

PLACE IN BORGES'S "EL ALEPH"
THE IRONY OF REVELATION



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People are delighted with irrationalism [...]; but for the most part they still talk and write all too "rationally."
(Heidegger, Nietzsche 1: 228)

At different stages in his career, Borges was interested in Kabbalah which he called "una suerte de metáfora de pensamiento" (OC 3: 274).¹ In his lecture "La cábala," for instance, he referenced his readings of the *Zohar*, a major literary work produced by Jewish mystics, and Gershom Scholem's *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*. In contrast to other religious mystics, kabbalists intend to decipher and interpret the world as a reflection of divine mysteries. This interweaving of two realms, the divine and the mundane, Scholem observes, is unique for Jewish mysticism. They converge in a biblical notion of place as a locus where God might be worshipped and apparently encountered and in that of an object-

¹ I would like to thank Efraín Kristal for his insightful comments throughout the writing of this essay.

place as revelation, a mystical experience by itself, a theological synonym for God.²

I would like to bring kabbalistic, phenomenological and deconstructionist approaches to bear on Borges' ironic elaboration of a biblical notion of 'place' in "El Aleph." I contend that in this text 'place' has a triple function. It is a locus where revelation happens, or is supposed to happen; a house of a mediocre poet which incorporates a false modality of the divine; and an impossible object-place which is a mystical experience by itself.

In his phenomenological study, Gaston Bachelard suggests that places stimulate imagination, and have stable symbolic functions in the life of an individual. In accord with this perspective, the story's protagonist, Carlos Daneri, firmly believes that he encounters 'his' Aleph, and thus directly communicates with the divine, a source of his poetic inspiration, in the cellar of his childhood home. Daneri's account of his vision is both recognized and ironized by the text, which in vein with kabbalistic and deconstructionist thoughts depicts revelation, as vacillating between presence and absence. These notions are found in both kabbalistic interpretations of the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and Derrida's metaphorical interpretation and use of the ambivalent Pharmakon.

"El Aleph," "uno de los puntos del espacio que contiene todos los puntos" (OC 1: 623), has been discovered by Carlos Deneri in the cellar of his childhood home. According to Bachelard, the cellar is "the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces" (18). He emphasizes that in the house one has been born, "dream is more powerful than thought" (16). Being located in the house which possesses "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams" (Bachelard 6), a cellar is a place which awakes the "unconscious" mind, stimulates the work of human imagination, and is a chronotope associated with the myste-

² In *Genesis* (see, particularly, 1: 9, 22: 3, 28: 11, 28:19), place, *makom*, is a locale where God might be worshipped, in post biblical Hebrew and Aramaic, place became a theological synonym for God, as expressed in Talmudic sayings "He is a place of His world," and "His world is His place" (Jammer 26).

rious.³ As Bachelard observes, "when we dream [in a cellar], we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths" (18), and he continues "the cellar dream irrefutably increases reality" (20).

In line with Bachelard's phenomenological approach, Daneri characterizes the Aleph as "*inajenable*" as an imaginary complement to existent reality; and refers to it using the possessive pronouns "mi" (623) or "mío" (625). Daneri himself admits that an individual's ability to imagine, which he believes he possesses, brings the Aleph into presence. As Naomi Lindstrom points out, "the Aleph suggests that the magic sphere is brought into being by force of desire and enjoys no existence unless sought" (55-56).

Daneri's perception of the cellar of his home as a place for the revelation of subjective truths and a child's memories also corresponds to its symbolic functioning, as defined by Bachelard. Recalling his memories, Daneri tells the narrator "Borges" about his mysterious discovery of the magic Aleph—the world in its totality, which dates back to his childhood:

yo lo descubrí en la niñez[...]. La escalera del sótano es empinada, mis tíos me tenían prohibido el descenso, pero alguien dijo que había *un mundo en el sótano*. Se refería, lo supe después, a un baúl, pero yo entendí que *había un mundo*. Bajé *secretamente*, rodé por la escalera vedada, caí. Al abrir los ojos, vi *el Aleph*. (623; italics added)

For Daneri, the businessmen's intention to destroy his house means the destruction of his most intimate universe and causes his anger and despair: "—¡La casa de mis padres, la vieja casa inveterada de la calle Garay!— repitió, quina olvidando su pesar en la melodía" (622). Also, in their conversation, Daneri confesses to the narrator "con esa voz llana, impersonal, a que solemos recurrir para confiar algo muy íntimo" (622), that he needs the house because the Aleph it contains is necessary for him to complete the poem that he has been working on. The narrator refers to his words: "dijo que para terminar el poema le era indispensable la casa, pues en un ángulo

³ Mikhail Bakhtin defined the chronotope as follows: "We will give the name chronotope (literary, "time-space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84).

del sótano había un Aleph" (622-623). In this way, Daneri's account of the discovery of his Aleph as possible only in the cellar of his childhood home, exemplifies the psychological aspect of place as discussed by Bachelard.

Irony, however, as a ludic and demystifying discursive strategy, challenges the stable symbolic connection between the place and the individual described by Bachelard and maintained in Daneri's account of his 'mystical' experience. Indeed, both Daneri's 'creative process,' as well as its result, the poem "La Tierra" inspired by the vision in the cellar, a stimulator of human imagination, are the objects of satire. In contrast to Daneri's own belief, Borges's readers realize that the poem does not reveal the character's imagination nor incorporate his fantasy, but rather only contains observations framed within the conventions of Spanish prosody, which the author recites to the narrator with "sonora satisfacción":

He visto, como el griego, las urbes de los hombres,
 Los trabajos, los días de varia luz, el hambre;
 No corrijo los hechos, no falseo los nombres,
 Pero el *voyage* que narro, es ... *autour de ma chambre*. (619)⁴

The conflict of beliefs evokes irony. As Wayne C. Booth observes "we are alerted whenever we notice an unmistakable conflict between the beliefs expressed and the beliefs we hold and suspect the author of holding" (15). Indeed, Daneri is a character who belongs to an ironic mode, a talentless yet ambitious poet whose self-appointed task to describe the universe in its entirety is mocked by the text. According to Northrop Frye, a character belongs to the ironic mode "[i]f inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity" (34). Daneri's frustration, caused, as he explains, by the impossibility of finishing his poetic description of the universe in its totality because his house and his Aleph will be destroyed, provokes

⁴ Charles Mears, the protagonist of Rudyard Kipling's "The Finest Story in the World," a story which Borges creatively translated into Spanish (see Kristal 34-35), can be seen as a possible source of inspiration for Borges's Daneri. Both characters "suffered from aspirations," which have been "all literary" (Kipling 106).

laughter. Moreover, defying the owner's expectation, as the narrator mentions in "posdata," after the destruction of the house, Daneri becomes particularly prolific and successful with his work. As the narrator comments,

... a los seis meses de la demolición del inmueble de la calle Garay, la Editorial Procusto no se dejó arredar por la longitud del considerable poema y lanzó al mercado una selección de 'trozos argentinos.' Huelga repetir lo ocurrido; Carlos Argentino Daneri recibió el Segundo Premio Nacional de Literatura.[...]Hace ya mucho tiempo que no consigo ver a Daneri; los diarios dicen que pronto nos dará otro volumen. Su afortunada pluma (no entorpecida ya por el Aleph) se ha consagrado a versificar los epítomes del doctor Acevedo Díaz. (627)

Further, though Daneri considers himself an owner of the "holy" place where an impossible object-place, the source of his poetic inspiration, "el aleph," can be encountered, his communication with the divine remains doubtful for the readers of Borges's story. On the one hand, Daneri's self-confident intent to reduce the distance between himself and the divine the "aleph," "pura divinidad," (626) by claiming to possess it in his house on the street Garay, evokes a burlesque *ethos*. On the other hand, Daneri's encounter with the divine can be interpreted as an act of will and subjective truth. As Scholem notes, "[e]ach man has his own unique access to Revelation. Authority no longer resides in a single unmistakable 'meaning' of the divine communication, but in its infinite capacity for taking on new forms" (13). Support for both of these assumptions can be found in the epigraphs to the story. One of them is from Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*:

But they will teach us that Eternity is the Standing still of the Present Time, a *Nuncstans* (as the Schools call it); which neither they, nor any else understand, no more than they would a *Hic stans* for an Infinite greatness of Place. (*Leviathan*, IV, 46).⁵

⁵ In my analysis I will refer Hobbes's *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), where a quote used by Borges appears on p. 643.

In this quote “an Infinite greatness of Place” stands for “the Incomprehensible Nature of God” (Hobbes 693), which remains distant and enigmatic. Moreover, Hobbes suggests that “inhabiting” the divine diminishes it. In the Part IV, entitled “Of the Kingdome of Darknesse,” the English author, for instance, observes:

To worship God , in some peculiar Place[...] implies a new Relation by Appropriation to God[...]But to worship God, as inanimating , or inhabiting, *such Image, or place; that is to say, an infinite substance in a finite place is Idolatry: for such finite Gods, are but Idols of the brain, nothing real.* (692; italics added)

Likewise, the narrator refers to the discovery in the cellar, which he and Daneri share, as “un falso Aleph” (627), for the divine cannot be reduced to a finite object “el diámetro sería de dos o tres centímetros,” which human beings can possess and inhabit. Another reason for the narrator's characterization of Daneri's Aleph as false can be found in a source familiar to Borges, Baruj Spinoza's concept of the Divine, probably influenced by Hobbes' idea of the parallelism between the notions of God and Place, both of which are infinite and not totally comprehensible by Man. In his seminal lecture “Baruj Spinoza,” Borges perceptively observes that, for Spinoza, God is as infinite as the universe, “an infinite circumference” which has “an infinite number of radii, but only two are known to us: space and time” (282). Daneri's Aleph, however, “uno de los puntos del espacio” which contains “el inconcebible universo” (623), does not possess a temporal dimension. This also makes Daneri's impossible object a false embodiment of the divine, which in its “true” forms exists in all time frames.

The character's mystical experience, nevertheless, might be explained as an act of personal will. This option is suggested by the epigraph from *Hamlet*: “O God!, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a King of infinite space” (II, 2). Indeed, evoking the prince's desperate aspirations “to possess the infinite” while recognizing his restricted condition, this quote alludes to the human perception of the world as a matter of will, a vision which is in ac-

cord with Arthur Schopenhauer's ideas shared by the Borges-author.⁶ In a way similar to Hamlet, who does not refer to the mimetic Denmark but rather to its metaphysical presence which is both a reflection and creation of his own mind, Daneri creates his own access to the remote world, where the divine and the mundane interweave, and which he cannot help falsifying. In this way, both implicitly referring to and challenging Bachelard's assumption about the stable symbolic functions of places, Borges's text ironically elaborates a biblical notion of the place as a locale where the possibility of encountering the divine remains open.

The ludic affinity between the representation of the Aleph in Borges's story and its biblical precursor, as well as the use of a narrative strategy which interrelates opposites, also suggest that Daneri's impossible object oscillates between presence and absence. As Scholem points out, the Aleph is "pregnant with infinite meaning," yet it does not carry any specific meaning; it is "a spiritual root of all other letters and [...] hence all other elements of human discourse" (30). To hear the Aleph, however, is to hear next to nothing: it is a preparation for all audible language but in itself conveys no sound. According to Rabbi Mendel Torum, Scholem observes, the actual revelation to Israel consisted only of the aleph. This statement, Scholem asserts, transforms the revelation on Mount Sinai into a mystical revelation, "it had to be translated into human language and that is what Moses did" (30). He further suggests: "But the truly divine element in this revelation, the immense *aleph*, was not in itself sufficient to express the divine message, and in itself it was more than the community could bear" (31).

The 'revelation' in the house on Garay street can be seen as a comic parallel with that on Mount Sinai. The basement in Daneri's house becomes a location where revelation apparently occurs due to the presence of the "impossible object," a place which embodies the spirit of the divine/mystical experience, the burning bush which is never consumed, and the Aleph which contains the infinite within

⁶ Admiring Schopenhauer's book *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Borges points out: "Creo que es el que ha dado, de algún modo, digamos, la cifra, la clave para entender el mundo" (qtd. in Balderston et. al. 294).

it. The comic effect is produced “by transposing the natural expression of an idea into another key” (Bergson 140). Referring to the whole event of the discovery of the Aleph as “una especie de ‘oximoron’,” Ana María Barrenechea points out that the use of irony as a discursive strategy in the story makes “la presencia del planeta concentrada en un punto[...] cómicamente disparatada” (114).

The interrelatedness of opposites is Scholem’s definition of the letter aleph with its mystical connotations as well as in the characters’ experience in Borges’s story evokes deconstructionist use of the term “pharmakon.”⁷ Derrida first refers to the word “pharmakon,” which in Greek means both “remedy” and “poison” in his essay “Plato’s Pharmacy,” included in *Dissemination*. The French philosopher finds this ambiguous word, the meanings of which display a contradiction, particularly interesting and useful for the deconstructionists in their attempt to show that the inherent failure in Western and absence, etc. For Derrida, the word ‘pharmakon’ is “extremely apt for the task of tying all metaphysics is in the either/or nature of its dialectics, such as truth and falsity, presence the threads[...] together” (96). He asserts that “one could follow the word pharmakon as a guiding thread within the whole Platonic problematic of the mixture” (128). The role of the pharmakon as *fil conducteur* in Derrida’s philosophical essay is analogous to its function in Borges’s story, which both celebrates and undermines the existence of an Aleph, and in this way echoes Derrida’s observation that books “of a philosophical nature invariably include both the thesis and the antithesis, the rigorous pro and con of a doctrine” (qtd. in González-Echevarría 231).

Evoking Scholem’s description of mystical revelation which hardly can be communicated by human beings and the interrelatedness of opposites explicit in Derrida’s metaphorical interpretation of the ambivalent pharmakon, both Daneri and the narrator can hardly describe the Aleph. Indeed, skeptical about Daneri’s “ineptas ideas”

⁷ Borges and Derrida similarly use the foreign words “el aleph” and “pharmakon,” respectively, the ambivalent meanings of which become organizing principles of “El Aleph” and *Dissemination*.

(618) and his pseudo-artistic creation, the narrator nevertheless accepts for the moment the existence of the Aleph when, after following Daneri's advice, he descends to the cellar and later attempts to describe his experience.⁸ The narrator's account of his attempt to capture the totality of the universe incorporated in "el microcosmo de alquimistas y cabalistas" (624) reveals both presence and absence: the tiny Aleph, "el diámetro sería de dos o tres centímetros" incorporates in itself "el espacio cósmico [...] *sin disminución del tamaño*" (625; italics added) and brings it all into a center of simultaneity. The pharmakon-like ambivalent experience explains the narrator's incapability to communicate his vision, as he confesses: "¿cómo transmitir a los otros el infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca?" (624). The narrator "Borges" refers to his experience as the "instante gigantesco" full of contradictions, when limited becomes unrestricted and simultaneously multifocused: "Cada cosa [...] era infinitas cosas, porque yo claramente la veía desde todos los puntos del universo. [...] Vi todos los espejos del planeta y ninguno me reflejó" (625). The correspondence between the names of the author and the narrator, recurrent in Borges's fiction, provokes a double effect. On the one hand, it evokes a burlesque *ethos*, as Bakhtin also mentions, "[p]lay with a posited author is also characteristic of the comic novel [...] a heritage from Don Quixote" (312). On the other hand, it emphasizes the author's personal preoccupations, described by Barrenechea as "la incomunicabilidad de las experiencias no compartidas" and "inabarcabilidad" (117) of the universe, of the infinite.

The story ends with the narrator questioning both the existence of that Aleph and his vision: "¿Existe ese Aleph en lo íntimo de una piedra? ¿Lo he visto cuando vi todas las cosas y lo he olvidado? [...] yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo" (627). The rhetorical nature of this interrogative leaves the reader with a variety of interpretations as to where the concepts of the Aleph, "el En sof" (627),

⁸ This episode can also be interpreted as a ludic allusion to Dante's "Paradiso" where the pilgrim is exposed to a reality he cannot express: "In that heaven which partakes most of His light/ I have been, and have beheld such things as who/ Comes down thence has no wit nor power to write" (4-6).

and the Pharmakon, “the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference” (Derrida 127), converge. Like “el aleph” in both Jewish mysticism and in Borges’s story, “[t]he pharmakon,” Derrida writes, “keeps itself forever in reserve[...]. We will watch it infinitely promise itself and endlessly vanish through concealed doorways that shine like mirrors and open onto a labyrinth. It is a store of deep background that we are calling *pharmacy*” (127-128).

To conclude, a ludic use of the phenomenological symbolism of the house and the cellar in staging the characters’ encounter with the Aleph can be considered a parodic reference to the mystical revelation as described by kabbalists as well as its insightful interpretation by Borges inspired by Jewish mystical thought. Both Borges’s ironic elaboration of the biblical notion of place as a locale where revelation occurs, and of the notion of object-place as an embodiment of the divine, manifests the lack of a single ‘unmistakable’ meaning of revelation and shows place to be a stage for a mystical experience which is “fundamentally amorphous” (Scholem 8) and closed to precise definition and univocal interpretation. This approach to the notion of place can be considered another example of the influence of kabbalistic thought on Borges’s writings.

Being also in vein with the phenomenological theory developed by Bachelard, Borges’s object-place, the Aleph, is both brought to existence by, and acts as a reflector of human imagination. The coexistence of ‘familiar’/‘realistic’ places and a “magic” place/object in “El Aleph” illustrates Bachelard’s observation that a ‘house’ is a “cradle”(7) which cherishes human daydreams, and also manifests a symbolic functioning of place as defined by Jewish mystics. Indeed, in his study of the symbols of the Kabbalah, Scholem points out the importance of the psychological aspect of traditional symbols as “means of expressing an experience that is in itself expressionless” (22), an observation literalized in Borges’s text.

The phenomenological approach to place as a symbol, however, is both recognized and ironized in the story. The irony undermines the stable symbolic connections between the place and the individual described by Bachelard, and displays the intellectual affinity between Borges’s texts and the deconstructionist celebration of the

play of differences that denies any idea of stability. The simultaneous perception of the universe in its totality becomes possible only as an act of subjective truth; it is a matter of a personal will and belief, closed to any logical proofs and objective explanation. Revelation is present, and at the same time dissipated, by the ludic movement of the pharmakon, which suggests that an endless search is the only way to find it, to access the divine: "God is in the making. Dios está haciéndose" (Shaw qtd. in Borges OC 3: 273).

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