

## POLITICS OF THE NAME: ON BORGES'S "EL ALEPH"



*Silvia Rosman*

*Todo lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos cuyo ejercicio  
presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten*

J. L. Borges, "El aleph"

---

**I**n reaction to the vitriolic attacks on the inhuman and foreign nature of his writing, from the 1920s on Borges explores the question of a common language and its implications for the concept of literature. Is there an authentic Argentinean language that would give rise to an equally authentic national literature? In "El idioma de los argentinos" (1927), Borges responds to this question by referring to a double particularity: "Dos influencias antagónicas entre sí militan contra un habla argentina. Una es la de quienes imaginan que esa habla ya está prefigurada en el arrabalero de los sainetes; otra es la de los casticistas o españolados que creen en lo cabal del idioma y en la impiedad o inutilidad de su refacción" (*Idioma* 136). Neither the localized slang of the Buenos Aires margins and its implied unity of place, nor the linguistic cohesion of a dictionary Spanish that no one speaks succeed in capturing the "voice" of the Spanish spoken in Argentina, crystallized as those two "languages" are by their proper and definite meaning.

If a certain cultural nationalism imposed the normalizing parameters that a pedagogical notion of an Argentinean essence embodied (the continuity with Hispanic tradition, the notion of authenticity and uniqueness that would mark the nation's autonomy), Borges finds in the performative use of language a certain linguistic commonality: the "no escrito idioma argentino (...) *diciéndonos*," where the intonation or inflexion of certain words can be heard. In "El Aleph" he will refer to this commonality as sharing language.

Paradoxically, what is common is not necessarily one's own, as indicated by the Spanish "share": "comparten" (from com-partir), which points both to the commonality of experience and to the division, splitting and distancing which that experience puts into play. Sharing language therefore destines the Argentinean writer to the task of the translator, given that in the event that is writing, the voice, the dialect (as Borges calls it) can never reach the unified stability of a transparent national language. The problem of translation that sharing language demands and resists, the possibilities and impossibilities implied in transmitting, communicating or representing sense, is Borges's approach to the question of a common language.

Does translation in Borges allow access to another space (or realm), to another culture; is anything transmitted in a Borgesian translation? How should one think those moments in Borges's texts when the translation is interrupted, where the transmission fails or, as in "Emma Zunz," the characters speak two languages at the same time: when there is no possibility of a translation taking place? How should one think what escapes the translation process and can only be thought as a non-localizable language? Writing under the shadow of the two world wars, in "El Aleph" and other texts from the 1940s, Borges explores the relations between community and literature. Borges is especially concerned that the tenor of that relation not subsume either of the two terms under pedagogic, normalizing and representational parameters, given that the notion of a linguistic community can no longer assure the transmission of sense. Borges's notion of a "shared" language thus proposes a writing that can be considered Argentinean without having to be national.

Borges explicitly announces the impossibility of translation or translation as an impossibility and writing of the limit in "Los tra-

ductores de las 1001 noches": "Traducir el espíritu es una intención tan enorme y tan fantasmal que bien puede quedar como inofensiva; traducir la letra una precisión tan extravagante que no hay riesgo de que la ensayen" (OC 1:400). The task of the translator is always a failure for Borges, although translations are a constant concern in his texts: "Ningún problema tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción" (OC 1: 239). However, translation is not considered simply an interlinguistic activity or, as some critics have suggested, the strategy of an irreverent South American writer confronting Western culture. Translation is a necessity for Borges's task as a writer, while the materiality of his texts simultaneously announce and expose its failure. As he states in "Las versiones homéricas" (1932), writing exposes "la dificultad categórica de saber lo que pertenece al poeta y lo que pertenece al lenguaje" (OC 1: 240). This impossibility resides in that between what language says and the way it says it or, as Borges himself states, between the intention and the precision, there is an abyss. Translations constantly expose the abyss from and of which writing emerges.

A first approach to the problem of translation in Borges shows that the notion of linguistic unity able to serve as the foundation for a politics of the national community does not exist in his texts. This lack of unity is contrasted to what a certain political discourse elected as the exemplary examples of cultural or linguistic nationalism. In a late conference titled "El libro" (1978) Borges notes that in the selection of national poets, countries tend to exhibit a high level of arbitrariness. It is as if the national poet were not exactly the one able to represent the characteristics of the nation's "spirit" but, rather, the one who emphasizes, denounces and declares the gap that exists between the imagination and the so-called national community. Borges frames his commentary within the history of the concept of the book:

Tenemos entonces un nuevo concepto, el de que cada país tiene que ser representado por un libro; en todo caso, por un autor que puede serlo de muchos libros. Es curioso (...) que los países hayan elegido individuos que no se parecen demasiado a ellos. Uno piensa, por ejemplo, que Inglaterra hubiera elegido al doctor Johnson como representante; pero no, Inglaterra ha elegido a Shakespeare, y Shakes-

peare es (...) el menos inglés de los escritores ingleses. Lo típico de Inglaterra es el *understatement*, es el decir un poco menos de las cosas. En cambio Shakespeare tendía a la hipérbole en la metáfora, y no nos sorprendería nada que Shakespeare hubiera sido italiano o judío, por ejemplo. (...) Otro caso más curioso es el de España. España está representada por Miguel de Cervantes. Cervantes es un hombre contemporáneo de la Inquisición, pero es tolerante, es un hombre que no tiene ni las virtudes ni los vicios españoles (...) *Es como si cada país pensara que tiene que ser representado por alguien distinto, por alguien que pueda ser, una suerte de remedio, una suerte de triaca, una suerte de contraveneno de sus defectos* (...) Nosotros hubiéramos podido elegir el *Facundo* de Sarmiento (...) pero no, nosotros hemos elegido como libro la crónica de un desertor, hemos elegido el *Martín Fierro*, que si bien merece ser elegido como libro, ¿cómo pensar que nuestra historia está representada por un desertor de la conquista del desierto? (...) (OC 4: 168-9, my emphasis).

Instead of facilitating the contiguity between language and community, for Borges the so-called national poem and book are symptoms of a problematic and imaginary relation. They seem to speak a foreign language, represent what the community does not want them to represent and do so in a style or a voice that is not properly that of the linguistic community. Indeed, those texts seem to share the logic of the *pharmakon*, which, as Derrida shows, in Greek signifies not only remedy (*triaca* and *contraveneno* are the words Borges utilizes) but also poison itself (*Dissemination* 98-9). Therefore, if the national poet and book in Borges's text function as the imaginary remedy capable of curing the contradictions found within a supposed community's unity, they are also (literally) death itself ("la muerte") since they accentuate and exacerbate the gaps in that same national community and thus put in doubt the very unity they are supposed to represent.

The paradoxical situation that Borges presents in "El libro" (that of representations that do not successfully represent their intended object) is directly related to that of translation. The term *pharmakon* itself exposes this relation, given that if the Greek word can be translated as both remedy and poison, it not only makes evident the problem of translating from one language to another but also that of translating within the language that one calls one's own. If within

each linguistic system there are various languages, then one can no longer speak of a transparent non-contaminated language, one that is pure or intact. Neither can one any longer think that a translation consists in restituting in the translation what was first given in the original. That is, one can no longer think that the translation occupies a secondary or subaltern place in relation to the original—or that it even occupies a place.

We have learned from Walter Benjamin that translation cannot be thought within the genealogical line of heredity and similitude; there are no family ties in translation, no natural relations. On the contrary, the translation and the so-called original are converted into the fragments of a "pure" language which is, at the same time, the impetus for translation (the dream of transparent communicability) and the greatest of impossibilities, since the multiplicity of languages does not permit the dream of transparency becoming a reality (Derrida *Otobiography* 102).

The relation between translation and original for Benjamin, therefore, can only be an infinitely small point, a place which is in fact a non-place since it impedes unity or convergence and only "exists" in order to be abandoned. A translation is therefore necessarily orphaned; by rejecting the place of the subaltern, it defies the law of the father, but also the law of the mother: that motherland which could, if only for a moment, supply it with the reassuring site of an origin, with an identity.

What does it mean to be an Argentinean writer? Various defined as dependent on foreign (i.e. European) traditions (and thus cosmopolitan) or autonomous in relation to those traditions (and thus nationalistic, although still negatively defined in relation to the "foreign"), the Argentinean writer (although the same could perhaps be said of most so-called Latin American writers), either has too little or too much, is constantly in search of an identity to call his own or mourning the loss of one that was never properly his. This economy of gains and losses which has been the lot of Latin American writers implies localizing the place that writer is supposed to occupy. Neither marginal, central nor "in-between," in "El Aleph" (1941) Borges calls for a permanent dislocation of the writer and of writing.

In this story the mediocre poet Carlos Argentino Daneri reveals to Borges, the narrator, that he has found the Aleph (a point in space which contains all the other points). Daneri discovers the Aleph in the basement of his house on Garay Street and because of this discovery he is able to compose the epic poem later published as "Trozos argentinos," for which he is awarded the National Prize for Literature. If read only in reference to the intellectual politics of the time and to Borges's complicated relationship to Leopoldo Lugones, the story functions as a parody of Lugones's collection of poems, *Odas Seculares* (1910), which was written to commemorate the Centenary of Argentina's Independence. Much like Daneri's poem, *Odas* pretends to give an encyclopedic account of the nation and therefore celebrates its plants, rivers, animals and cities in an almost endless enumeration. It also establishes a symbiotic and organic relation between nation and self, thus making the poet the natural representative and expression of the national community.

It is also well known that in 1941 Borges was not awarded the Municipal Prize for his entry "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" because the jury considered Borges's work to be "extranjerizante." There was a great deal of outrage among Borges's supporters and "El Aleph" can be read in part as Borges's "revenge" on the members of the jury. No one would then have failed to recognize that the person whom Daneri wishes to prologue his epic poem is none other than Álvaro Melián Lafinur. Having the same name as the character in the story, he was the only member of the jury to have voted in favor of Borges's story.

The central focus of "El Aleph," however, is not only Borges's rejection of a certain type of nationalistic literature, but to explore the consequences of grounding literary production on the basis of a prior definition of national culture. More importantly, to problematize the possibilities and impossibilities for thinking the relation between literature and community, not as a theme or object of representation, but rather as what is enacted in the performative practice of writing. How should the "in common" be written, asks Borges and with what language? Further, does the "in" common presuppose a place, should it in order to think the ethical and political di-

mensions of literature? If not, how can the meaning(s) of literature be thought?

"El Aleph" has often been read alongside Borges's essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición." Accordingly, the story would confirm, in a fictionalized manner, the main thesis of the essay, namely, that even a subaltern Argentinean writer has access to the whole of Western tradition. In his comments on the essay, Ricardo Piglia frames Borges's thesis in the following manner:

¿Qué quiere decir la tradición argentina? Borges parte de esa pregunta y el ensayo es un manifiesto que acompaña la construcción ficcional de "El aleph", su relato sobre la escritura nacional. ¿Cómo llegar a ser universal en este suburbio del mundo? (Piglia 50)

As a subaltern writer, Borges, according to Piglia, must necessarily define his position in relation to the central and hegemonic traditions which are both properly his (by virtue of his access through books) but of which he is equally dispossessed because of his marginal and secondary position in relation to those traditions (by virtue of being Argentinean):

La tesis central del ensayo de Borges es que las literaturas secundarias y marginales, desplazadas de las grandes corrientes europeas tienen la posibilidad de un manejo propio, "irreverente", de las grandes tradiciones (...). Pueblos de fronteras, que se manejan entre dos historias, en dos tiempos, y a menudo en dos lenguas. Una cultura nacional dispersa y fracturada, en tensión con una tradición dominante de alta cultura extranjera. Para Borges (...) este lugar incierto permite un uso específico de la herencia cultural (51).

Although displaced (dispersed and fragmented) in relation to that center which for Piglia is represented by European culture, the secondary and marginal literatures are nevertheless able to produce specific uses of that central and centered tradition. Through what appears to be a strategy, a trick of the weak, the marginalized literatures in Piglia's schema thus assume a proper place (a place of their own) which is now the frontier.

However, for this strategy to be possible, the categories used by Piglia depend on the prior unity of the differentiated spaces which,

as S. Contreras shows, are then placed in an oppositional relation: European/Argentinean, foreign/national, central/marginal, high culture/secondary, subaltern literature, although the first term in each of these relations appears to possess a fullness denied to the second (41-2). The irreverence on the part of the subaltern writer depends on how he manages to bridge the gap or, better, to fill the void implied in these binary relations. According to Piglia, the writer accomplishes this task by mixing, plagiarizing or robbing those elements from the hegemonic tradition which are deemed useful or which allow for an access or potentiality (“un llegar a ser”) in his writing which would otherwise be impossible to achieve.

Borges’s “El escritor argentino y la tradición” also depends on spatial metaphors for its exposition but, as we will see, these function differently to the theses that Piglia posits in his text. Everything in the essay intends to show the lack of unity and contiguity in what cultural nationalism defines as properly Argentinean and properly foreign. Regarding the supposed blood relations that certain critics claim to exist between Argentinean and Spanish literatures; that is, the linguistic unity which is supposed to be their common ground, Borges replies that Spanish literature is “hard to enjoy” (“difícilmente gustable”); to the claim that *Don Segundo Sombra* is the most essentially Argentinean of novels, Borges responds that it would not be so if the marks of the French literary tradition and Kipling’s *Kim* were not inscribed in Güiraldes’s writing.

As in his lecture “El libro”, throughout “El escritor argentino y la tradición” Borges contends that in order to “communicate” the flavor or the taste of a certain country the text must be inscribed with a mark of difference, the text then must be improper and this impropriety or difference must function at the level of the name:

Durante muchos años, en libros ahora felizmente olvidados, traté de redactar el sabor, la esencia de los barrios extremos de Buenos Aires; naturalmente abundé en palabras locales, no prescindí de palabras como cuchilleros, milonga, tapia y otras (...) luego, hará un año, escribí una historia que se llama *La muerte y la brújula* que es una suerte de pesadilla, una pesadilla en que figuran elementos de Buenos Aires deformados por el horror de la pesadilla; pienso allí en el Paseo Colón y lo llamo Rue de Toulon; pienso en las quintas de Adrogué y



las llamo Triste-le-Roy; publicada esa historia, mis amigos me dijeron que al fin habían encontrado en lo que yo escribía el sabor de las afueras de Buenos Aires. Precisamente porque no me había propuesto encontrar ese sabor, porque me había abandonado al sueño, pude lograr, al cabo de tantos años, lo que antes busqué en vano (OC 1: 270-1).

Borges shows that there is no logical, direct or natural relation between imagination and nomination. No analogy of any sort can be established in the passage from Paseo Colón to Rue de Toulon; one is not the metaphor of the other. In fact between what is meant (Paseo Colón, Argentina) and the way that the language means (Rue de Toulon) there is a non-relation that nevertheless succeeds in capturing the "flavor" ("el sabor") of that order of signification. In "La muerte y la brújula," according to Borges, writing works as something other to the translation process and yet retains, as Benjamin notes, an infinitely small yet unrepresentable point that is able to produce sense.

It is when the attempt to control language fails, when a literal, word by word translation is abandoned, that something of the original can be communicated. In other words, there is no way to make the intention and the name coincide. Indeed, the difference between imagination and nomination is transmitted as if in a dream, according to Borges, or, rather, a nightmare ("el horror de la pesadilla"), when the writer abandons himself and succumbs to the other of reason. This implies leaving something behind but also giving himself up to errancy: "porque me había abandonado al sueño, pude lograr (...) lo que antes busqué en vano" (OC 1: 271). For Borges, then, the Argentinean writer can only be called by that name when he abandons himself, leaves himself behind, so to speak, or, if calling upon other senses of "abandonado" (linked to notions of orphanhood and even of bastardry), is someone outside the legality of the family structure. Writing thus implies giving up before the law, not in order to obey its letter (or to lay down another law), but rather to let the letter wander, never reaching its destination; a proper and definite meaning.

The abandonment of the Argentinean writer results in his becoming permanently dis-appropriated, like the Jews or the Irish: "...)

muchos de esos irlandeses ilustres (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) fueron descendientes de ingleses, fueron personas que no tenían sangre celta: sin embargo, les bastó el hecho de sentirse irlandeses, distintos, para innovar en la cultura inglesa" (*OC* 1: 273). It is therefore *not* the right to the acquisition of the Western tradition by a marginal Argentinean writer that is at stake for Borges but, rather, the permanent destabilization of what is understood to be the property of the proper name, whether this name be Europe, Ireland, France or Argentina: "no podemos concretarnos a lo argentino para ser argentinos" (*OC* 1: 274). There is always something that exceeds nomination, which the name cannot contain and, to return to the passage we quoted earlier, it is for this reason that Paseo Colón can be translated into Rue de Toulon. Instead of designating the most concrete and unique of places, the translation of these "proper" names undoes the specificity that the name is supposed to designate.

In Borges's formulation literature or, rather, writing, makes it possible to forget oneself (one's Self) and to forget one's place as well. However the Argentinean writer may define the tradition to which he says to belong, it is its disuse as knowledge that is important for Borges and it is in this disuse that a mark of innovation can be read. For this reason, Italian themes can "belong" to the English literary tradition by way of Chaucer and Shakespeare, as the essay states, just as the French and English literary traditions may "belong" to the Argentinean tradition by way of Güiraldes. As translations, literary and artistic texts suppose an errancy into foreignness, of Self and country ("Creo que si nos abandonamos a ese sueño voluntario que se llama la creación artística, seremos argentinos y seremos, también, buenos o tolerables escritores" (*OC* 1: 274)), an errancy which disarticulates the integrity of the terms which the hierarchies center/margin, metropolitan/subaltern, foreign/national are supposed to sustain.

Instead of serving as an illustration or example of the story, "El escritor argentino y la tradición," therefore, puts in doubt the homology between the essay and "El Aleph." If, as Piglia states, for Borges the universe can be found in the basement of a house on Garay Street; that is, in the foundational house of the Nation (Juan de Garay is the name of the founder of Buenos Aires) and that universe

is the very content of Carlos Argentino Daneri's laughable poem, then the knowledge to be found in the Aleph is rejected in the story and cannot be considered the triumphant acquisition of a subaltern, South American writer. The end of the first part of the story indicates as much; it comes immediately after Borges the narrator (hereon referred to as "Borges") has "seen" the Aleph:

En la calle, en las escaleras de Constitución, en el subterráneo, me parecieron familiares todas las caras. Temí que no quedara una sola cosa capaz de sorprenderme, temí que no me abandonara jamás la impresión de volver. Felizmente, al cabo de unas noches de insomnio, me trabajó otra vez el olvido. (*OC* 1: 626)

The story then does not center on how from the subaltern space occupied by an Argentinean writer he may gain access to universal knowledge, but on the need to forget that knowledge, just as at the end of the second part of the story "Borges" cannot remember the face of Beatriz. This forgetting is accompanied by the destruction of the house—its imminent destruction is the reason Carlos Argentino Daneri first contacts "Borges"—. Instead of allowing access and the possibility of mixing or combining elements of the various traditions that the Aleph includes, the Aleph is virtually a de-appropriating-machine; knowledge is not its product for "Borges". What remains for the writer once this occurs, what does he make "use" of once he has been "unworked" by forgetting ("me trabajó otra vez el olvido")? Certainly not the contents of a national literature, however heterogeneous it may be—the destruction of the house (and one supposes of the Aleph) points in this direction.

The dis-appropriation of knowledge that the Aleph puts into effect undermines the philosophical concept of subject, which forms the basis of all notions of representation. From his house of national being ("la casa del ser nacional") Daneri has the will to transcribe the totality of the universe into the language of his poem in order to make a name for himself, to become a famous poet. This desire of Daneri's is analogous to the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel where the tribe of the Shems also wish to make a name for themselves by creating a universal language, which would be the only language spoken on earth. The Shems desire a unity of place (the

Tower) so that they will no longer be scattered (Derrida *Otobriography* 100).

The desire for mastery and the will to communion that for Daneri the poem will make possible, can also be said to define the function of myth. Essentially concerned with revealing and founding, myth is a narrative of origins and a teleological representation of collective destiny. As such, myth is communitarian because it seeks to represent "the unique voice of the many" (Nancy 44). The jury that awards Daneri the National Prize for Literature recognizes the mythic function of his poem as the representation of the national community. Indeed, the desire for a unity of place as the locus of linguistic and communal union is evident in Daneri's poem "The Earth," where he proposes to make of the Aleph's simultaneity of time, a totalizing description of space:

Éste se proponía versificar toda la redondez del planeta; en 1941 ya había despachado una hectáreas del estado de Queensland, más de un kilómetro del curso de Ob, un gasómetro al norte de Veracruz (...). Me leyó ciertos laboriosos pasajes de la zona australiana de su poema. (OC 1: 620)

Lévi-Strauss defines myth as the turning of time into space, as a grid on which world, society and history are conferred meanings (145). In effect myth making is a putting in representation and figuring the world; for this reason it is considered foundational, concerned as it is with constructing and building. Myth, therefore, is a narrative that provides the ground on which to build and found the collective. And this meaning of ground and this ground of meaning is of course what Daneri believes he has found in the basement of his house on Garay Street. For Daneri the Aleph is the possibility of founding a national myth. Through his experience of the Aleph Daneri wishes to create a totalizing literature, a literature in which image and meaning will converge and whose very language will be the revelation of truth; of the truth of his poem as representative of the national community, as in Lugones's *Odas Seculares*.

However, "Borges's" experience of the Aleph sows confusion and forgetting on Daneri's desire for mastery. As we learn in the second part of the story, immediately after "Borges" sees the Aleph, the

house/tower is destroyed, as in the Genesis story and, as the only other "witness" to the Aleph, "Borges" is incapable of a successful translation; he is incapable of transmitting its Truth, as Daneri desires.

There is a gap between the time of the Aleph and the time of writing. For this reason "Borges" complains, "Arribo, ahora al inefable centro de mi relato, empieza, aquí, mi desesperación de escritor" (OC 1: 624). The Aleph functions like what Benjamin calls a sacred text in which the letter and sense (or meaning) cannot be disassociated. Or as in Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles, according to Benjamin: "In them the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an aeolian harp is touched by the wind (...). For this very reason Hölderlin's translations in particular are subject to the enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator with silence" (73-4). The Aleph thus marks the limit of Borgesian writing because it is simultaneously what cannot be translated (it thus functions like a proper, unique name) but also what requires translation, since it belongs to a common system, language.

As in "El escritor argentino y la tradición," where Borges speaks of translating Paseo Colón into the Rue de Toulon, the proper name theoretically should not be in need of translation, as it unambiguously names a concrete place or individual. However, in the essay Borges shows that writing presupposes a system of differences, which puts in doubt the notion of the proper. In this way, he decomposes the unity and uniqueness of the proper name Argentina, as well as its adjectivation into literature, culture and tradition. For the proponents of cultural nationalism such a translation would not be possible, as the nation's name, its appellation, is one and absolute. It is for this reason that Daneri believes that by writing his poem titled "La Tierra," he is, in effect, translating in a literal and original way, that is, he is writing an original, proper poem and for those same reasons, a national poem.

Closer to a Cervantes, Shakespeare or Hernández than to Carlos Argentino Daneri, in "El Aleph" "Borges" is exposed to the anguish of the post-Babelic writer. When translating from a foreign language

or into one, the writer experiences the strangeness of the language that he considers his own. Borges states:

Todo lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos cuyo ejercicio presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten, cómo transmitir [or translate, one might say] el infinito Aleph que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca? (*OC* 1: 624)

The problem that “Borges” speaks of here “exists” because the text to be translated no longer belongs to the original language or even to the language into which it will be translated. As J. Ritvo notes, because that text is subtracted from its “original” language, it begins to inhabit an uncertain “place” and the text which we thought was original, fixed and definitive, is in fact incomplete, unstable, full of silences and secrets and so is the translation (54-56).

The descent into the basement where the Aleph is housed does not discover, as Daneri would wish, any revelation for “Borges,” no truth, no sense that could be captured through writing. Indeed, as he states in “El escritor argentino y la tradición,” it is when he no longer seeks to find [encontrar] but, rather, to abandon himself that the “sense” is communicated, even though it is no longer a sense which depends on direction or final meaning. Language, “Borges” indicates, resists a total translation, even though the force of writing is the desire for communication, a desire that is also related to the desire for Beatriz. Desire for impossible reconciliations, for fascinating and monstrous unions. Why fascinating and monstrous? Because in the Aleph “Borges” finds the very possibility of being able to say everything (the dream of every writer) but also the unsayable itself—death—what cannot be articulated by language. But even given this situation, those desires of communication persist; they are not erased for being impossible or outside the reach of language.

As the second part of the story indicates (the postdata), the faint rumor of the Aleph, the narrator tells us, can still be heard in a column (the only left standing after the destruction of the Tower?) in a republic founded by nomads. The Aleph, intimates this part of the story, still functions as a horizon, although it is now exiled, outside the West (in Cairo), outside the register of phonetic and alphabetic writing and outside the parameters of a national territory (one supposes that a republic of nomads is an impossibility). The Aleph, that

secret and conjectural object whose contents are impossible to translate, marks the limit of Borgesian writing, marks the failure of language, but also the possibility of writing itself. Isn't the story that we read also titled "El aleph," even though this Aleph has been un-worked by forgetting, un-constructed through the traces and rests of a total and infinite knowledge?

No language is one language, Borges indicates repeatedly, the supposed original is always already dis-articulated, exiled, exposed to an infinite errancy. As the narrator states at the end of "El inmortal," the writer works with displaced and mutilated words. Translations then are fragments of fragments, and like the amphora in Benjamin's essay on translation, those fragments can never reconstruct a totality. Borges's writing thus follows the logic of the *pharmakon*; in his writing what we earlier called secret or mysterious is of course language itself, a language which promises to translate the spirit of what we call *patria*, but which simultaneously frustrates all possibility of proclaiming the existence of a national literature.

Silvia Rosman  
New York University

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *El idioma de los argentinos*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1994.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas I*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1989.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas IV*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1996.
- Contreras, Sandra. "Variaciones sobre el escritor argentino y la tradición." In S. Cueto, A. Giordano y otros, *Borges ocho ensayos*. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 1995.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Translated by B. Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Ear of the Other. Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. Christie McDonald, ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *A View from Afar*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Nancy, Jean Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Piglia, Ricardo. *Crítica y ficción*. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1990.
- Ritvo, Juan B. *La edad de la lectura*. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 1992.