

## ALEPH AND BORGES

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As is known, Aleph began life in this world very long before we did, about five millennia ago, in the most privileged and closely guarded precincts of the Egyptian pyramids.<sup>1</sup> The hieroglyph profile of its bull head can be seen quite clearly in the spells recorded in the *Book of the Dead* over the many centuries and dynasties that comprise the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms. Surviving shifts in fashion and finance in the function of the papyrus and other texts in this mortuary tradition, the bull's head beneath its horns achieved polychromatic emphasis in depictions of the bull of heaven, sire of the seven sacred cows, pastoral beasts who between their horns each carry *ra* the sun from the eastern dawn to the western dusk (Taylor).

More intimately, the bull or ox figures in the second of three pairs of items listed as indispensable for the traveller through the afterlife: bread and beer, meat and fowl, emolument in alabaster jars (whose number corresponds the seven orifices of the mummified head) and clothing. Over time, the paired items written and incised innumerable times in hieroglyphic and then hieratic script on a variety of surfaces became formulaic and involved abbreviated spellings and paraphrases, as Gardiner shows in the Excursus of his *Egyptian Grammar* devoted to the funerary cult (170-73). There, in a 12th-dynasty example of the the hotp-di-nesu formula (“a

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1 Having begun life in April 2010 as a talk given in Spanish for the VII Conferencia Internacional of the student association Aleph in Manchester in April 2010, this piece was refreshed by a visit to the British Museum *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* exhibition which opened later this same year (Taylor).

boon which the king gives”), after the bread and the beer, we see meat and fowl reduced to the head of an ox placed over that of a bird. We learn also about the opening of the mouth orifice in the embalming process, in imitation of the midwife’s opening of the new-born baby’s mouth, so that the spirit (*ka*) can communicate with the body; and about how the horns of the bull may in themselves indicate a beginning.

Before the last hieroglyphic texts had been inscribed, the image of the taurine aleph profile passed from the Hamitic south to the Semitic north of the levantine coast, to acquire sound and meaning as the first of the 22 letters of the Phoenician alphabet. In this guise, knowledge of aleph the ox spread along with the economic and military power of the Phoenicia west across the Mediterranean, through the Greek islands, Malta, Sicily, Carthage, and the Betis of Iberia. As a group, the first five letters of this first alphabet, although phonetic, do not cease to register or indicate visually the concepts from which their initial letter derives (Diringer 167-68).

Simplified, the acrophonic sequence reads: aleph (ox), beth (house), gamal (camel), daleth (door), heth (fence), the concepts being detectable in the shapes of the corresponding letters. Their ideological significance is hard to underestimate. Water-borne the Phoenician conquerors of the Mediterranean may have been, but the impression they made on land is firm: the pastoral ox belongs to a house with a door and a fence around it and is twinned with the longer range camel, which was domesticated in Arabia.

When these letters were adopted by the Greek “founders of European civilization” at the end of the second millennium BC, they became alpha, beta, gamma, delta, epsilon, the source in turn of the Roman ABCDE. Being Phoenician in origin, the letters adopted by the Greeks to such enormous cultural effect have absolutely no meaning when spoken in Greek. Yet their meaning can still be divined in shapes that endure, turned through 900 in the case of the first two letters. For in alpha, aleph’s horns are put on the side rather than on top of the ox head; and in the upright and bulges of beta, the houses of beth and the land they stand on are vertical. As for delta, Greek incursion in Egypt’s river replaced daleth the door.

Prefaced by the Spanish masculine definite article, “El Aleph” points us to a key dimension in the concept of “*ficción*” that made Jorge Luis Borges world famous. The first of his fictions surfaced during World War II, in

successive editions of *El jardín de los senderos que bifurcan* (1942-44), keenly marked by the brutal moment of their composition. There, alphabetic letters may encode ethnic struggles to the death, as they do in “La muerte y la brújula.” The fictions in *El Aleph* (1949) acquire ludic possibilities proper to Latin America’s finest literary hour, where alphabetic letters designate personas engaged in minimal adventures of the self, not least the B of the author’s own name.

In the title story of *El Aleph*, this term means a totality experienced by the senses and the mind, an epiphany of whole universe and all time concentrated into a moment, a cosmic vision. As B, Borges is forever bound to his love Beatriz Viterbo, recently dead and therefore borne moment by moment further from him in time. Unconsummated, the love of B for B is continuously threatened by the crass Carlos Argentino Danieri (ACD) who however is also the one who enables Borges, lying prone in the cellar of Danieri’s house, to see the aleph. At the end of the fiction, a “Posdata del primero de marzo de 1943” further elaborates the intensely personal story of the narrator Borges. Danieri’s house has been knocked down, we are told, and in any case what Borges saw there was “un falso Aleph” (1:627).

Skirting the obvious psychological resonance of much of the story—the cellar and the position of Borges in it, the sight of Beatriz’s innermost intimacy in her very entrails, sexual excitement that separates rather is shared, issuing into tears—the narrator adduces a series of proofs, erudite to the point of silly, that the Aleph was false. They involve quoting Richard Burton, the translator of the *Arabian Nights* discussed already in *Historia de la eternidad*, and the Dominican critic Pedro Henríquez Ureña, in order to get to the mirror-aleph of Alejandro Bicornio de Macedonia (also quoted in “La muerte y la brújula”), in which “se reflejaba el universo entero” (“El Aleph” 1: 627).

As an image, this reference takes us back to the Greek derivative alpha, which has one horn higher than the other, sooner than aleph where the horns are level. The accompanying reference to the “séptuple copa de Kai Josrú” (1: 627) takes us back further still, to the alabaster jars and the *Ka* of the hieroglyphic pyramid texts. Casting across to the Tintagel of Arthurian legend, we hear too of the universal mirror of Merlin, “redondo y hueco y semejante a un mundo de vidrio” (1: 627), found in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. The quotation is precise (III, ii, 19):

The great Magician Merlin had deuiz'd,  
by his deepe science, and hell-dreaded might,  
A looking glasse, right wondrously aguiz'd  
whose vertues through the wyde world soone  
were solemniz'd. . . .  
For thy it round and hollow shaped was,  
like to the world it selfe, and seem'd a world of glas.

In sum, Borges's fiction "El Aleph" in the volume of that title, plays heavily with a leitmotif of his work that is strongest in the fictions: resisting death and oblivion by immersing oneself deeply in the fiction that is literature, beginning explicitly with the scribes who over millennia wrote the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. At the same time, the sheer scope and detail of the erudition, despite the underlying humour, lend it a certain Old World exhaustion.

In the volume *El Aleph*, the title fiction is accompanied by another, "La escritura del dios," which attracts great attention since on many counts and in its totalizing vision it closely parallels our prototype. The fundamental difference from the start is that between the Old and the New worlds, between gods, pyramids and texts that belong not beyond America but in it.

This makes explicit a dimension of Borges's work that is rarely noted yet decisive, that of the indigenous American. A Borges indigenista then? Well, against all expectation, it would seem so, on this evidence.

"Las muchedumbres de América" intrude already in the vision inspired by "El Aleph"; also the tiny but telling detail of "las mismas baldosas que hace treinta años vi en el zaguán de una casa en Fray Bentos" (1: 625). The specification of this town necessarily recalls "Funes el memorioso," the young Urugayan with a "cara taciturna y aindiada" (1: 485), who in his head carries the multitudinous vision of the Aleph that on his last night on earth he recounts to the persona Borges. In the other direction, as evidence of a certain disenchantment with Old World learning, we might add the discomfort, misgivings, even suspicions of bad faith expressed by the scholar librarian in "Deutsches Requiem."

According to what we glean from "La escritura del dios," this as it were complementary text to "El Aleph," the script here inspires its own cosmic vision, one founded in the philosophical tradition of America. It is written in the skin of a feline with a Guarani name, a jaguar, which comes to exemplify the continent.

Immanent in the jaguar skin, the text is legible for the priest magus of the pyramid of Qaholom, Maya rather than Egyptian. Imprisoned by the Spanish invaders, this priest remains true to the knowledge recorded in the *Popol Vuh*, the account of New World genesis written in the Maya language and transcribed from hieroglyphic roots. The events of this genesis and the vast extension through time in the successive births and destructions of its world ages charge what the priest reads in the patterns in the skin of the jaguar he shares his prison with. A core formula of fourteen syllables that would restore the temple but which he refuses to utter further ties the jaguar to the origin of language itself, via what we learn from the quotations of these syllables in the cognate fictions “La biblioteca de Babel” and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” Flouting centuries of Old World supposition, this Ursprache is revealed as American, “a Samoyed-Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with classical Arabic inflections,”—a high point of Borges’s irreverence, as was suggested on a previous occasion (Brotherston).

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