CHAPTER TEN

Vox in Deserto: 
Borges and the Story of Sand

He told me his book was called the Book of Sand, because neither the book nor the sand have either beginning or end.

—Borges, Libro de Arena

We would again have to allude to the writing of Borges, considering it a writing avant la lettre, insofar as it anticipates and prescribes the imagination and thought determining the historical, political, theoretical, and aesthetic tendencies that define ambivalently the culture of the second half of the last century, finalizing that century, that millennium, and other times. The revelations of his paradoxical vision, the aporias of his incertitudes, the disconcerts of suspended oppositions, the perfection of representations so precise that they obliterate what they represent, copies that surpass their originals, the vanishing of categories and genres, the undrawing of disciplinary limits, the fatality of a writing that does not distinguish although it is sustained by distinction, the progressive introduction of fiction into history, the omission that is another recourse of fiction, the totalitarian absurdity of inventories that impugn invention, the arbitrary enumerations, the incidences of possible worlds that displace known ones, the discontinuous parallelism of the encyclopedias that record or interpret them, the theoretical crises and the hermeneutic rescues of a truth, fragile and in flight, constitute some of the forms of those disparate definitions.

Observing these broken down gnosiological series, the meticulous clarity of rigorous cartographic registers, the iconic solidity of diagrams as valid as they are debatable, the measurable distances according to exact standards, the terminating borders between jurisdictions that tend to confront one another, the orientation of cardinal points as symmetrical as
they are arbitrary, the eventualities of a utopic geography could not cease
be one of the favorite targets at which Borges would aim his negative
poetics.

“What are the Orient and the Occident? If they ask me, I do not
know. Let us look for an approximation,”1 Borges replies, but in regional
terms, diffusely spatial, to the same question that Augustine formulated
about time, and, like the old professor of rhetoric who was a monk before
converting, responds by affirming that he knows space and does not know
it at the same time. Anterior and similar to the coincidences of the global­
ized present, Borges’s epistemological fiction takes note of this planetary
reduction in which the confines, being conventional, do not count; where
distances, because of the immediacy of contexts and accelerated imagina­
tion, count less; where accidents are no more than accidental; where exotic
places appear juxtaposed—because they are neighbors or mythical—to
familiar im­mediations where Orient and Occident contract in a common
decline that brings them closer to one another. Preceded by the reduc­
dancies of Der Untergang des Abendlandes (The Decline of the West), a
title in which time and space are confounded in one and the same fall,2 that
approximation constitutes a decline in two parts for two reasons: because
geographical reason declines (barely a primary topography); because con­
ceptual reason declines (barely a discrete logic).

And how to define the Orient, not the real Orient, which does
not exist? I would say that the notions of Orient and Occident are
generalizations but that no individual feels Oriental. I sup­
pose that a man feels Persian, feels Hindu, feels Malay, but not
Oriental. In the same way, no one feels Latin American: we feel
Argentine, Chilean, Orientals (Uruguayans). It does not matter, the concept does not exist.3

Between prophecy or provocation, Borges’s previsions were those of
an epoch in which countries vanish, regionalized into markets; in which
deterritorialization turns inside out the definitions of national statutes
submitted to the fluctuations of a conceptual stock market in which
notions of nation and narration are confounded, and not only because of
homophonic occurrences. Borges’s imagination mocks borders because,
uncertain, they indistinctly unite or separate jurisdictions. They degrade
them, running through them by means of personal topology that explodes
into contiguouss only conceived of in dreams, making of the whole world a common
place, topos koimoi. More than sites, indisputable arguments,
they get by without fortuitous particularities, without the eventualities of
history, procuring to discover, beyond idiomatic, idiosyncratic contingen­
cies and the myths of identity that sustain them, the models of a knowl­
edge capable of abstracting them. There the variants of being and knowl­
edge stand as instances of a movement, of a voyage that is directed beyond,
toward another reality, an ulteriority where the eventual does not count;
where the voyage is a disputable errancy of permanency in space, where
the vision of the whole Earth can be concentrated in a sacred place or
ciphered in an initial or initiatory letter that is not less so for spatializing
time in writing. Because if the world was made to finish in a beautiful
book, the book exists because it is beautiful—cosmos, a world—and
because it remains, it does not end...

It would not be excessive, then, to simplify a parallelism that would
implicate textual itineraries and recognize that—according to the genetic
analysis of Borges’s manuscripts—if the mihrab is the place that “gives
place” to the aleph,4 associated with an “Arabic geography,”5 the desert is
the place that gives place to Borges’s text, an imagination that tries to
comprehend in one expression, in one moment, eternity and infinity or, at
the same time, to claim them for itself.

This literary claim desires the desert. But, more than vox in deserto,
more than to speak in the desert or to desire to be heard, Borges speaks­
in Spanish—his desire for the desert between desire and desert, decirlos
to say them) in one sole word. It would be necessary to begin at the
beginning, but like the end, the beginning is neither one nor is it certain;
there are several, and perhaps for this reason one of the principal begin­
ings (principios)—which is the beginning of Writing—begins with b and
not with the first letter, as if presuming that something anterior had
already preceded it, one conjecture that the theologians have noted only
to have it refuted, as they must have noted and refuted a question no
longer of letters but of names (nombres), a word that means “numbers” in
French and “names” in Spanish, encompassing transidiomatically the
dualities of a common denominator or of a similar referent.

In this way is posed a brief philological discussion, a first question of
translation, of crossed languages, a question or a search for words that
Borges would not have avoided and that poetically engages the titles of
the books of the Torah with this allure of saying or of that desire of the
desert. Once again: instead of to speak (decir) in the desert, speak (decir)
the desert. The first title of the Pentateuco, Genesis, in Hebrew Bereshit,
which means “beginning,” names the word with which the book of Gen­
esis begins. The second title, Exodus—from the Greek exo, “out of,” and
bodos, “route, voyage, act of leaving”—is the distant translation of the
Hebrew Shemot, which means “Names,” neither emigration nor exile, but
rather the Hebrew word with which Exodus begins: “These are the
names . . .” Leviticus, the third title of the Hebrew Bible, refers to the
priests, sons of Aaron, separating itself from the Hebrew Ve ikra, which means “and he called,” another of Yahweh’s ways of saying, with which the book begins. The fourth, Numbers—in Hebrew Ba-midbar—which is a title adopted by the Septuagint (the Seventy translators of the Torah, or Seventy two, in order to avoid sectarian misreadings). After it, the Vulgate passes over Ba-midbar, the title that anticipates the beginning of the book, making allusion to the census of the twelve tribes in place of referring to the place, the desert of Sinai, where Yahweh addresses Moses, speaks to him. Midbar claims its close relation with the word: dibur, “speech,” diburim, “talks,” “rumors, cheap talk,” in modern Hebrew. Words and desert, both voices proceed from the same root, spoken voices rooted in the desert. On the one hand, the name of “words” is omitted to make reference to the voyage to the way of the one who leaves, to the route or path that is abandoned or the one that one tries to rescue (Exodus). On the other hand, the place is omitted, the desert, in order to make reference to numbers (Numbers). Intersection of voices and ways in the desert: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

The fifth book of the Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy, adopted from the Greek and Latin meaning “second law,” also does not translate the Hebrew debarim, “palabras”; “These be the words that Moses spake . . . in the wilderness.” “In the beginning” of all the books of the Torah is found the word, speech, discourse, voices that are spoken in the desert. More than etymological, more than idiomatic, the profundity of the relation between “word” and “desert” sinks its roots in a mythology of the nothing, in a letristic, consonant coincidence, dibur, originates as minimalist, as if in a previous language, a geography of the void, an empty space that is the origin of the world that, because of the word, remains to be made. Even by opposition, a semantic relation similar but contrary is to be verified in Latin: desertus, adjectival past participle of deserere, “to separate oneself,” “abandon,” derives as does sermo, “speech, language,” from the Latin serere: the desert depriving or deprived of the word. Signs cross one another in different languages, exchange signals, the semantic paths leading to a common mystery. Thought in Spanish, in the “language of Borges,” they are words that propitiate bilingual, multilingual interlacements, names for numbers and vice versa, words that reflect one another, confronting each other like mirrors, verbal mirages that attract infinite interpretations, dissimulated interior translations, transports, or metaphors of a passing secularization.

When the narrator of “The Theologians” recounts that Aureliano argues in favor of a thesis on circular time, he points out that in the subject of theology there is no novelty without danger, but dealing with the idea that the thesis he defended was “too unlikely, too amazing for the risk to have been serious,” he clarifies, in parenthesis, that “the heresies that we ought to fear are those which can be confused with orthodoxy.”

Years before writing this story, in “Circular Time,”11 Borges had already foreseen its plot. In place of announcing it, he prefers to remit it to the past. The mis-ordered reversibility of this work in progress justifies the prolongation of a quote:

(I imagined some time ago a fantastic story, in the style of León Bloy: a theologian consecrates all of his life to confuting a heretic, he vanquishes him in intricate polemics, he denounces him, he makes him burn; in Heaven he discovers that for God the heretic and he consisted of one and the same person.)13

This essay precedes, in the History of Eternity, “The Translators of the Thousand and One Nights.” An obstinate circularity, a regressive succession, series in cycles that repeat themselves sub specie aeternitatis, these are the foundations of a doctrine that affirms eternity in the multiplication of possible worlds, as conceived by Borges on the basis of and in the manner of Louis-Auguste Blanqui: like copies that repeat themselves eternally in infinite space. In Eternity Through the Stars: An Astronomical Hypothesis,15 the plurality of facsimilar stars that Blanqui supposes and describes in the reclusion of prison, the slippages of some into others, the recurrence of his astronomical phantasmagorias, the desperate illusion of coincidences and differences, constitute the intellectual substance and constant aesthetic that Borges demands and dispenses in different versions16: “Of the three doctrines I have enumerated, the best-reasoned and most complex is that of Blanqui.”17

Repetitions question continuity, refute succession if it is progressive, procure eternity, “whose shattered copy is time,” and also space, since it is measured by time. The coordinates being confused—to designate them somehow—they do not order, they enable melancholic references of a geometrical indefiniteness that the seller of Bibles and of The Book of Sand, in The Book of Sand,19 utters in a low voice, as if he were thinking out loud: “If space is infinite, we are in whatever point of space. If time is infinite, we are in whatever point of time.”20 The pages of the book, like sand, are uncountable, “none is the first, none is the last.”21

The sand, like “the water that in water is invisible,”22 is lost in the desert, where neither the sand nor the desert is distinguished. In that indefinite or infinite space, similar but opposed to the rigorous precision traced by the labyrinth, one makes out the primordial “topos,” place and theme of a loss, the disorientation that justifies the search for the Borgesian
writing. The Orient is the origin, or vice versa, since in the desert, like the word—let the redundancy stand—are in the beginning and everywhere, although he dedicates several texts to this ubiquity:

"The desert": Some three or four hundred meters away from the Pyramid I bent over, took up a handful of sand, let it fall silently a little further on, and said in a low voice: I am modifying the Sabara. The deed was minimal, but the not ingenious words were exact and I thought that I had needed my entire life to be able to say them.23

Borges's "Thirteen Coins"24 or "Quince monedas,"25 as it appears in another edition, comprise a series of very short poems included in a discontinuous way in his different editions. Among these coins of fluctuating number, "The Desert" is the place where time does not count; present, it remains suspended or does not remain, canceled and potential, expectant, it is time in which eternity and the instant coincide, where differences vanish, soil, sun or moon, a battle or two:

Space without time.
The moon is the color of sand.
Now, precisely now,
Are dying the men of Metauro and Trafalgar.26

In another "The Desert," this one a longer poem, I transcribe here only a few verses:

Before entering the desert
the soldiers drank long of the water form the cistern.
Hierocles spilt on the earth
the water from his canteen and said:
If we must enter in the desert,
I am already in the desert.
If thirst is going to scorch me,
Let it scorch me!
This is a parable.27

"The Book of Sand" is not an "Arabic story," like the *Vathek* of William Beckford, nor does it take place in the desert, although the desert, secretive, is absent and present at the same time. Even if "The Book of Sand" is a relatively brief tale, it refers to an infinite book, like the sand of the desert, without limits, or with invisible edges that extend it beyond the horizon. To reduce the excesses of that extravagant extension, before the impossibility of defining or of giving a reference to the indefiniteness, the narrator begins *ad absurdum*, making use of, *more geometrico*, all the recourses of exactitude. Contradictorily, he defines line, plane, volumes as forms of the infinite that are not those of the book, or not even its opposites. Recognizing the convention of all fantastic tales, the narrator affirms, from the beginning, that it is a true book. Given the literary verisimilitude, of that partial truth of writing, he prefers to occult—truth, the book—behind another book that is a fiction of fictions: "He opts for hiding them behind some uncompleted (descabalados) volumes of the *Thousand and One Nights,*"28 a volume that is missing some parts, apparently "incomplete." Nor is "cabala" foreign to that disorder that the adjective qualifies, nor do the traditions of reading contradict that disperse "reception": "The Arabs say that no one can/ Read to the end of the Book of the Nights."29 In addition to occulting the uncertain truth of other books, *The Thousand and One Nights* is one of his archetypal narratives, the spiral matrix where are produced the mirages of his abyssal imagination, anterior and interior to other books, or to the same book, that take place in the desert. More than the parable of the desert it is the voice in the desert, the word is lost in the word, they are not differentiated, just as the word is not differentiated from the book:

In the book is the Book. Without knowing it
The queen tells the king the already forgotten
Story of them both.... 30

From the two books or from them both, the king and the queen? Consisting of its vigils, *The Thousand and One Nights* not only constitutes a book but also a temporal and nocturnal pretext of innumerable stories that figure the literary imagination of its bibliothecological rhetoric: figures of a talisman that protects or dispenses the luck of its erudition prolonged in fictions or in interminable histories that wager against time. Borges disperses in parts (descabala) the book: "takes out precise parts in order to construct another [book] which does not claim to be entire (cabal) or complete either."31 Like a magical inscription that circulates in his texts, in more or less transparent quotes or in even more secret rendezvous (*cita* in Spanish brings together the two passions in one and the same word: the citation and the sentimental meeting), the book comes and goes in Borges's oeuvre, a literal and figurative "transport" of his metaphors. In the same way that the genie enclosed in the vessel is not the same one who escapes from Aladdin's lamp, he only appears "by enchantment," according to the French translation of *The Thousand and One*
Nights. Both play within the pages of Borges, weaving the plot and filtering, in bibliographical references, the autobiographical accidents that fiction reveals.

In "The South," Juan Dahlmann "had attained, that afternoon, an uncompleted copy of the Thousand and One Nights." It is the book with which he travels toward his destiny: the south, his fatality, the displacement in procurement of a double death. In that story, the ciphered and habitual reading postpones the duel, it serves "as if to cover reality,"33 believing in this way to avoid the challenge and the fight. Like The Book of Sand, between whose pages "none is the first; none, the last,"34 the Thousand and One Nights holds mysteries that hold other mysteries: occults the character or occults (from him) reality, like it occulted the Book of Sand on a shelf of the library, insinuating the rigor of an inexorable law: one book occults another, or more.

The Thousand and One Nights is, moreover, title and subject of a talk published in Seven Nights. The periodical brevity, to which the tetrasyllabic title of the book that compiles several other talks refers, appears in counterpoint to the millenary nocturnal fabulation, with the verbosity preceding an enumeration that mocks, because of its scarcity, the enumeration of a series that does not end. "The idea of infinite is co-substantial with The Thousand and One Nights,"35 the narration enables a universe where time and space are confused, where numerical precision makes fun, contradictorily, no longer of the limitations of enumeration but rather of its imposibility. The end in suspense, like in the stories of Sheherezade that suspend the ending, postpone the sentence, which is as much the verbal one as the condemnation, death, the end, always interrupted:

I want to pause over the title. It is one of the most beautiful in the world, so beautiful [. . . ] I believe that for us the word "thousand" is synonymous with "infinite." To say a thousand nights is to say infinite nights, the many nights, the innumerable nights. To say "a thousand and one nights" is to add one to the infinite.36

For this reason Borges prefers that title of numerous narration to the one that it presents in English, "The Arabian Nights," an Oriental, ethnic mention, which, like "the Arabic numerals," do not number the pages of the Book of Sand, which pass from 400,514, even, to 999, odd. Borges's story The Book of Sand—two times eponymous—presents the same title for the book that appears in the story and for the book wherein appears the story. Thus the book exists outside of the story and inside of the story, vanishing the limits from both sides, providing entrance or exit to the dualities of its ambiguous diegetic statute. It belongs to "a world that is made of correspondences, that is made of magic mirrors,"37 which, facing one another, confuse reality with words, forging images that shed blinding light and are erased in the sand. In others of Borges's stories, the regions, the countries owe their existence to the mentions that figure in an Encyclopedia. This statute would not be unusual in a universe where Sheherezade's life depended on her word, the continuity of the story as well, narrator and narration exist equally with the word. An encyclopedia, literary, or verbal survival dissimulates the differences that no longer oppose life to anything that is not written.

From the beginning, the word is the commencement:

I think we ought not renounce the word Orient, such a beautiful word, since in it, by happy coincidence, there is gold (oro) to be found. [and he insists] In the word Orient we hear the word gold (oro) because at dawn the heavens look like gold.38

Borges discovers affinities between words that, beyond phonetic coincidences, reveal a universe articulated by a different poetic logic: arena (sand), Arab, arid, ardent, arcane, or more distant, "in the confines of the sand (arena) of Arizona,"39 incipient rhymes, at the beginning, textual bonds are laid out like traps in unforeseen situations.

Although "its semantics has been restricted to places,"40 for Borges the desert is not only infinite extension but also the place from which "one leaves" and, for this reason, a goal: an origin and a departure, the beginning and the leaving. Its desolation is, moreover, of another nature:

I see that this theme is fecund in Borges since the desert—in any case as it is lived by the Arabs—is the sheer place of loss, of a virtual loss; and frequently, it is there where one loses and refinds oneself; and it is that disposition that brings about the paradigm of the footprint, of its inscription, of its fragility, of its blurring; of its furtive slippage toward the sign, in order to reveal in it the latency of its meaning; that is to say, the testimony of a presence in absence.41

Beyond tracing the roots of loss, Borges consecrates the sand as the original substance of space, deserted dust that remains in movement, since sand is not only the infinite sediment of the desert but also the shifting material of fiction in a book of which the narrator, like the mythical narrator, is a prisoner. If "the first metaphor is water," water becomes sand like "those rivers of sand with fish of gold" that, in the first place make us
think of Islam. That becoming would propitiate another experiencing of time by writing: if “the course of time and time are only one mystery and not two,” discourse duplicates it. Emblematic, remote, clepsydra names the water and its disappearance, the water stolen by the discourse that is prolonged but, above all, by the word that designates and, at the same time, suppresses what it designates. Through the crystal of the clepsydra the water makes transparent twice over the secret order that the passage of time administers but, like a shaker that tosses the die, “the allegorical instrument” turns around and chance returns. “Shakespeare—according to his own metaphor—put in the turn of an hourglass the works of the years,” said Borges more than a half century ago.

If all history, like all story, is uncertain, Borges pushes that uncertainty to its extreme, prolonging it into a History of Eternity that tries to recount the impossible history of an eternity that has no time, or sets out to enumerate the moments of the instant, that also does not have it. He recounts, nevertheless, the history of the sand, he tells it two times, the history of the desert and the number, interminably, which is another incessant form of (re)counting. The voice is doubled in the desert or, the other way around, the desert is doubled in the voice, in one same voice or at the same time. It is doubled and comes back to itself, vox in deserto, like in a mirror, almost a mirage. In the image of clepsydra, Borges exhausts water into sand, exhausts time as its slips toward the end in order to return to the beginning. Fall, that is a symbol of other falls, of equally symbolic fractures, sand decants, meticulous, without pausing, without swerving, like a verse that returns by inversion, turning around itself, in a fragile orb or two, where are passing by, because they wander and disappear, the voices that do not count.
10. VOX IN DESERTO


2. If we attend to the meaning of fall that is designated by both Untergang (decline) and Abendland (Occident), the title of the book by
Oswald Spengler duplicates the crepuscular condition. Oswald Spengler, Der Untergang des Abendlandes; Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte (Munich: Beck, 1922).

3. Borges, “Las mil y una noches,” 67. Those of us born in Uruguay—whose official denomination is “The Oriental Republic of Uruguay,” because the country is located, seen from Argentina, to the east of the Uruguay river—are “Orientals.” Borges himself, born in Buenos Aires, identified himself as “Oriental” because of having been conceived in the hacienda of the Haedos, in Rio Negro, a province of Uruguay.

4. I am thankful to Salvio Martínez and Jorge Panesi for the information about the manuscript of the story “The Aleph,” which Borges had dedicated to Estela Canto, where in place of aleph appears mirhab, crossed out in all cases.

5. It is the only specific entry that the CD-Rom of the Encyclopaedia Universalis presents in its extensive reference for “Geography.”


8. Deuteronomy, ibid., 145.


10. Ibid., 550.

11. This text appeared under the title “Three Forms of the Eternal Return,” in La Nación of Buenos Aires, 12/14/1041. The story “The Theologians” was published in 1947 in Anales de Nuevos Aires.

12. English in the original.


14. Ibid., 397–413.


20. Ibid., 69.
21. Ibid., 69.
30. Ibid., 512.
31. This is the definition of the verb *descabalar* given by the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*.
33. Ibid., 529.
36. Ibid., 61.
37. Ibid., 73.
38. Ibid., 63.
42. Borges, “Las mil y una noches,” 64.