

‘Cualquier hombre es todos los hombres’ ('any man is all men'): Jorge Luis Borges, W. B. Yeats and Eternal Return

GRACE GAYNOR

University of Liverpool

Abstract. This paper considers the presence of W. B. Yeats in the work of Jorge Luis Borges. It focuses particularly on Borges's use of Yeats's poetry as epigraphs to two of his short stories, 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' ('Theme of the Traitor and the Hero') and 'Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829–1874)' ('A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829–1874)'). An epigraph presents a unique way of one writer making reference to another, particularly within the broader context of Borges's propensity to saturate his work with allusions and references to other writers. A consideration of these epigraphs as rewritings of Yeats by Borges is supported by paratextual theory, and further explores ideas of recontextualisation, appropriation, and attributing authorship. Finally, this paper also discusses Borges's references to Yeats in the context of eternal return, examining the ways in which Borges employs a selective principle in his choice of Yeats.

* * * * *

From Homer to Shakespeare, Jorge Luis Borges densely punctuates his work with vast and various references to other writers.¹ From this mass of writers, the focus of this article is W. B. Yeats, and how the ways in which Borges makes reference to Yeats can be considered rewritings. There is much to be explored in the substance of Yeats's writing itself and how its themes and preoccupations might be identified as influences on Borges's writing. However, for the purposes of this article, I will be focusing on Borges's use of Yeats's poetry as epigraphs for two of his short stories: 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' ('Theme of the Traitor and the Hero')² and 'Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829–1874)' ('A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829–1874)'),³ which appeared in Borges's collections,

¹ For the quotation cited in the title of this article, see Jorge Luis Borges, 'La forma de la espada', in *Obras Completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974), pp. 491–95 (p. 494), and Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Shape of the Sword', in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. by Donald A. Yates (UK: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000), pp. 96–101 (p. 99). Further references to *Obras Completas* will be written as *OC*.

² Borges, 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', in *OC*, pp. 496–98; Borges, 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero', in *Labyrinths*, trans. by James E. Irby, pp. 102–05.

³ Borges, 'Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829–1874)', in *OC*, pp. 561–63; Jorge Luis Borges, 'A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829–1874)', in *The Aleph*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (UK: Penguin, 2000), pp. 40–43.

Ficciones and *El Aleph*, respectively.⁴ Epigraphs are a very particular way of one writer making reference to another, introducing, as I will explore, questions of rewriting and appropriation. I will also be considering these rewritings as adhering to a selective principle within eternal return, further investigating the uncertainty around authorship that arises from this idea.

Commenting on the presence of Yeats in Borges's work, Daniel Balderston suggests that, 'The fact that Yeats is so present and yet so seemingly absent [...] is striking.'⁵ One way of exploring this disparity is to assess the number of references there are to Yeats using the online resource, 'Borges Center': a project directed by Balderston and based on his own previous index.⁶ This has a 'Finder's Guide',⁷ which allows the user to search for explicit or implicit references to keywords in Borges's work.⁸ According to the 'Finder's Guide', Borges does not make many references to Yeats in comparison to other writers: that is, thirty-nine times in fourteen works, as opposed to Joyce's appearance ninety-four times.⁹ His relative absence is thus evident, yet a consideration of the two epigraphs allows for his contrasting presence to be addressed. Whilst Yeats is not cited frequently, the quality of references in which he does appear — in the epigraphs — creates a strong impression of his presence in Borges's work.

According to Gérard Genette, an epigraph has four potential functions: the first is 'elucidating [...] not the text but the *title*';¹⁰ the second is 'commenting on the text, whose meaning it indirectly [...] emphasizes';¹¹ the third is stressing 'not what it says but who the author is, plus the sense of indirect backing';¹² and the fourth is marking 'the period, the genre, or the tenor of a piece of writing'.¹³ The second and third function apply most aptly to Borges's use of Yeats, in that Borges chooses Yeats to elucidate his stories and, I would argue, as a way of

⁴ Borges, *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1944); *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1949).

⁵ Daniel Balderston, 'The Rag-and-Bone Shop: On Borges, Yeats and Ireland', *Variaciones Borges*, 32 (2011), 41–58 (p. 43).

⁶ Daniel Balderston, *The Literary Universe of Jorge Luis Borges: An Index to References and Allusions to Persons, Titles, and Places in His Writings* (New York: Greenwood Pub. Group, 1986).

⁷ Borges Center, 'Finder's Guide' <<http://www.borges.pitt.edu/finders-guide>> [accessed 17 September 2015].

⁸ See 'The Rag-and-Bone Shop', where Balderston uses this index to critically analyse instances in which Yeats is mentioned in Borges's work, for example, in a rather long entry for 'William Butler Yeats': Borges, 'Introducción a la literatura inglesa', in *Obras completas en colaboración* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1979), pp. 854–55.

⁹ According to *The Literary Universe* (p. 164), Yeats is referenced twenty-four times in seven works. The increased figures reported by the 'Finder's Guide' is due to the publication of material that has been released since 1986 and the duplication of references that this material created, such as additional collected volumes of Borges's work. Therefore, the 'Finder's Guide' offers a more complete representation of these references.

¹⁰ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p. 156.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

legitimising his ideas by aligning himself with Yeats.¹⁴ However, the importance with which I am investing these epigraphs is not necessarily covered by these four functions. Genette suggests that the position of the epigraph might affect how intrinsic it is to the overall work,¹⁵ yet the 'aesthetic of brevity' that Borges employs in his short stories riles against superfluity, rendering the epigraphs both intrinsic and necessary to the story.¹⁶

The epigraph to 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' takes its lines from Yeats's poem 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' in his collection *The Tower*. The lines chosen are:

So the Platonic Year
Whirls out new right and wrong,
Whirls in the old instead;
All men are dancers and their tread
Goes with the barbarous clangour of a gong.¹⁷

The most striking element of this epigraph is its evocation of Yeats's geometric gyres, which were the foundation of his esoteric work, *A Vision*.¹⁸ The story which Borges tells after the epigraph features a character called Ryan, whose preordained destiny is emphasised by the labyrinthine structure of the narrative. Faucher describes this 'building of the labyrinth', through the repetition of events in 'Tema', as 'the circular coiling away of events and the recoiling of events toward the center':¹⁹ an image which illustrates the strong visual association between movements of history in Borges's labyrinth and the 'whirls out' and 'whirls in' of Yeats's gyre.

It is worthy of note that both of Yeats's collections *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* were determined to be the result of *A Vision*; 'I put *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* into evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-

¹⁴ For a delineation of the way in which Borges situates himself amongst other writers, see James Ramey, 'Synecdoche and Literary Parasitism in Borges and Joyce', *Comparative Literature*, 2, 61 (2009), 47–62.

¹⁵ 'It goes without saying that this change in location may entail a change in role [...] the relationship between the introductory epigraph and text is still prospective [...] the terminal epigraph of Giono's *Un roi sans divertissement* [...] is [...] presented [...] as belonging fully to the text' (Genette, p. 149).

¹⁶ Patricia Novillo-Corvalán, 'Transnational Modernist Encounters: Joyce, Borges, Bolaño, and the Dialectics of Expansion and Compression', *The Modern Language Review*, 108.2 (2013), 341–67 (p. 341).

¹⁷ W. B. Yeats, 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', in *W. B. Yeats Collected Poems*, ed. by Augustine Martin (London: Vintage, 1992), pp. 213–17 (p. 214).

¹⁸ *A Vision* was first published in 1925 (W. B. Yeats, *A Critical Edition of Yeats' 'A Vision' (1925)*, ed. by George M. Harper and Walter K. Hood (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978)), and republished in 1937 (W. B. Yeats, *A Vision (1937)* (London: Macmillan, 1978)), with significant changes made. My comments on the gyres are relevant to both publications, but for the purpose of this article, I will be referring to the 1937 version, 'A Vision B' (AVB), based on Yeats's claim that in the 1925 version, 'A Vision A' (AVA), he had 'misinterpreted the geometry' (AVB, p. 19) of the geometric symbolism apparently offered by the 'communicator[s]' (AVB, p. 9) through the medium of automatic writing (which originally provided the basis for *A Vision*), suggesting that he had interpreted the geometry more accurately for AVB.

¹⁹ Kane X. Faucher, 'Modalities, Logic and the Cabala in Borges', *Variaciones Borges*, 13 (2002), 105–56 (pp. 108–09).

possession and power'.²⁰ The epigraph to Borges's 'Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz' ('I'm looking for the face I had | Before the world was made') comes from 'A Woman Young and Old';²¹ a poem from *The Winding Stair*. Borges is seemingly drawn, in his choice of epigraphs, to the poetry which is derived from *A Vision*, and the specifically 'geometric symbolism' prevalent within this work.²² As epigraphs, they do not only thematically inform Borges's stories, but provide geometric structures which extend beyond the paratext. Indeed, the overarching structure of the gyre, which is determining time and history, is introduced in the epigraph to 'Tema' and then pervades throughout the story that follows. Borges recontextualises both the lines from 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' and their associated imagery and, by doing so, draws attention to the themes and images that are emphasised in these lines, which may not otherwise have prevailed if the poem was read as a whole.

The historical contexts into which Borges places Yeats's poetry are not obviously similar to the original contexts of the poetry. 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', for example, was written in reaction to the violence committed by the Black and Tans at Gort in Galway during the year 1919,²³ an event not explicit in 'Tema'. However, it is not Yeats's historical preoccupations that Borges chooses to glean from the lines of poetry chosen as an epigraph. In the original poem, Yeats's evocation of the gyre is entrenched in a particular moment in history, yet it also gestures outwardly towards the abstract, otherworldly machinations of the cycles of time outlined in *A Vision*, a gesture which Borges casts back towards his own story, bereft of its specific historical context. Therefore, it is not only Yeats's thematic ideas that Borges recontextualises, but the abstract notions of history that are emphasised by the gyre and refracted back towards 'Tema', such as 'the concept of recurring history and the theme of men acting according to a 'prefigured' scheme'.²⁴

Using epigraphs in such a way tends to establish 'a context and a sense of literary community',²⁵ and indeed there is nothing remarkable about the way in which Borges does this. However, it is Borges's recontextualisation of particular themes, images, and notions of history from Yeats's poetry that calls into question whether these epigraphs can still be considered as having been written by Yeats, or whether they have been rewritten out of recognition by Borges. The lines chosen by Borges are exactly the same as those in Yeats's original poem but, cut adrift and inserted into a new context, they have the potential to be made new, made Borges's.

²⁰ AVB, p. 8.

²¹ Yeats, 'A Woman Young and Old', in *W. B. Yeats Collected Poems*, pp. 280–87 (p. 280).

²² AVB, p. 13.

²³ See Michael Wood, *Yeats and Violence* (New York: OUP, 2010) for further explanations of Yeats's depiction of violence in 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'.

²⁴ Evelyn Fishburn and Psiche Hughes, *A Dictionary of Borges* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd, 1990), p. 244.

²⁵ David Leon Higdon, 'George Eliot and the Art of the Epigraph', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 25 (1970), 127–51 (p. 131).

This is reminiscent of Borges's story 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote' ('Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*')²⁶ in which the character Pierre Menard attempts to rewrite Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in a self-imposed forgetfulness towards the original text. When lines from the two versions of the story are compared, they appear at first to be identical, with both Cervantes and Menard writing 'la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir' ('truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and advisor to the present, and the future's counsellor'). However, the narrator suggests that they are different because of the contexts in which both authors understand the definitions and connotations of the language they use, 'Menard, contemporáneo de William James, no define la historia como una indagación de la realidad sino como su origen' ('Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin').²⁷ Menard does not simply appropriate the words of Cervantes; this rewriting is an organic and literal recreation of a text. Here, Borges provides us with an example of how complicated attributing authorship is when a text is rewritten, particularly when identical language does not serve as sufficient evidence for verisimilitude.

Just as the gyre in the epigraph to 'Tema' sets up the labyrinthine structure of the narrative that follows, so too does the epigraph to 'Biografía'. Borges attributed this epigraph to the collection *The Winding Stair* rather than the poem 'A Woman Young and Old'. Here, the image of the winding stair serves a purpose that the title of the poem does not, in that it alludes to the systemisation of time that occurs within the story, whose themes include ideas of history and destiny. One of Borges's translators, Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, once asked Borges why he credited this epigraph to the collection rather than the poem. Borges replied that, 'it made me think of the library, with the winding staircases at hand'.²⁸ Di Giovanni suggests that this is 'a lapse on Borges's part',²⁹ as the library he referred to was the Biblioteca Nacional de la República in Argentina, of which he became director in 1955, eleven years after the story was written. By making this alteration, Borges not only rewrites the title of the poem, he also suggests that the title of the collection of poetry, *The Winding Stair*, so effectively captures the essence of each of its poems, that any line in the collection can subscribe to this image.

If Borges's explanation for this authorial decision is based upon an experience which, according to Di Giovanni, he had not yet had, then his motivations for rewriting the title remain open for speculation. If it did not capture the memory

²⁶ Borges, 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote', in *OC*, pp. 444–50; Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', in *Labyrinths*, trans. by James E. Irby, pp. 62–71.

²⁷ 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote', p. 449; 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', p. 69.

²⁸ Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, *Borges on writing*, ed. by Norman Thomas di Giovanni and others (United States: Dutton & Co, 1973), p. 119.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

of this physical winding staircase, then it must have appealed to him as an abstract symbol, for reasons he cannot recall or does not admit when asked about it years later. Yeats's account of the winding stairs at his own home, the tower Thoor Ballylee, might offer some insight into the symbolic appeal of this image: 'this winding, gyring, spring treadmill of a stair is my ancestral stair; that Goldsmith and the Dean, Berkeley and Burke have travelled there'.³⁰ Here, Yeats uses this image to position himself amongst writers and philosophers, infusing the winding stairs with a sense of history and memory. It is therefore an appropriate image to evoke at a moment in which Borges is choosing to situate himself within Yeats's thought.

The same occurs in 'Tema', where he attributes his epigraph not to the poem 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', but to the collection of Yeats's poetry, *The Tower*. The tower appealed to Borges like the winding stair did, as a highly symbolic image associated strongly with Yeats, and particularly with memory. Indeed, just as 'Tema' is preoccupied with memory, so too does Yeats's poem, 'The Tower', evoke 'images, in the Great Memory stored',³¹ making the tower an apt image for the epigraph to this story.³² To understand this further, one must look back to Borges' work, *Atlas*,³³ and to his entry on 'Ireland' (in which he also mentions Yeats) that he illustrates solely with images of an early medieval Irish round tower. Borges describes this round tower as 'The most vivid of my impressions of Ireland' where 'the monks [...] saved Latin and Greek, that is, culture, for our inheritance'.³⁴ In 'Tema' this image of the round tower as a receptacle for the preservation of the memory of Latin and Greek culture is reflected again in the symbolic impact of the destruction of the Irish round tower of Kilgarven,³⁵ an event which represents the unravelling of time and memory within the story.

To return to 'Biografía', Thomas Rice commented that this story 'despite its epigraph from Yeats, owes more to Joyce'.³⁶ A consideration of the epigraph as a rewriting of Yeats by Borges already throws the notion of authorship into an ambiguous state. This remark goes further. Borges himself explores the idea that even an explicit reference to one writer might mask an affinity to another

³⁰ Yeats, 'Blood and the Moon', in *W. B. Yeats Collected Poems*, pp. 244–46 (p. 245).

³¹ Yeats, 'The Tower', in *W. B. Yeats Collected Poems*, pp. 200–06 (p. 203).

³² For Borges's comments on Yeats in relation to notions of great memory and personal memory, see Borges and Osvaldo Ferrari, *Reencuentro: Diálogos Inéditos* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999), p. 195.

³³ Jorge Luis Borges and María Kodama, *Atlas*, trans. by Anthony Kerrigan (London: Viking, 1986). This book was the product of a trip in which Borges and María Kodama travelled around the world choosing particular images associated with the places to which they had travelled, and writing a small section on each location.

³⁴ *Atlas*, p. 16.

³⁵ 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', p. 497. This event is anticipated by Caesar's wife, Calpurnia, who saw the destruction of the tower in her dreams ('La mujer de César, Calpurnia, vio en sueños abatida una torre').

³⁶ Thomas J. Rice, 'Subtle Reflections of/upon Joyce in/by Borges', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 4 (2000), 47–62 (p. 51).

in 'Pierre Menard', when he says, 'Atribuir a Louis Ferdinand Céline o a James Joyce la *Imitación de Christo* ¿no es una suficiente renovación de esos tenuos avisos espirituales?' ('To attribute the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce, is this not a sufficient renovation of its tenuous spiritual indications?').³⁷ The remark from Rice suggests that Borges did not attribute his epigraph correctly, that he misinterpreted the 'spiritual indications' of his own work, and that he ought to have used an epigraph from Joyce, or kept the lines from Yeats, but attributed them to Joyce instead.

The comment by Rice may appear to undermine Borges's particular choice of Yeats for his epigraphs. Yet it also has implications for a consideration of these epigraphs in the context of eternal return.³⁸ According to this concept, Borges was rewriting all of his literary predecessors, including both Yeats and Joyce. However, whilst Borges's abundant use of references to other writers and philosophers in his writing creates an impression of multiple authorship, he was also highly selective about the writers that he chose. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche discussed 'endless recurrence' as 'a selective principle, in the service of strength'. He furthered this qualitative approach when he exclaimed 'everything becomes and recurs eternally — escape is impossible! — Supposing we could judge value, what follows?'.³⁹ In 'Pierre Menard', Menard says, 'El Quijote [...] me interesa profundamente pero no me parece ¿cómo lo diré? inevitable [...] el Quijote es innecesario. Puedo premeditar su escritura' ('The *Quixote* [...] interests me deeply, but it does not seem — how shall I say it? — inevitable [...] the *Quixote* is unnecessary. I can premeditate writing it').⁴⁰ Borges himself applies a distinct separation between texts that are 'unnecessary' and those that will return 'inevitably' by referencing in his work the writers that he selectively returns. In this sense, Borges's rewriting of Yeats through his epigraphs presents a purposeful exhumation of Yeats from the revolutions of eternal return, as well as an attempt to safe-guard symbols particular to Yeats, such as the tower, the gyre, and the winding stair.

In a review of Borges entitled 'A Modern Master',⁴¹ Paul de Man uses lines from Yeats's poem 'The Statues' as an epigraph.⁴² This decision to mimic Borges's use of Yeats's poetry as an epigraph, but to re-write Borges's choice by selecting a different poem by Yeats, creates the impression that De Man is rewriting Borges rewriting Yeats, continuing the illusion of an eternal cycle of

³⁷ 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote', p. 450; 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', p. 71.

³⁸ For an explanation of this concept of eternal return (e.g. 'The image of cycles in which the universe returns to re-enact exactly the same course of events'), see Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 161. Oxford Reference Online.

³⁹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, 'Plan for an unfinished book: The Eternal Recurrence', in *The Will to Power*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 1058.

⁴⁰ 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote', pp. 447–48; 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', p. 71.

⁴¹ Paul De Man, 'A Modern Master', *The New York Review of Books*, 8.7 (1964), 8–10.

⁴² The lines he chose were: 'Empty eyeballs knew | That knowledge increases unreality, that | Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show'. Yeats, 'The Statues', in *W. B. Yeats Collected Poems*, pp. 349–50 (p. 350).

rewriting and reinforcing Borges's apocryphal line, 'cualquier hombre es todos los hombres'.⁴³ The notion that any man is all men typifies Borges's explorations of the sanctity of individual authorship, or rather the lack thereof. However, for de Man, the epigraph simply being by Yeats is sufficient to set a thematic tone for a discussion of Borges, as it is 'not what it says but who the author is'.⁴⁴ Not only does this go some way towards reasserting the authorship of Yeats, it also illustrates Ronald Christ's observation that 'Borges' writing is instinct with its own criticism [...] critics have, therefore, imitated him in writing about him'.⁴⁵ Like Borges, de Man's illusion of multiple, or rather eternal authorship is once more shown to be highly selective. This in turn reveals both authors as desirous of Genette's third function: the 'indirect backing' of the epigraph. It is in his choice of epigraphs that Borges, like de Man after him, selects 'his peers and thus his place in the pantheon'.⁴⁶

⁴³ 'La forma de la espada', in *OC*, p. 494. See the title of this article for its translation.

⁴⁴ Genette, p. 159.

⁴⁵ Ronald Christ, 'A Modest Proposal for the Criticism of Borges', in *The Cardinal Points of Borges*, ed. by Lowell Dunham and Ivar Ivask (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), pp. 7–15 (p. 7).

⁴⁶ Genette, p. 160.