make up the world have their existence only in

24. Erfjord’s letter reveals that Berkeley was a member of this secret society.
being perceived by a worldly creature or by “the mind of some Eternal Spirit.” (We may note in passing that Berkeley uses the metaphor of sight – to open one’s eyes and see – to talk about knowledge.) Thus, the perceiving mind or self gains supreme importance in this philosophy. This non-materialistic conception of objects is best described by the statement in “Tlön” that “all nouns . . . have only metaphoric value” (75). It is for this reason that “space is not conceived as having duration in time” (73-4). It is noteworthy how “the sophism of the nine copper coins” (75), which propounds the doctrine of materialism, is either not understood at all or philosophically rejected as a fallacious argument. Individual, independent (in the sense of being a series of unconnected) ideas are all that exist (as suggested in the paragraph above on language). As these entities cannot be explained, judged, named, or classified, being “irreducible” (74), they can only be, in Berkeley’s understanding, perceived by the mind. This is because “there are no necessary connections between ideas,” and they have “‘no power or agency’” (Grayling 177) to affect or illuminate one another when they are linked together by the subject.

However, the above argument for immaterialism does not deny the sensory aspects of perceived objects. According to idealism, various sensible qualities are “observed” to coalesce together to form objects (Grayling 168), which are perceived by the mind and exist as ideas therein (Grayling 169). With this understanding, let us now turn our attention to the objects referred to in the narrative. The nine copper coins; the “hrōnir” or “secondary objects” that are duplicated by minds, such as pencils, “a rusty wheel,” “a gold mask, an archaic sword, two or three clay amphorae, and the verdigris’d and mutilated torso of a king” (77); and “the ur — the thing produced by suggestion, the object brought forth by hope” (78) are striking for their physicality. These secondary
objects are products of the Tlönians’ expectations. Thus, they are symbols of the inevitable influence of idealism on reality. The main example of “ur” offered by the narrator is “[t]he magnificent gold mask” (78) mentioned above. To this, we may add the “compass” (79) that appears in Laprida, “a very small yet extremely heavy” “gleaming metal cone” discovered at an inn “in the Cuchilla Negra,” and several others in various countries all over the real world. The appearance of “the ur” in the real world symbolises the encroaching influence of “the fantastic world of Tlön” (80) on it.

The significance of the Tlönian problem, as sketched by the narrator, is the insidious influence of idealism on the inhabitants of the real world. Since psychology is the single most important discipline of Tlön’s “classical culture” (73), we may infer from this the paramount importance given to the mind and its works in that culture. This results firstly in a diminished or absent engagement with the experience of individual subjects, and secondly in the rise of totalising narratives. When the objects produced in that realm make their appearance in our world, they impact people adversely. This is indicated by the example of the heavy metal cone, which, as the narrator hints, may be responsible for the insanity and death of the “young man” who possessed it. It inspires “fear and revulsion” (80) in the narrator himself. The terror of hrönir becomes evident when we learn that they have been used “not only to interrogate but even to modify the past” (77). The reference at the end of the narrative to the obliteration of history and the reformation of several disciplines of human knowledge – including “biology” (81)²⁵ – resulting from the spell cast on humanity by Tlön is further proof of this. The discovery “in 1944 [of] the forty volumes of The First Encyclopaedia of Tlön” (79), and their

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²⁵. Given Borges’s growing blindness, this may be a veiled reference to eugenics and the purification of the human species by a combination of measures such as involuntary or forced sterilisation and killing off “undesirable” members of society such as disabled persons.
dissemination throughout the world, heralds the collapse of reality and the falling of “the world . . . under the sway of Tlön” (81) due to the promise of order it offers. Thus, “the horrifying or banal truth” referred to at the beginning of the narrative in connection with “a first-person novel” (68) with an unreliable narrator is that people are enamoured of simplistic systems of knowledge, that is, various species of idealism, such as “dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism” (81). Such people hope that the above-mentioned comprehensive systems of knowledge will yield solutions to human problems, and restore order in a chaotic world. Thus, in “Tlön,” Borges examines the ethical problems posed by idealistic theories by tracing their trajectory, and exposing the consequences of the application of such theories in the world.

Clearly, then, “Tlön” is a narrative whose form and content correspond well in an exploration of an ideal realm and its implications. “The Library of Babel” (112-18) may also be so described on account of its artistic fusion of form and content in an examination of a different kind of ideal realm – one created on the basis of “twenty-five orthographic symbols” (113), that is, scriptorial language. The unnamed narrator of the story, who is a blind librarian, and therefore an alter ego of Borges, is portrayed as living in “the Library.” This library is “the universe,” an eternal realm constituted by an “infinite number of hexagonal galleries” (112). All the inhabitants of this labyrinthine library are librarians. The narrator shows this to be the case when he refers to “[m]an, the imperfect librarian” (113). The foregoing words bring out the supremely relevant point of the narrative, notwithstanding the narrator’s claim to the contrary, that it is “pointless” (117). Throughout, references are made to a number of metaphysical arguments offered by idealists and philosophers of various other hues about the library,

26. Borges developed this narrative out of his essay “The Total Library” (Piper 57).
its structure, the books, and the writing, suggesting the unabating restlessness of the realm’s librarians.

The “epistle” (118) – for that is how the narrator refers to the narrative – discusses the problem of meaning in the labyrinthine writing found in “the enigmatic books” housed in the Library. In the first articulation of the problem, the narrator presents the reader with the mysterious case of the writing on “the front cover of each book” which neither indicates nor prefigures “what the pages inside will say.” This problem is part of a larger riddle, namely “the formless and chaotic nature of virtually all books” (113). The solution to the riddle is provided by the “fundamental law of the Library,” viz. “all books, however different from one another they might be,” are constituted by combining “the twenty-two letters of the alphabet” (114) and three punctuation marks, which are the basic building blocks necessary for expression in every language employed in the Library. Towards the end of the story, the narrator offers his own solution to the problem: that any and all “combination[s] of characters” conceived in the Library carry some significance “in one or more of its secret tongues” without fail, which may be deciphered by means of “cryptographic or allegorical ‘reading[s]’” (117).

We may say that in “The Library of Babel,” which is called a personal letter, the narrator suggests what Arthur C. Danto means by the “universality of literary reference” (64). Building upon the idea that “the work exists for the spectator and not on its own account” so that its “apprehension” by “the individual apprehending it . . . completes the work and gives it final substance” (63), Danto postulates:

27. Danto acknowledges Hegel for this conception of literature.
[A literary] work is about the “I” that reads the text, identifying himself not with the implied reader for whom the implied narrator writes but with the actual subject of the text in such a way that each work becomes a metaphor for each reader: perhaps the same metaphor for each . . . It is literature when, for each reader I, I is the subject of the story . . . literature [is] a kind of mirror, not simply in the sense of rendering an external reality, [nor] in passively returning an image [but] in transforming the self-consciousness of the reader who in virtue of identifying with the image recognises what he is. (64)

As discussed earlier in the chapter, Borges too views the literary work as a kind of mirror. The reading of (literary) texts enables (or should enable) the reader to discover the self. Danto formulates the above argument as a corrective to both the conception of literature as that which by means of “fictive terms” refers vertically to “subsistent entities” in possible worlds (56-7) and as text, which is defined as “a network of reciprocal effects” with merely internal, horizontal references (60-1). The latter concept is strikingly similar to that of the enigmatic writing found in the books housed in the library of the narrative. Thus, the overwhelming importance given by “the [imperfect] men of the Library” (112) to language and the books hides a grave lack in their culture: the near-complete absence of introspection and reflection on self-conduct. In fact, the narrator’s summary of the philosophical conclusions offered by the “librarian of genius” (114) concerning the books in the Library subtly suggests the insufficiency of those conclusions. This is because they foreground only language, and the extravagant

character of the Library’s contents, without making any reference to the writers and readers of the books. His own conclusion about meaning (discussed above) is followed by the realisation that all speech and writing amount to “tautologies” (117)\textsuperscript{29}, and hence are pointless because meaning is present not on the page but within ourselves.

On comparing “Tlön” and “The Library of Babel,” we find that the two narratives share some striking similarities. The encyclopaedias in the former and the library, which contains all possible books and which is the universe in the latter, mirror each other. As we have seen, the ideal realms which they reveal negate life,\textsuperscript{30} which is based on corporeality, and is therefore formed by individual experience. By showing how people are spellbound by idealism, and by their misguided belief in the existence of meaning in books, respectively, the narrators suggest the extent to which this loss of the power of thinking for oneself and forgetfulness lead to enormous human suffering. This conclusion is supported by the loss of life, and of the past and disintegration of this world reported in “Tlön” as well as by the occurrence in “The Library of Babel” of deadly quarrels, killings, fanaticism, “brigandage,” “suicides” (118), and even the suspicion of impending human extinction. The narrator in the former narrative recognises the necessity of talking about the fragility of human life and mortality. Thus, at its close, we find him translating “Sir Thomas Browne’s Urne Buriall.” However, he does not “intend to publish” (81) his translation because people who have been habituated to Tlön will not read such a work. The blind librarian in the latter narrative

\textsuperscript{29}This is so because any and all expressions in language already exist in the “divine library” (117). Due to this, a person cannot say or write anything new.

\textsuperscript{30}In a conversation that Max Ubelaker Andrade and I had on July 10, 2014 via Skype, I realised that both of us had independently arrived at the reading of “Tlön” and “The Library of Babel” which exposes “the danger of withdrawing into such places,” that is, the idealist realms which are the subject of the two narratives.
also dismisses his narrative as pointless because the inhabitants of the realm will not listen to what he has to say about life and its contingencies, such as blindness and old age. Like the people who look for “The Vindications” (115), and like other “fanatics” (116), he too has “squandered and spent [his] years” (117) searching for “perhaps the catalogue of catalogues” (112). However, it is evident from the narrative that he has come to realise the fruitlessness of such ventures. This recognition may be seen in his deep sadness, which is caused by the loss of life, the human cost involved in people’s incessant search for supernatural books with the belief that they may help them solve personal and world problems. Thus, he suggests throughout the story that it is crucial to turn inwards, look for meaning there, examine one’s experience, and become a writer instead of remaining a reader. This may enable the person to gain self-understanding. In arriving at their respective insights, the narrators of the two short stories bring out the importance of memory in preserving an ethical perspective on life. The role of memory is unquestionably significant in other short stories by Borges, including “The Maker.”

While in “Tlön” and “The Library of Babel” the narrators come to understand the importance of engaging with experiential reality, the narratives themselves do not, as we have seen in the foregoing pages, deal with it. In the narratives examined in the following section, a shift may be perceived with regard to this point; and in “The Maker,” there is a sea change in Borges’s aesthetic approach to blindness. There the narrator tells the story of the Greek epic poet Homer becoming blind, and realising through his experience, his powers as a poet.

31. He declares in the second paragraph that he is “preparing to die” because he is blind – “my eyes can hardly make out what I myself have written” (112). He gives in to this despair because he assumes that he cannot perform his duties anymore. It is worth noting in this regard that Borges was the director of the National Library of Argentina during the years of his blindness.
2.3. The Aesthetic Turn to the Experience of Blindness

The short story “The Secret Miracle” (156-62), first published in 1943, reflects on the responses of the writer and playwright Jaromir Hladik to the twin mysteries of time and the act of dying by dwelling on his efforts to complete his “unfinished tragedy The Enemies” (157). On March 19, 1939, Hladik is arrested in Prague by the Gestapo, and condemned to be executed by gunfire on the 29th of the same month. During his imprisonment, he descends into the night of despair and, in the words of the narrator, dies “hundreds of deaths” (158) before remembering his unfinished play. By the miraculous intercession of God, Hladik’s death is postponed, and “time . . . halted” (161), so that he can complete his play in his mind. Thus, the narrative dramatises the difference between “real duration” and “spatialized time” – a distinction that Bergson makes in his book An Introduction to Metaphysics (1961). Bergson defines the former thus: “It is our own person in its flowing through time” (Introduction to Metaphysics 9). Duration is characterised by mental activity. Creativity is shown to be the power that sustains Hladik in the face of the destructive forces of time and death.

Borges says that blindness forced him to compose poems in “regular verse” forms because they could be worked on in the memory, without his having to look at a written page (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 307-08). In the light of this biographical information, the reference to Hladik’s working on his verse drama “without a manuscript” may be considered as an allusion to blindness. Its aptness to the playwright’s situation is evident. He is a prisoner who does not have access to his

32. Merleau-Ponty talks about the distinction between “the flow of duration” (80) “in the Bergsonian sense” (47) and the impersonal, “objective time” (80). Although Merleau-Ponty builds a different philosophical system from that of Bergson’s metaphysics, the former does draw on the thought of the latter, for example, in discussing the subject’s experience of time.
manuscript, which forces him to work in a sort of enforced blindness. Repeated use in
the text of words such as “night” and “dark” are significant because they metaphorically
allude to sightlessness. These words bring out Hladik’s despair. Before he can complete
his literary work, he is to be executed. The librarian of the Clementine Library in
Hladik’s dream is a character who has become blind looking for God. This points to the
futility of trying to seek God visually. Although Hladik succeeds in reaching God by
touching a letter on “a map of India,” his connection with the divine being is established
through sound. First he speaks with God, and later God responds to him in like manner
in a dream: “A voice that was everywhere spoke to him” (160), granting his wish of a
year to complete his play. Although blindness is used here as a metaphor, the short
story deals with the artist’s creative work, which takes place in the mind in the spoken
medium and the hexameter, without his having to rely on visual aids.

According to Estela Canto, the three short stories “The Aleph” (274-86), “The
Zahir” (242-49), and “The Writing of the God” (250-54) are linked to one another,
and were composed in “the summer of 1945 [sic]” (Núñez-Faraco 613). The theme that
links the three narratives is the tension between sight and its absence, which is
embodied in the three symbols at the centre of narrative focus in the short stories. In
“The Zahir,” an occurrence appearing in a tableau of visible objects (each of which was
the Zahir in its time) aptly symbolises this tension. The incident involves “a blind man
in the Surakarta mosque,” who was the Zahir in Java and who was “stoned by the

33. With an obvious reference to paralysis, the narrator also uses the word “paralysed” in order
to describe the immobility of Hladik and his executioners when God, answering the playwright’s prayer
for a year to complete his tragedy, halts time and freezes the physical world in order to postpone the
execution (161).

34. Borges dedicated “The Aleph” to Canto.

35. These short stories appeared in the collection The Aleph (1949).
faithful.” An alter ego of the author, the narrator – whose name is Borges – structures his narrative as a memoir of the Zahir. In Buenos Aires, the Zahir is “a common twenty-centavo coin” (242). The narrative records his growing fascination with the coin. The Zahir gradually takes him from being obsessed with the visual appearances of the world to being solely occupied in thinking about it. His repeated descriptions of Teodelina Villar’s images, especially her facial features (243); the rich trove of vivid images throughout the text of coins, a treasure of “red rings and gleaming gold” (246) as well as various objects and creatures which were the Zahir in their time and country (242); and finally his declaration towards the end of the narrative, “Anything that is not the Zahir comes to me as though through a filter, and from a distance” (248), are significant. They act as narrative indicators of a transformation in Borges’s (the narrator) selfhood over five months – from June 7 to November 13 (242). Compelled by the power of the Zahir, he initially withdraws inwards from the visible, physical world, and engages in intellectual and imaginative tasks. Further, in the course of time, his mind becomes absorbed in “the memory” of it – since he has got rid of the coin by paying for a brandy with it. We may consider the Zahir to be a symbol of blindness because, once a person looks upon it, it influences their life completely like their own body, and he/she can never again think of or access the world except through its medium. Hull’s conception of blindness as “the necessary avenue of communication

36. This means that eventually he perceives the appearances of the world as being filtered or mirrored by the Zahir.

37. The short story “The Aleph” enacts a comparable journey from obsession with the seductions of the visual to an appreciation of imaginative activity through the mediums of tactile and auditory experience (Ubelaker Andrade, “Against Seeing”). This journey is represented by the narrator’s viewing the entire universe in a point called an Aleph; it concludes with his final assertion that the visible Aleph is false, and that the true Aleph is to be found buried in a stone column at a mosque in Cairo. If one puts one’s ear to the stone column, he can hear “‘the bustling rumour’” (285) of the universe.
between my interior and the world” (*Touching the Rock* 155; *On Sight* 136) captures the nature of this experience very well. Concerning the influence of the Zahir upon himself, Borges makes a couple of statements that are suggestive of the effects of blindness: soon “I will not know whether it’s morning or night,” he says, and continues with a statement about his final relationship with the cosmos: “I will no longer” be able to “perceive the universe,” but only the Zahir (248). He interprets the object of his continuous contemplation from a spiritual angle, and hopes that through concentration on it, he, like the Sufis, will find God (249).

We can read the short story “The Writing of the God” in the light of a narrative image offered by Hull. He writes that “during the early months and years” of his blindness, there was “a persistent image” which bothered him to the extent of panicking him badly. This is a mineshaft leading deep into a hill. In the imagined episode, Hull is being carried remorselessly “deeper and deeper into the hillside” “in a little coal-truck.” He has no way of getting out of the mountain, and feels “trapped in an intolerable hiding place” (*Touching the Rock* 47; *On Sight* 42). Tzinacan is the priest of the god Qaholom, and the narrator of “The Writing of the God.” The deep, oppressive stone cell in which he is imprisoned, and the smothering sand which buries him in a dream, take on the significance of the loss of visual perception and the isolating experience of blindness. In his old age, the priest can still perceive the jaguar which is imprisoned in the adjacent cell in the light that “enters the vault” (250) of the prison, but he cannot see well. He also suggests that he is paralysed, and can no longer move. Thus, although he “devoted [long years] to learning the order and arrangement of the spots on the tiger's skin” (251-52) with the objective of deciphering Qaholom’s “secret text” (251), he can no longer see his jailer “whom the years have gradually blurred.” This is a clear
indication of the gradual loss of eyesight. Phrases such as “my darkness” (250) and “each blind day” as well as the rhetorical question “between my days and nights, what difference can there be?” (252), and the words “allow the day to enter my night” (253) appearing towards the end of the narrative, function as allusions to blindness. Thus, the priest/narrator serves as the alter ego of Borges.

In “The Writing of the God,” Borges explores, in mystical terms, the theme of understanding by contrasting the following pairs – dream and reality, blindness and sight, physical sight and spiritual vision, and metaphoric blindness and vision. It is worth noting that a “bright light” (252) awakens Tzinacan from the nightmare and, that on waking, he sees all those things which define his life as a prisoner: “the face and hands of the jailer, the pulley, the rope, the meat, and the water jugs” (253). I suggest that he catches sight of these things in “an epiphany of sorts” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 310). In the poem “A Blind Man” (Selected Poems 357),

the speaker’s yearning to see the world and himself is embodied in a sudden glimpse of “a lock of hair, the colour of ashes or perhaps gold” in an instance of “unexpected, synaesthetic vision” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 310). In “The Writing of the God,” Tzinacan’s sight of the familiar things in his prison after he emerges from the series of dreams heralds a profound spiritual transformation in him. This enables him to have a vision of the universe. He narrates that on waking from the “indefatigable labyrinth of dreams” (253) in which “the countless sand” (252) suffocated him to the point of death, he blessed the prison, its discomforts, and “my old and aching body” – in short, his whole, severely restricted world. At this point, he has a life-changing, mystical experience: “[T]here occurred union with the deity, union with the universe (I do not know whether

38. The poem first appeared in the collection The Unending Rose (1975).
there is a difference between those two words).” This ecstatic experience is symbolised by the vision – he uses the words “saw” and “sight” here – of the great, “infinite” (253) wheel. While the dark world within the prison symbolises blindness and isolation in Tzinacan’s waking life, the sand that crushes him in the series of dreams that occur one within the other is a symbol of blindness in his dream life, that is, his mind, which deals with metaphors. Further, his search for the god’s writing, which he sustains through “[l]ong [frustrating] years” (251) with the help of the light which enters the prison for an “instant” (252) every dark day, suggests a kind of blindness in terms of the lack of understanding. We can make sense of this metaphor if we consider the link between sight and knowledge evident in Borges’s writings. Such a connection is also articulated by Hull: “In situations of uncertainty, when I become a little panicky through being asthmatic or losing my way, then I usually have a very strong, even claustrophobic sense of darkness. . . . I also feel plunged into darkness when I am emotionally involved in ignorance” (On Sight 20). Besides, when Tzinacan “loses sight of himself just as [the] epiphanic vision is unfolded before his eyes” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 320), metaphoric blindness – in the form of losing sight of the self – and spiritual vision are brought together as the rationale for the narrator’s decision not to speak the secret words of the god.

In a discussion about the journey of the protagonist to the underworld – katabasis, and his freedom from that trap as a literary trope, Ubelaker Andrade states:

[I] think that the journey to the underworld is actually quite full of earthly delights for Borges. Instead of being dark, it’s filled with light: things to see, things to be excited by, things to possess, things to obsess over. Freedom, on the other hand, is full of darkness. Freedom can be the
absence of sight, of desire, the empty hand that does not seek out anything to grasp. I feel that, for Borges, the underworld is not found in a place of darkness but instead in an amplly lit museum, a perfect aperture like the Aleph, a perfect memory like that of Funes. All these modes of seeing, of remembering, of possessing with the mind are traps, whereas freedom is often constituted by forgetfulness, oblivion, absence, and blindness, especially in the case of “The Maker” where the gift of blindness allows discursive patterns to suddenly come into view in the mental realm. (Personal interview)

These words point decisively to Borges’s aesthetic turn away from the dominance of visuality towards a world without sight. As the quote makes it clear, a self-conscious inversion occurs in his treatment of the underworld motif. Whereas in Virgil and Dante that region is dark and therefore available to touch, Borges conceives of it as well-lit and full of sensory delights that are available to sight. When the latter understands the visual as a trap, and thinks that its absence leads to freedom, he seems to indicate that blindness may be fruitful for the person.

The figure of Homer, the ancient blind singer of Greek epic poems, symbolically links blindness and creativity in Borges’s work. The short story “The Immortal” (183–95), which appears in the collection The Aleph (1949), explores this theme by examining two sides of the coin of language – artistic potential and irony regarding the self. The unnamed narrator reports the princess de Lucinge’s description of the protagonist – Joseph Cartaphilus – as “an emaciated, grimy man with gray eyes

39. He begins telling the story of “the rare book dealer Joseph Cartaphilus,” and closes it with a postscript defending the authenticity of the manuscript containing Cartaphilus’s narrative. It is this narrative that forms bulk of the short story “The Immortal.”
and gray beard and singularly vague features” (183). The foregoing words describe Cartaphilus, in Laraway’s terms, “as others see [him]” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 312). The phrase “gray eyes” is, I suggest, a hint that the man is blind. He is, as we learn later, also Homer. While the first allusion to his blindness appears in the opening paragraph of the narrative, two more veiled indications of his lack of eyesight are to be found in the middle and at the end respectively. Part III of the narrative presents a third-person reference to the dead eyes of the Troglodyte who is Homer. The statement “there are no longer any images from memory” (195) from the postscript may be regarded as a first-person allusion made by Cartaphilus to his blindness. After centuries of not being able to perceive images, they have receded and eventually faded from his memory. It is worth noting here Hull’s observation about images because it sheds light on a significant effect of blindness on his mind. He writes that, in his case, images started becoming less and less important as time went by. Around three years after being registered blind, he finds it “more and more difficult to realise that people look like anything, to put any meaning into the idea that they have an appearance” (Touching the Rock 24; On Sight 19). A larger narrative movement is mirrored in Part III of the short story. Many years after the Roman tribune names Homer Argos after Ulysses’s dog which appears in the Odyssey, the latter identifies himself as the person who is called Argos – a name found in a poem sung long ago by himself.40 Here we have an act of aesthetic self-recognition. Thus, the narrative records a movement from a third-person visual recognition of Cartaphilus to his re-discovery of his identity not through vision but aesthetically as the “man of letters” (194) Homer, and not as the Roman tribune Marcus Flaminius Rufus. He does this towards the end of Part IV by pointing out a

40. See “The Blind Spot in the Mirror” (312) for a discussion of self-identification in logical terms.
number of anomalies – relating to the use of language and other aesthetic ones – which are present throughout the narrative.

Metaphoric blindness mirrors physical blindness, and both link up with the question of identity in the short story. As the narrator of the story of the immortals (who is Homer as well as Cartaphilus) shows through his narrative, language, with its power to evoke images, can be used to portray “the experiences of two different men” (193) as those of one man. This means that the poet, apart from describing his own experiences, has also represented those of Flaminius Rufus as his own with the help of his memory and imagination. Since he is an immortal who has lived for several centuries and thus has undergone the experiences of many men in his lifetime and also in his imagination, paradoxically, he “is all men” (191). This effaces his identity as a single man not only in the world, but also in his self-conception. Moreover, his narrative strategy of self-effacement which, in the words of the narrator of the postscript, involves the use of “words taken out of place and mutilated, words from other men” (195) from centuries past, means that his identity is hidden from sight, behind the language used by others over the years.

The theme of the body and mortality, which forms a major thread in this narrative about immortals, is explored through converging and diverging patterns in the lives of Flaminius Rufus and Homer/Cartaphilus. When the former, a man of war who has killed other men, drinks from the river “whose waters give immortality” (italics as in the source, 192) and sees “the brilliant City” of the immortals after passing through “the blind realm” (187) of dark and utterly disorienting subterranean labyrinths, he becomes immortal, befriends Homer, and joins the community of Troglydotes on the

41. We may recall here the blind prophet Tiresias, who symbolises blindness and insight.
bank of the same river. The “dark maze” and “the bright City of the immortals” (188) symbolise the man’s difficult journey inwards, which results in his living for centuries “in thought” or in a state of self-absorption “scarcely perceiv[ing] the physical world” (190). A millennium before the Roman tribune comes to the river and the city, Homer also drinks from the immortal stream and joins the Troglodytes in their contemplative lifestyle after counselling them to build the bewildering city. Then, “at the beginning or end of the tenth century” (192), both men, like the other Troglodytes, set out to seek for the river that takes away immortality. While Homer/Cartaphilus finds this “spring” outside a city “on the Eritrean coast” in the twentieth century, tastes “its clear water” (193), and regains mortality, the reader does not learn anything further about the Roman tribune’s life and fate after the two companions part in the eleventh century. Not only is the death of Homer in 1929 mentioned in the opening paragraph of the narrative, but we even read about other deaths and corporeal experiences throughout the text. Significantly, it is only after Homer regains mortality that he comes to re-discover his identity as the poet.

The opening paragraph of “The Maker” (292-93) portrays a Homer who “had never lingered among the pleasures of memory” but had flitted from one “momentary and vivid” impression to the next – intensely experiencing objects of beauty that are available to sight, touch, taste, and “the nearness of the sea or women” – without dwelling on those experiences. He was a sensitive, well-travelled, and courageous man. He equally welcomed “complex stories [and] reality” but never gave them serious thought. However, all this changed when he started going blind, though the change was not immediate. As “the splendid universe began drawing away from him,” and he experienced the gradual dimming of his sight, and realised its significance, he initially
underwent a considerable period – “[d]ays and nights” – of great suffering. This is aptly described by the expression “despair of his flesh,” which is employed by the narrator to bring out the visceral nature of Homer’s grief (and anxiety), before he regained his “calm” as he settled into his new mode of existence as a blind person. This crucial moment in his life is marked by the narrator’s use of a literary trope signifying both auditory experience and an act of remembering: “[T]he way one might feel upon recognising a melody or a voice” (292). These words herald both Homer’s acceptance of a new way of experiencing the world, and his descent “into his memory, which seemed to him endless.” When he gained access to his memory, he recalled, with a sense of déjà vu, first the feelings that he had felt while embarking upon new adventures as a youngster – “fear but also . . . joy and hopefulness and curiosity” (293) – and then his early adventures themselves.

Being a man who felt everything keenly, Homer’s experiences as he was being transformed first by partial blindness and subsequently by “his last darkness” (293) necessitate sensuous expression throughout the narrative. We find memorable language that foregrounds Borges’s aesthetic engagement with the passionate poet’s history. The following words bring out the inexorable advance of blindness: “[T]he earth became uncertain under his feet.” Next, the narrator uses words which are a direct expression of Homer’s feelings – important because they come from the character himself – on realising that he was losing his sight: “…I will not be able to see the sky filled with mythological dread or this face that the years will transfigure” (italics as in the source, 292).42 As he recollected his fight with the “boy who had insulted him,” what he wanted

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42. Significantly, Hull also expresses similar regrets in his two diaries while talking about “a sense of cognitive dissonance” about the self: “…I cannot witness the work of time upon my own face” (Touching the Rock 144; On Sight 128).
to recover “was the precise flavour of that moment,” which then gave rise to the memory of his adventure with “the first woman the gods had given him.” On recovering the intimate awareness of “the clumsy combat,” and his search for the woman “through galleries that were like labyrinths of stone and down slopes that descended into darkness,” he understood that blindness did not mean the end of his life, and that in the new life “love and adventure were also awaiting him.” It is at this point of the narrative that we find an evocative expression that metaphorically heralds Homer’s new life, and indicates the mutability of the human body: “In this night of his mortal eyes into which he was descending” (293). These words also signal a change in his attitude to blindness. He had become aware of his memory, which would enable him to recall the experiences he had had in “the various world” (292), the dramatic stories he had listened to, and of his powers as a singer of great epics. The reader encounters the remarkable expression that indicates the far-reaching influence on humankind of those poems – “the Odysseys and Iliads” – when the narrator says that it was the maker’s “fate to sing and to leave [them] echoing in the cupped hands of human memory” (293). The words “sing” and “echoing” signify auditory events, while the image of “the cupped hands” is tactile, all of which are appropriate in describing the blind maker’s work because they form an intimate part of a blind person’s experiential world.

The narrator’s treatment of Homer’s experience of the world undergoes an evolution in the course of the narrative in consonance with the changes in the man’s selfhood. One who lived from moment to moment, immersing himself in all that life

43. In doing so, it calls to mind his two adventures which took place on two separate nights.
44. These memories would help the maker in the creative process of composing his epic poems.
had to offer, without delving into his memory, was transformed by blindness into a person who reached back into his memory as an act of new awakening. At that moment, he remembered two adventures that he had had in “the dark.” Those adventures had involved sensory experiences other than sight – hearing, touch, smell, and taste. When he reflected on those experiences that had taken place in his past, he recognised the promise of life as a blind man and as a great maker. The narrator’s use of the past tense from the beginning up to but excluding the last sentence, which is in the present tense, shows that “The Maker” is a retrospective narrative. This point becomes clear when we recognise that the narrator is telling the story from the situation of a blind person. Referring to Homer’s realisation of hopes for the future, he says, “These things we know, but not those that he felt as he descended into his last darkness” (293). This mode of narration, and his awareness of the difficult feelings that a person who is becoming blind might experience, prompt the present author to conjecture that, in this narrative as well, the narrator is an alter ego of Borges. We may note here that Borges lost his sight over a long period of time, his “particular kind of blindness . . . settl[ing] in for good after his fifty-eighth birthday” (Manguel 15-6).

On the evening of Sunday, June 28, 2015, I had a brief conversation with the writer and journalist Selina Mills about Borges. Mills responded with an insightful observation when I stated that Borges had a difficult time dealing with his blindness. She said, “He must have been obsessed with the written word.” I had occasion to refer to that remark the next day. Fielding a question put to me by the blind artist David

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45. We will explore the theme of the maker’s “memory” in greater detail in Chapter III(105-08).

46. As noted above, he uses figures of speech which are natural to a blind writer, like the remarkable tactile image of “the cupped hands of human memory.”
Johnson after my talk, I explained that, although in 1977, the Argentine writer states in his lecture on blindness that it is “a way of life: one of the styles of living” (Selected Non-Fictions 478), earlier in the same piece, he mourns the loss of his “reader’s and writer’s sight” (Selected Non-Fictions 475). He ends the lecture by referring to “the slow process of blindness,” which he experienced, and expresses mixed feelings about it: “[I]t is not a complete misfortune. It is one more instrument among the many—all of them so strange—that fate or chance provide” (Selected Non-Fictions 483). In an interview he gave in 1982, he laments, “Since I lost my sight in the fifties, I have not been able to exult in writing in this casual manner,” and be “a playboy of words” (“The World of Fiction” 78). Thus, we can perceive a continual alternation between hope and despair with respect to blindness throughout Borges’s life and writings. The dialectical movement in his aesthetic approach to blindness during the 1940s and ‘50s discussed in this chapter is a major example of this shift in attitudes.

In line with this shifting pattern of responses to blindness, the short story “Blue Tigers” (494-503), published in English in the collection Shakespeare’s memory (1983), portrays a blind character as somebody who liberates the narrator from a terrible fate. When the tiger enthusiast from Scotland, Alexander Craigie, goes in search of a blue tiger (which he has heard and dreamt of) in a village somewhere in India, he stumbles upon magical stones of the same colour—blue—“as the tiger of my dreams” (497). These stones breed and multiply, thereby violating the “essential law of the human mind” (500) relating to mathematics and bewitching Craigie. He is forced against his will to dream and think about the stones continuously, and is driven towards insanity.

47. Mr Johnson’s specific objection to the argument in my paper was that the dialectic of the ideal and the experiential characterising Borges’s aesthetic of blindness is “too literary,” by which he meant that it appears contrived. I disagreed, and explained that Borges did alternate between various positions with regard to his blindness throughout his writing career.
When he first arrives in the village which “squatted at the foot of a hill” (495), he senses that the inhabitants of the village are concealing a secret from him, which he conjectures is concerned with the blue tiger. One day, on proposing to climb to the top of “the wooded hill” (496) near the village, he is dissuaded by the villagers: “The eldest of them said gravely that my goal was impossible to attain, the summit of the hill was sacred, magical obstacles blocked the ascent to man. He who trod the peak with mortal foot was in danger of seeing the godhead, and of going blind or mad” (497). Just as thinking continuously upon the Zahir is recognised by the narrator of “The Zahir” to be a path to God, the magical blue stones in the present narrative, which are like “coins, or buttons, or counters in some game” (497), are linked to divinity. Thus, the stones that Craigie finds on the plateau, which the villagers call “‘blue tigers,’” are “the godhead” mentioned by the elder, or symbols of that deity. As indicated above, the stones gradually drive the narrator insane, thereby forcing him to turn away from the world and withdraw into himself. The story ends with the blind beggar accepting the blue stones as alms and blessing Craigie: “…You may keep your days and nights, and keep wisdom, habits, the world”’ (503). However, the latter indicates in his narrative that even though the stones are no longer in his possession, they continue to exercise their power over him. This becomes evident from the words about the day on which he found the stones: “It may be that I have tried to forget the rest of that day, which was the first of a misfortunate series that continues even until now” (499). The elder’s words about the alteration in the person’s corporeal make-up (in terms of his physical or mental condition) on viewing the godhead, and Craigie’s subsequent experience of being mentally unmoored or reality being tampered with by the stones, suggest the idea that when the individual comes into contact with god or the divine being, his/her self and
relationship with the world are altered radically forever. Thus, the blind beggar embodies the mystical power of god in the story.

Through a reading of a number of short stories covering Borges’s writing career, I have outlined the phases of the author’s literary engagement with the question of blindness. At the heart of this engagement may be perceived a dialectical movement that shapes his fiction writing during the crucial decades of the 1940s and ‘50s, when he became blind and had to change the ways in which he read and wrote. This aesthetic, as has been shown, is determined by an initial move into the ideal realm prompted by blindness, which constitutes a withdrawal from the experiential world, and by an eventual turn to engaging with that experience itself in the fictional realm. My reading of “Tlön” and “The Library of Babel” has detailed the ways in which people can be duped by idealistic systems of knowledge, and by the textual realm if they give up introspection. While my interpretation of “The Aleph,” “The Zahir,” “The Writing of the God,” and “The Immortal” brings out the shift in the aesthetic of blindness, my observations on “The Maker” have shown how engagement with the experience of blindness and the life of the imagination go hand in hand for both poets – Homer, who is the subject of the narrative, and Borges, who is its writer. In the next chapter, we will turn to Borges’s treatment of disability, including blindness and other bodily deformities, and their role in self-understanding.