

# On Dámaso Alonso's and Jorge Luis Borges' Reflections by the Charles River

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**Abstract:** In this article, I examine similar reactions on the part of Dámaso Alonso and Jorge Luis Borges to the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I discuss Alonso's poem "A un río le llamaban Carlos" and Borges' short story "El otro" in light of Jacques Lacan's ideas on the formation of self in "The Mirror Stage." I argue that the Charles River is a metaphor for a mirror, reflecting and breaking the self in the second part of the authors' lives. I end by analyzing how these works use testimonial writing as an orthopedic restorative medium for a fragmented self.

**Keywords:** Dámaso Alonso – Jorge Luis Borges – Jacques Lacan – Charles River – testimony

In "Tema del traidor y del héroe" (1944), Jorge Luis Borges discusses the repetition of certain events throughout history. For example, the murder of Fergus Kilpatrick in the nineteenth century bears a striking resemblance to the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC (128). In this article, I examine a similar cyclical event that took place by the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1954, Dámaso Alonso wrote the poem "A un río le llamaban Carlos," in which he reflects on the meaning of the self by looking at the Charles River. Eighteen years later, in 1972, Borges published a short story, "El otro," in which the same river prompts another crisis of the self. These cyclical events stem from the Charles River's metaphorical function; it acts as a fractured mirror that reflects and breaks the self. The figurative reflection that the river offers produces an awareness of the self in both authors. Alonso talks to the river and identifies the idea of his real self with it: "de este río al que le llamaban Dámaso, digo, Carlos" (199), while Borges makes himself the protagonist of his short story and converses with a younger version of himself by the river side. The awareness of the self leads to the realization of an ever-changing and fragmented self via the metaphorical reflective ability of the flowing Charles River.

I will read Alonso's and Borges' texts according to Jacques Lacan's ideas on the formation of self in his famous essay "The Mirror Stage." I will argue that Alonso and Borges experience a process that could be described as an additional mirror stage in the second half of their lives, while living in Cambridge. The river, or the mirror, produces

an awareness of the self and a constitutive crisis. The original mirror stage results in a failure; the child finds that his infant body does not match the ideal self that he sees reflected in the mirror. In this second iteration of the mirror stage, the mirror breaks but also constructs the self. I will conclude that this second mirror stage results in testimonial writing; and that writing acquires a prosthetic function that helps the subject reconstruct the self.

Before examining Alonso's and Borges' texts, I would like to briefly outline Lacan's notions on the formation of the self. According to the French psychoanalyst, children who are six to eighteen months old create an ideal image of self the first time they look at themselves in the mirror (178–179). At that age, according to Lacan, children do not distinguish themselves from the rest of the world. They live in a type of continuum, which he calls the imaginary order, where everything is part of everything else. Indeed, Terry Eagleton explains that “we lack any defined center of self, in which what ‘self’ we have seems to pass into objects, and objects into it, in a ceaseless closed exchange” (142). In this boundless context, the importance of the children's encounter with the mirror resides in the fact that they become aware of the opposition between themselves and the external world for the first time. The mirror, as Lacan describes it, “establish[es] a relation between the organism and its reality” (180). In this way, the child begins to create a sense of self in front of the mirror. The Charles River will produce a similar awareness of self in Alonso and Borges.

This initial sense of self is created through a misrecognition. The qualities of the mirror image do not correspond with the child's own attributes. On seeing his ideal image, the child realizes that his body is still that of a toddler—an imperfect body characterized by a lack of mobility and coordination (Lacan 180). Therefore, there is a sense of otherness; the person in the mirror, at the same time, is the child himself and somebody else:

The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopedic—and, lastly, to the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. (Lacan 180–81)

I would like to call special attention to the words “drama” and “orthopedic.” As we will see, a similar drama is present in Alonso's and Borges' texts. The river provides the reflective space for the authors to address their metaphorical reflections, and those reflections, at the same time, are part of themselves and something alien. Regarding the word “orthopedic,” Lacan sees the mirror as a type of prosthesis that bonds the fragmented body of the child and imparts to him a fictional sense of unity and self. In

the second iteration of the mirror stage, writing will again act as a prosthesis that helps in the construction of the fragmented self.

Generally speaking, writing acquires a prosthetic function insofar as it allows for the restoration of something that is missing, and as Mercedes Junquera explains, Alonso wrote poetry “para buscar el orden en el caos y a Dios entre la nada” (193). Similarly, Andrew Debicki describes Alonso’s view on poetry in the 40s and 50s as “the artful embodiment, presentation and communication of essential meanings” (117). In this sense, Alonso uses poetry to explore, reflect, and even reconstruct the order and meanings of a world that was falling apart.<sup>1</sup> As for Borges, Cristina Bulacio also defines his fictions as “presencias de una ausencia: *la realidad*” (155). For Bulacio, the word fiction means “creation” and “construction” of the world and of self, which otherwise would be unintelligible (153).<sup>2</sup> These critics suggest a performative function in the writings of Alonso and Borges; both authors are not only writing but constructing and creating a reality that is either missing or unintelligible. I will delve deeper into this idea in my analysis of “A un río le llamaban Carlos” and of “El otro.”

Alonso’s “A un río le llamaban Carlos” appeared in a collection of poems titled *Hombre y Dios* (1955) which, unlike *Hijos de la ira* (1944), is not so much about the search for God as it is about the relationship between man and God. Alonso establishes this relationship in terms of vision. As Debicki explains, Alonso attempts to find a superior outlook on the world that combines a God-centered view and a man-centered view. Both visions are flawed on their own and need to be united to achieve the superior outlook (52). Most important for this study is the way in which the Spanish poet constructs this superior view. The poems in *Hombre y Dios* act like pieces of a puzzle that slowly come together and construct this superior outlook on the world. Indeed, Debicki highlights the organic unity of this collection of poems, where all the poems, despite their individual differences, come together in the end to construct the full vision (44). For Debicki, *Hombre y Dios* “. . . does not achieve its complexity, on the whole, by embodying all the different meanings and shadings in each individual poem, but rather by building a carefully constructed whole out of a balance of individual poems, each of which presents a partial (and sometimes simple) view” (44). The organic unity that is the outcome of Alonso’s work evidences the fragmented nature of *Hombre y Dios*, where the work only gains its ultimate meaning through the combination of its individual parts.

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<sup>1</sup> Alonso lived through the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and through the terrible post-war era that devastated Spain for several decades. The poet, unlike many others, did not leave Spain and experienced firsthand all the misery and suffering of his country. Alonso’s search for God and meaning translates into an existential poetry that is particularly evident in his book of poems *Hijos de la ira* (1944).

<sup>2</sup> Bulacio’s argument may be at odds with post-structuralist notions that signal the failure of language to represent reality. However, for her argument, she draws on recent findings in cognitive science that demonstrate the necessity of categorizing reality using language so that sense can be made of the outside world (139).

This fragmentation is also present in the structure of *Hombre y Dios* itself. The collection of poems is divided into three parts: a prologue, a middle part, and an epilogue, and these parts do not follow a logical sequence in the construction of the superior outlook. In the prologue, Alonso explores the benefits, but also the limitations of the God-centered view. In the epilogue, Alonso does the same for the man-centered view of the universe. It is in the middle section of the book that the poet proposes a superior outlook that encompasses that of both man and God. Therefore, we can see that *Hombre y Dios* presents a double fragmentation: one of its individual parts and one of its structure. The importance of this work resides precisely, as Debicki indicates, in Alonso's ability to unite the pieces and construct a coherent whole. As we will see, the fragmented nature of the book of poems is also evident in "A un río le llamaban Carlos," where Alonso reflects on his disjointed self.

"A un río le llamaban Carlos" appears at the end of the epilogue when Alonso presents the man-centered view. It is important to clarify at this point that, even if the main topic of *Hombre y Dios* is the relationship between man and God, "A un río le llamaban Carlos" can be regarded as a continuation of the poet's concerns in *Hijos de la ira* in the sense that it too is an existentialist poem (Junquera 195). Indeed, for Debicki, the poem is "constructed around a basic questioning of the nature of man" (48). In this poem, we see the limitations of the man-centered view, but we also see the limitations of the self through the constitutive crisis that the river, or the mirror, produces.

Alonso wrote "A un río le llamaban Carlos" during his stay as a professor at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He wrote this poem in the second part of his life, at the age of 55. The poem, similar to Borges' story, begins with the poet sitting by the river bank: "yo me senté en la orilla: quería preguntarte, preguntarme tu secreto" (196). The alternation of the pronouns "me" and "te" in the second verse of the poem suggests that the poet is talking to his *alter ego* in the river. For Debicki, "the river is humanized" (49), and Junquera suggests that the poet talks to "su doble" (196). These pronouns do indeed help to merge the identity of Alonso with his conversation partner: they are (and are not) the same person, similar to the Lacanian infant and his reflection in the mirror.<sup>3</sup> The poet continues to describe the river as "una tristeza, muy mansa y gris, que fluye" (197), and in the last stanza, we discover that the river is also part of the poet: "y ahora me fluye dentro una tristeza, un río de tristeza gris" (198). The description of the river's characteristics coincides with the poet's inner world. The correlation between the poet and the river is repeated in the very last verse of the poem when Alonso identifies himself with the river by mistake: "de este río al que le llamaban Dámaso, digo, Carlos" (199). Through what we could define as a Freudian slip, Alonso reveals that he has been talking to an "other" that is at the same time Alonso himself.

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<sup>3</sup> This alternation of pronouns also appears in "El otro" at the beginning of the conversation between the two Borges. Old Borges claims that "para tranquilizarlo y tranquilizarme, fingí un aplomo que ciertamente no sentía" (10).

The Charles River is acting as a metaphorical mirror by making the poet aware of his own self.

Seeing his metaphorical reflection in the river produces a psychological reaction in Alonso that materializes into a philosophical discussion on the idea of the self. The poet sees a certain madness in the conversation with the other. However, he wants to delve deeper into the nature of men and wonders about the meaning of life and about the nature of the self by asking his reflection:

Ah, loco, yo, loco, quería saber qué eras, quién eras  
(género, especie)  
y qué eran, qué significaban «fluir», «fluido»,  
«fluyente»;  
qué instante era tu instante;  
cuál de tus mil reflejos, tu reflejo absoluto;  
yo quería indagar el último recinto de tu vida:  
tu unicidad, esa alma de agua única,  
por la que te conocen por Carlos. (Alonso 196)

In this stanza, we see how the awareness of self produces a constitutive crisis that highlights the disjointed nature of the subject. The words “fluir,” “fluido,” and “fluyente” signal the impossibility of finding a unified subject. The subject, similar to the river, is always changing and cannot be captured in a single moment. The self inevitably changes with the passage of time and produces a thousand different reflections throughout life. We could also further extend the metaphor of the mirror and argue that the Charles River is not only a mirror, but a broken mirror. It reflects the subject and then makes it aware of its disjointed character by breaking the image into a thousand small pieces of figurative glass. Moreover, the fragmented character of the self is exacerbated by the author’s difficulty in conversing with his reflections, which ignore him: “Y tú fluías, fluías, sin cesar, indiferente, y no escuchabas a tu amante extático” (197). A similar type of fragmentation will also occur between the two protagonists of Borges’ story.

“El otro” appeared in 1975 in a collection of short stories titled *El libro de arena*. This collection was one of the last works that the Argentinian writer would publish before his death in 1986. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on two elements that characterize *El libro de arena*: its fragmented nature and its revisionary aim. First, the collection appears to lack a clear thematic thread or pattern that unites the different stories. The multiple attempts by different scholars to find some type of thematic unity within it are proof of the book’s disjointed character. Mario Goloboff argues that the stories in the book can be grouped according to two categories: stories about the question of identity and stories about “la persecución de la palabra poética” (151). Goloboff also acknowledges that this categorization is not completely inclusive and that

some stories fall outside of it (151). On his part, Herbert Brant offers a different categorization and finds a psychological attribute that unites several stories in the collection: the dreams of preparation for death. According to Brant, several stories in the collection, including “El otro,” depict the psychological notion that dreams prepare the psyche of the elderly for death (75). However, both Goloboff and Brant agree that another element that characterizes *El libro de arena* is a revisionary spirit of previous concerns and themes of the Argentinian author (Goloboff 152, Brant 72).<sup>4</sup> I would like to consider their statement about the revisionary character of *El libro de arena* and Brant’s contention of the psychological character of some stories in the book in order to show that the Charles River, acting as a mirror—as it does in Alonso’s case—produces an awareness of the self in Borges that prompts him to reflect on his previous self and to revise it.

Borges, like Alonso, lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while teaching at Harvard University, and similar to the Spanish poet, Borges starts “El otro” by looking at the Charles River while sitting on a bench. The river makes him think of Heraclitus of Ephesus and of the passage of time. This encounter with the river is immediately followed by a *déjà vu* moment and by the awareness that there is somebody sitting on the other end of the bench. To Borges’ amazement, he realizes that the person sitting on the other side is a younger version of himself. The river has produced what Borges himself explains as a psychological reaction: “sentí de golpe la impresión (que según los psicólogos corresponde a los estados de fatiga) de haber vivido ya aquel momento” (8). The feeling of having already lived a moment of our lives inevitably prompts us, consciously or unconsciously, to reflect on our lives (when have I seen this before?), and this feeling makes us aware of the self, of the “I” in the sentence. The *déjà vu* that Borges experiences and the awareness of self that it produces is taken to an extreme when it materializes in the form of a young Borges. In this context, we can see once again the function of the Charles River as a metaphorical mirror. Borges’ figurative reflection in the river translates into a *déjà vu* moment and into the subsequent awareness of self. In the story, the younger version of the author seems to have physically emerged from old Borges’ metaphorical reflection and now sits next to him on the bench.

The conversation between the two Borges that follows this first encounter on the bench is characterized by an internal drama. Similar to the child in the Lacanian

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, “El otro” can be said to be a repetition and an elaboration of “Borges y yo” (1960), where the Argentinian author expresses the same idea of a divided self, somebody who, at the same time, is and is not himself: “no sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página” (808). Borges’ interest in identity issues is present in his work in one way or another since the beginning of his literary career. Importantly for my argument, several authors have recognized the capacity of writing to construct the self in Borges’ work. Analyzing “Borges y yo,” Bulacio notes the autopoietic character of that story, in which Borges, by interpreting himself, is also building the self: “solo en un relato se abre la posibilidad de contarnos a nosotros mismos quiénes somos y, en ese acto, ser eso mismo que contamos” (154–55).

mirror, the two protagonists are and are not the same person. This rupture of self is portrayed in several ways in "El otro." First, the author combines two different chronotopes in the story, as it occurs in two different places and times. In Cambridge, from where old Borges sees the action in 1969, and in Geneva, where young Borges lives in 1918. Even if they are the same person, there is an uncanny sense of "otherness" from the very beginning. Like the child in the mirror stage, there is a "here" (me, outside of the mirror) and a "there" (you, in the mirror). Old Borges attempts to convince his younger version that they are the same person by telling him things that only he himself would know. However, young Borges only shows a vague interest in what the other Borges has to say. Moreover, they explicitly disagree with each other when talking about Walt Whitman or literature, as they both have different views on these topics: "mi *alter ego* creía en la invención o descubrimiento de metáforas nuevas; yo en las que corresponden a afinidades íntimas y notorias y que nuestra imaginación ya ha aceptado" (15). The internal drama of the mirror stage, as Lacan notes, is the infant's realization that his defective body does not correspond with the ideal image in the mirror. Similarly, in this second iteration of the mirror stage, old Borges is forced to realize that his current self does not correspond to his young self: "*el hombre de ayer no es el hombre de hoy* sentenció algún griego. Nosotros dos, en este banco de Ginebra o de Cambridge, somos tal vez la prueba" (14). Thus, the river, which had produced an awareness of self, also creates a fracture: Borges realizes that there is no such thing as a unified self.

I have already mentioned that Borges, in *El libro de arena*, revises some of the themes that appeared in his early works. In the story that I analyze here, the Argentinian author is also looking back in time to (re)examine the notion of self: "al fin y al cabo, al recordarse, no hay persona que no se encuentre consigo misma. Es lo que nos está pasando ahora, salvo que somos dos" (10). The problem that Borges is experiencing in his reevaluation of the self is that it appears as something fluid, something that is not static and that changes over time. Jorge García, talking about "El otro," contends that "si los recuerdos determinan la identidad y padecen un cambio incesante, entonces nuestras identidades también deberían pasar por un cambio similar. No somos lo que creemos que somos con una identidad individual y permanente sino, más bien, constantes procesos de cambio y evolución" (116). The continuous evolution and change that our self undergoes precludes us from finding a unified version of it, and this is what old Borges comes to realize through the story. Therefore, the drama of this second iteration of the mirror stage results from the alienation of the self from the other (who is and is not the self at the same time) and from the impossibility of finding a core or central meaning that bestows a unified and coherent character on the self. Alonso's poem and Borges' story end with unresolved questions that highlight the impossibility of finding a unified self.

Both authors confirm the existence of a crisis. The crisis that derives from the realization that life is an ever-changing phenomenon where nothing, not even the self,

remains static and everything is in constant movement. Both Alonso and Borges give testimony to this crisis. Shoshana Felman refers to the twentieth century as the “era of testimony” due to the traumas produced by the historical events of the century: “the Second World War, the Holocaust, the nuclear bomb, and other war atrocities” (5). Importantly, testimony was not only a historical or a social phenomenon but also a literary one. Felman provides examples of how testimony appears in the works of Albert Camus or Paul Celan, among others, and in films: “oftentimes, contemporary works of art use testimony both as the subject of their drama and as the medium of their literal transmission” (5).

Alonso’s and Borges’ texts are literary testimonies that deal with the existential crisis of the self that comes as a result of a second iteration of the mirror stage.<sup>5</sup> These two texts are not presented as private; they are meant to be read and to be heard. In addition to the conversation with the river, “A un río le llamaban Carlos” addresses the audience: “amigos míos” (199). Antonio Carreño notes that the Spanish poet also talks to an implicit listener when, for example, Alonso generalizes about love or about our relationship with God (451). Carreño also describes the poem as “más bien para ser escuchado que para ser leído” (451). Therefore, the conversation with the river is not a private reflection; rather, it is combined with a desire to tell and to reach a larger audience. Likewise, “El otro” begins with Borges’ intention to share with the audience a burden, the story, that was traumatic for him: “no lo escribí inmediatamente porque mi primer propósito fue olvidarlo, para no perder la razón. Ahora, en 1972, pienso que si lo escribo, los otros lo leerán como un cuento y, con los años, lo será tal vez para mí. Sé que fue casi atroz mientras duró y más aún durante las desveladas noches que lo siguieron” (7). It seems as if Borges is going to engage in a type of psychoanalytical therapy session that requires the telling of past events.

In fact, giving testimony can be described as an exercise of healing and restoration. From a psychoanalytical perspective, testimony is not only the expression of factual information, but a way of accessing one’s own knowledge about a certain event or crisis: “knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right” (Laub 62). Accessing this inner knowledge has a therapeutic purpose, a type of Freudian “talking cure,” that helps the person recreate the events of a trauma and find relief. In this sense, Dori Laub explains how survivors of the Holocaust, by addressing a

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to Felman’s acknowledgement of the presence of testimony as a subject and as a medium of expression in literature, there are other elements that support the consideration of Alonso’s and Borges’ texts as literary testimonies; on the one hand, we have the fact that both authors make themselves the protagonists of their respective poem and story, and that these two texts are set in a space and time that correspond to a specific moment in the lives of these authors. On the other hand, according to Paul de Man: “autobiography . . . is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (921). For de Man, all texts, to different degrees, contain an autobiographical moment. He defines this moment as a crisis that results in a type of game of constant substitution between the author and the narrator (921).



listener (by addressing a “you” through testimony), are able to bear witness to their own story and construct an internal witness (a “thou”) that had been previously silenced by the circumstances of the Holocaust (85). The reconstruction of the inner “thou” allows them “to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation” (85). Likewise, Felman highlights this performative function of testimony and states that “in literature as well as in psychoanalysis, and conceivably in history as well, the witness might be . . . the one who (in fact) *witnesses*, but also, the one who *begets*, the truth, through the speech process of the testimony” (16). From this perspective, testimony is a speech or literary act (it performs the action of accessing the internal knowledge of a crisis or trauma) that yields psychological benefits for the testifier (Felman 16).<sup>6</sup>

In giving testimony to their encounter with the river and to the crisis that it produces, Alonso and Borges are also engaging in a restorative process. Their testimonies allow them to bear witness to the crisis of the self and to address (and reclaim) a part of themselves that is no longer there. The two authors construct in writing the details of the crisis; the abstract rupture is given form in the text, and it allows them to bear witness to the crisis. However, by creating an “other,” these two authors are not only highlighting the disjointed character of the self, they are also enabling the possibility of addressing that part of themselves that had been lost. Felman, when talking about Paul Celan, affirms that “as an event directed toward the recreation of a ‘thou,’ poetry becomes, precisely, the event of *creating an address* for the specificity of a historical experience which annihilated any possibility of address” (38). Alonso and Borges recreate an addressee (their previous selves) whose possibility of communication had been annihilated by the passage of time and the mutability of life.

Importantly, this address entails a repossession of the self. Alonso and Borges make themselves visible in these two texts, and I ultimately consider this a performative act of vindication of their own selves. In *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, we find a precedent in which the real author appears in his own creation. Jonathan Brown argues that the appearance of Velázquez in *Las Meninas* can be explained by the painter’s desire to show his privileged relationship with the King of Spain and to assert the painter’s social value (72). This is an instance of how the arts can perform illocutionary acts: the painter or the writer can accomplish an action by the very act of painting or writing, in the same way as the utterance of a sentence can perform an action in the world (Austin 99).

The illocutionary act that Alonso’s and Borges’ texts perform is the repossession of the self; Alonso’s and Borges’ self-referentiality underlines a desire to reclaim the self. In Alonso’s poem, the fragmentation that the river represents is overcome at the end with the emphatic verse: “de este río al que le llamaban Dámaso, digo, Carlos” (199). In spite of the mutability of the river, Alonso finds some essentialism at the end of the

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<sup>6</sup> Felman argues that “to testify—to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one’s own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement” (5).

poem; the river is ultimately Dámaso. In Borges' story, despite the differences between the two protagonists, there is a certain essentialism of self that is reflected, for instance, in the impossibility of the two Borges deceiving each other: "éramos demasiado distintos y demasiado parecidos" (17). Alonso and Borges, then, are giving testimony to a crisis not to highlight the impossibility of finding a unified self, but to reclaim it in writing. In "The Mirror Stage," Lacan alluded to the orthopedic function of the mirror that bonds the fragmented body of the child (181). In the case of Alonso and Borges, writing also fulfills a prosthetic function insofar as it allows for the address to, and for the repossession of, the self.

The Charles River is not merely an anecdotal element in Alonso's and Borges' texts. This iconic place in the United States provides a space for self-reflection in the second part of these authors' lives while the two writers were teaching at Harvard University. The river is tied to a very concrete experience that they are having as professors who are not born in the United States and who are teaching at this prestigious institution at a time when such a situation was unusual. The more accomplished older-selves that they inhabit undergo an evaluation of self at middle-age while looking at the Charles River, a phenomenon to which I have referred in this article as the second iteration of the mirror stage. The metaphorical reflections in the river produce an awareness and a crisis of self: both authors use the motif of the flowing river to initiate the rupture of self and spark a crisis. Yet, this crisis results in testimonial writing, which offers an orthopedic restorative medium through which to reach out to and fix a fragmented self.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Prof. Andrés Zamora (Vanderbilt University) for bringing to my attention the allusions to the Charles River in Alonso's and Borges' texts.

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