

## GARAY STREET AND BEING-IN-THE-WORLD: HUMAN SPATIALITY IN BORGES'S "EL ALEPH"

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The story "El Aleph" is fundamentally spatial in its concerns, and offers a range of insights into not only the nature of human spatiality itself but also the ways in which space and literary expression relate to each other. Despite this, the profound implications of the spatial theme in the story have not by any means been explored adequately in commentaries on Borges's work, and what the story reveals about the role of place and space in literature has not been fully elucidated.<sup>1</sup>

One way of expressing the challenge posed by "El Aleph" is to say that it invites us to reflect on the nature of spatiality by imagining a universe that is "placeless," in a manner that resembles the way the same author's attempts in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" to explore the nature of the material world by positing the existence of a world in which there are no material objects. "El Aleph" could be said to go further than the latter story, however, since, in tandem with an intellectual exploration of placelessness, it offers us the emotional drama of an understated, but still poignant, love story. These two dimensions of the narrative are not kept separate, however; rather, the themes of "spatial presence" and locatedness are woven into the fabric of the narrator's expression of his very human longing for his beloved Beatriz. From the multiple references to Beatriz's portraits,

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1 This article is a slightly altered version of the first chapter of my book, *Borges and Space*, reproduced with permission of the publishers, and enriched by the discussion that took place after it was delivered as a guest lecture at the Borges Center in the University of Pittsburgh in February 2012; my thanks to Daniel Balderston for that invitation.

to the glimpses of her letters that “Borges” gets when he sees the Aleph, to the fact that Beatriz’s house on Garay Street is itself a pretext for him to experience something of her presence, the narrative repeatedly emphasizes the links between heart and mind, between the subjectivity of our feelings and the objective fact of the existence of every object and entity in the universe.

In a summary of the early Heidegger’s views on spatiality, Schatzki explains that the German philosopher recognized the fact that we are not “encapsulated in an inner sphere standing over against the world,” as the Cartesian view of human existence had seemed to suggest, but are human *by dint of being* “in the world”:

[T]he entity that each of us is is, essentially, *in-the-world*. The central constitutive feature of human existence, of the being of the entity whose self-understanding is worked out by living, is *being-in-the-world*. (16)

Thus, Heidegger’s use of the term “Dasein” comes to be a way of zoning in on that notion of “being-in-the-world,” and refers to a kind of being that relates to the world as a meaningful totality and for which the fact of being itself is an issue, as it is for humans. I want to suggest that the treatment of place and space in “El Aleph” is closely related to this concern with “being-in-the-world,” since the story consistently draws attention to what it means to be in the world, and the angst-ridden protagonist, “Borges,” articulates a set of longings associated with a desire to understand both his own experience of being in the world and the capacity of human beings to relate their awareness of their own spatial reality to the ambitions and emotions that drive them.

In the story, the ground is laid for our narrator’s discovery of the Aleph through references to a literary creation, a long poem being composed by Carlos Argentino Daneri, in whose house the Aleph is located. We are informed that Daneri’s poem constitutes the latter’s attempt to describe the whole world in verse – to “*versificar toda la redondez del planeta*” (1: 620) – and, furthermore, the narrator tells us that Daneri is keen to share his creation with him. When Daneri recites extracts from the poem, called “La Tierra,” we are able to appreciate its dismal quality, and the narrator himself is happy to emphasize just how poor a poem it is:

*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. (1: 619)*

These rather ludicrous lines and others recited by Daneri are tolerated politely by our protagonist, who is, after all, a guest in Daneri's house at the time. The critique the narrator offers of the work is limited to a few laconic comments on the venture, however. He refers to it as "tedioso," while his host, the poet himself, on the other hand, is very enthusiastic about his own work, and comments favorably on what he sees as its many good qualities.

The poem Daneri is writing has a spatial theme, since it is a description of the entire planet. It arises from his professed belief that, in modern times, the relationship between people and the world has been transformed through technology. No longer, it is argued, do we have to go out into the world and explore it in order to experience it; rather, given the existence of the telephone and telegraph and other modern inventions, the world can be experienced simply by staying at home and letting it come to us. Daneri's view, as the narrator informs us, is that the twentieth century had transformed the fable of Muhammad and the mountain: "las montañas, ahora, convergían sobre el moderno Mahoma" (1: 618).

Daneri argues that actual voyages are now redundant, given the nature of modern technology, since that technology can now bring the world into the home of the traveller. In the story, Borges discovers the Aleph, which is presented as if it were a kind of ultimate technological marvel, since, in terms that prefigure modern virtual encyclopedias, we are told that it contains within it a representation of everything that there is in the world. In turn, that discovery is recounted in a manner that emphasizes that it is the result of a journey, a set of movements described for us by the narrator, culminating in the descent into the cellar where the discovery is made.

The response of Borges to his encounter with the Aleph is ambivalent. His enumeration of the wonders that he beholds suggests his awe; but it is an awe tinged with confusion and perplexity, that soon yields to a wish to reject the Aleph and what it stands for. The story ends with a series of comments which question the authenticity of this Aleph and which suggest that a truer, more valid Aleph may be found elsewhere, perhaps in the

Amr Mosque in Cairo, “en el interior de una de las columnas de piedra que rodean el patio central...” (1: 627). This reference to an alternative Aleph, and to other objects that are said to “contain” the entire universe – such as a mirror mentioned in the *Arabian Nights*, or Merlin’s “universal mirror” which is referred to in *The Faerie Queen* – continues the theme of the quest that is at the heart of this story, a quest that is clearly not complete when the story is brought to a conclusion. While the quest is not announced at the start of the story, we are made aware that the Borges character is looking for *something* as he constantly returns to Beatriz’s former residence.

As a trope, the association between spatial location and the discovery of meanings recurs frequently in many contexts in Borges’s stories, often mentioned as an apparently minor element in a story that is ostensibly based around other ideas. This is the case, for example, of the story “La lotería en Babilonia,” where the “Company” is depicted as depositing secret messages in special places which the citizens of Babilonia may find, and which then become part of the set of sacred writings of the Babilonians. Similarly, in order for the magician to access special powers in “Las ruinas circulares,” he must go to a special place, the “lugar que requería su invencible propósito” (1: 451), in which he would be able carry out his magic ritual of creating a man. The idea that special knowledge and powers can only be acquired by reaching a special place is not unique to Borges, of course, and the quest theme in particular is found in literatures from all parts of the world, but it is interesting to note how often, and how explicitly, Borges makes reference to this particular “chronotopic motif,” to use the Bakhtinian term.

One of the reasons why Borges is interested in the idea may well be because he wants to examine the relationship between “external” voyages of discovery undertaken by his characters as they move from place to place and internal voyages of self-discovery. The suggestion is that the more we attempt to grapple with outside realities, to apprehend the material universe that surrounds us, the more we actually reveal our own selves, an idea which is not unconnected with the tenets of idealist philosophers such as George Berkeley, Arthur Schopenhauer and other thinkers much admired by Borges. This correspondence between external and internal is a constant concern of Borges’s, and it is frequently raised, either implicitly or explicitly, in his writings, not least in relation to spatial themes.

These contrasts reflect the sense of unease associated with the way in which spatial locations can be seen as either lived space or abstractions. Borges often communicates this uncertainty in his writings, on the one hand seeing location – in time or space – as the outcome of chance, a merely abstract affair which is the result of happenstance, so that the place I am in could be anywhere, and, on the other hand, suggesting that the particular spatiotemporal location I am placed in has a very significant impact on both who I am and how I behave. We need only think of the significance of Dahlmann's crossing Rivadavia Street and heading South in the story "El Sur" to see the relation that can be established between the fact of being in a particular place and the sense that a character has of his (or, very rarely, her) own identity. Even in "El Aleph," the Borges character feels the need to keep returning to the Viterbo household, apparently in an attempt to relate his sense of himself to the history of his love for Beatriz. It seems to be as much a matter of establishing the parameters of his own identity – through greater knowledge of how he relates both to Carlos Daneri and to his deceased love – as for any other reason, that he goes back to Garay Street.

Language issues are also related to spatial knowledge, in "El Aleph" and in other Borges stories. On seeing the Aleph, the narrator immediately reflects on the challenge presented by having to convey in language – and, thus, over time – what at that moment he was apprehending instantaneously. All spatial realities are compressed into the Aleph, although they are not compacted, so that all become visible simultaneously; the challenge for the narrator/viewer is to convey some sense of that single experience using words.<sup>2</sup> According to the narrator, the danger is that the result may be a successive enumeration of descriptions that end up as a series of words on paper, so divorced from the quasi-mystical experience that he has lived through that it threatens to debase that experience. The dichotomy here is twofold: on the one hand, there is the contrast between the lived experience of seeing the Aleph and the attempt to recount that experience; on the other hand, there is an implicit suggestion that writing is inferior to life. Perhaps there is a danger that the execrable drivel that

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2 Terry Smith (personal communication) has pointed out that the notion that one would be able to see multiple scenes simultaneously is an illusion; to *see* the images, we would need to *look at* each of them successively, in a manner not unlike the way we might describe them verbally.

Carlos Daneri produces may be all there is, that nothing more valuable than that is ever really produced in words, and that the string of verbal signs that make up the description of Borges's experience may amount to something as worthless as the apparently endless stream of contrived verses that Daneri concocts in his attempt to summarize the universe in words. The entity that is the Aleph exists in space and, if we can identify the correct spatial location to place ourselves in, we can instantly access all knowledge of spatial reality. That experience transcends what we may be able to capture using mere human language; even good analogies are dismissed by the narrator, since they would mean that his account would then end up being "contaminado de literatura, de falsedad" (1: 624). The limits of language, and the limited capacity of words to capture transcendental meanings, are being referred to here.

"El Aleph" also exemplifies the way in which the theme of spatiality is linked to issues of memory and personal anguish. In the early part of the story, much attention is paid by the narrator to the location in which he finds himself, and this is directly related to his wish to come to grips with the loss of Beatriz. We first encounter him at Constitución in Buenos Aires on the morning of her death, where he notes the way in which the advertising hoardings have been changed already, an indication of how life will go on regardless of her absence. She is depicted as being left behind by the world, by the universe: by this means, the narrator realizes that "el incesante y vasto universo ya se apartaba de ella" and that "ese cambio era el primero de una serie infinita" (1: 617). The pain that the narrator feels at her loss is given expression here in the "objective correlative" of the image of the advertisement for cigarettes that has now appeared on the hoarding, but it is accompanied by a direct expression of emotion on the part of the narrator: "el hecho me dolió..." (1: 617).

The first dilemma the narrator faces, alluded to in the opening paragraph of the story, is whether or not to go to Beatriz's family home in Garay Street on her birthday, to visit her father and her cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri. Thus, the theme of place and displacement is signalled as being of central importance from the start. The lament for the loss of Beatriz is linked straight away to the decision to visit the house, although the narrator's observation of the changed billboard occurs on the day of her death in February and the visit does not take place until the anniver-

sary of her birth in April. The compression of time and space achieved by including all of these references – February, April; Constitución Square, the house in Garay Street – within a few lines of each other in one paragraph at the beginning of the tale serves to foreshadow the compression that is associated with the discovery of the Aleph at the story’s climax. It also links the personal anguish that is recounted to the spatial realities that are the backdrop for the events. While time is explicitly referred to on any number of occasions – references to time passing and the gradual erosion of the memories of Beatriz that the character Borges experiences – spatial entities (the advertising hoarding; the house) and spatial locations (the square; Garay Street) are foregrounded too, and both time and space are associated with his emotional trauma. Thus, while the events of the story reach a climax with the appearance of an imaginary object which we are invited to believe in, the Aleph, both the temporal and the spatial circumstances that are described in the early part of the story are presented to us in the most concrete terms possible, and an essential link is forged between them and the narrator’s inner turmoil.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the theme of spatiality in this story. It is already signalled before the story proper begins by the inclusion of two epigraphs that address the issue. Both Hamlet’s reference to being “bounded in a nutshell” and the quotation from Hobbes’s *Leviathan* making reference to the incomprehensibility of the notion of “an Infinite greatness of Place” clearly flag the central intellectual concern of the story, which is to come to grips with the idea of how all places may come together into one. When combined with the expression of the narrator’s sadness at Beatriz’s death in the opening paragraphs, they also hint at the connection between this central emotional concern and the key idea of the Aleph. The narrator’s desire to come to terms with the loss of his loved one and to understand the processes by which memories live on, or fade, is directly related to that sudden and magical representation of all possible scenes in the universe in the Aleph by recourse to notions of spatiality: presence and absence, the ineluctable mutability of spatial entities, and the relationship between where we are and what we experience.

The instructions that Daneri gives when informing Borges about how to see the Aleph are very detailed. He tells him: “Te acuestas en el piso de baldosas y fijas los ojos en el décimonono escalón de la pertinente escal-

era... A los pocos minutos ves el Aleph... La almohada es humildosa ... pero si la levanto un solo centímetro, no verás ni una pizca...” (1: 624). This account of the precise maneuvering in the basement required in order to be able to witness the spectacle offered by the Aleph has its counterpart in the detailed account of the precise times and locations of the narrator’s visits to the family home in the early part of the story, and the former is prefigured by the latter. Such prefiguring reinforces the links between the two, thereby conveying an increased sense of the viability of the phenomenon being described, that is, the idea that all outward realities can somehow be encapsulated in this orb beneath the staircase. Hence, the effect of the appearance of the Aleph is strengthened, and the sense that it could represent a potentially real phenomenon is reinforced.

In turn, the implication of all this is that, if you wish for it hard enough, you may just find that the impossible is possible: the mechanisms for subverting the laws of physics may exist and may be discovered. Just as explorers in former times could come back from their travels with surprising news of radically different realities, of phenomena that did not correspond to the norms of the home society and yet enriched it, so too it is conceivable that, in the basement of a house in an ordinary street in Buenos Aires, you could discover the magic orb that was the Aleph. The fact that a relationship is established in the reader’s mind between the positioning associated with the vision of the Aleph and the references to the place and time of the narrator’s visits to the Viterbo household, along with the emphasis placed on Daneri’s literary attempts at geographical codification, means that a direct link can be made between the emotional dimension of the story and the intellectual puzzle that is the Aleph. After all, Borges is distraught at his bereavement, the loss of Beatriz; this is why the discovery of the Aleph could turn out to be so meaningful for him, and why it seems to offer him some hope of happiness. The Aleph presents a vision of the multitudinous universe, from seas teeming with fish, to a cobweb in the middle of a pyramid, to a copy of the first translation of Pliny into English; but among the scenes that it presents to the unfortunate narrator are also some acutely painful personal objects, including the corpse of Beatriz and some obscene letters written by her to her cousin. These enable him to have an insight into unwelcome aspects of Beatriz, which ultimately constitute disillusionment for him, so that what started out as the prospect



of altering the world in order to be able to cope with his grief becomes a source of disappointment and leaves him dismayed and sceptical. A key feature of the story's originality is this conjunction of the universal and the particular, the combination of the classic voyager's account of the wonders of the world and the poignant expression of unrequited love and frustrated passion. The foregrounding of the spatial theme helps make this possible, since it gives expression to the forlorn lover's longing for the world to be different from the way it is, by allowing all spatial realities to come together into one, the *hic-stans* which is the Aleph.

The way in which the Aleph is presented suggests that it affords the viewer a vision of all that exists in the universe, that it is indeed Hobbes's "infinite greatnesse of Place".<sup>3</sup> In fact, however, it is a much less comprehensive vision than it appears to be at first. There is a long list of phenomena set out by Borges in his description of what he sees:

Vi el populoso mar, vi el alba y la tarde, vi las muchedumbres de América, vi una plateada telaraña en el centro de una negra pirámide, vi un laberinto roto (era Londres), vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo, vi todos los espejos del planeta y ninguno me reflejó, vi en un traspatio de la calle Soler las mismas baldosas que hace treinta años vi en el zaguán de una casa en Fray Bentos, vi racimos, nieve, tabaco, vetas de metal, vapor de agua... (1: 625)

Yet, all of these entities belong to a fairly familiar, predominantly Western world, with an occasional reference to the Middle East. What is missing from the list are not only scenes from a broad range of cultural settings but, most notably, any sense of a universe beyond the confines of the planet Earth. We may be witnessing scenes drawn from the various corners of the globe, but it is a set of scenes that is limited to the known human world, and no attempt is made to convey a sense of the universe beyond.

3 Note that what Hobbes says in *Leviathan* (1651) is that the "hic-stans" is an impossibility: "For the meaning of eternity, they will not have it to be an endless succession of time; for then they should not be able to render a reason how Gods will and pre-ordaining of things to come should not be before His prescience of the same, as the efficient cause before the effect, or agent before the action; nor of many other their bold opinions concerning the incomprehensible nature of God. But they will teach us that eternity is the standing still of the present time, a nunc-stans, as the Schools call it; which neither they nor any else understand, no more than they would a hic-stans for an infinite greatnesse of place" (468).

Not even the moon is referred to.<sup>4</sup> The effect of this is to invite us to wonder about the limits of the universe, to reflect on the nature of the place that we inhabit when we think of it in cosmic terms. Daneri's attempt to "versify the entire planet" is superseded by the vision described by Borges when he witnesses the Aleph, but that very progression from silly iteration of individual descriptions to all-encompassing compression of infinite space leads inevitably to a more profound questioning of the physical and cognitive limits within which human beings live out their existence. There is a shift being suggested here, a transition from an inductive accumulation of parts to a totalized vision of infinity. The former is Daneri's approach to literary composition, wryly mocked by Borges when he lists for us some of what the poet has managed to "dispatch" in his cloistered dedication to his task:

[E]n 1941 ya había despachado unas hectáreas del estado de Queensland, más de un kilómetro del curso del Ob, un gasómetro al norte de Veracruz, las principales casas de comercio de la parroquia de la Concepción, la quinta de Mariana Cambaceres de Alvear... (1: 620)

On the other hand, what Borges himself is interested in, and impressed by, is the supposed breakthrough represented by the discovery of the Aleph and the fact that this appears to offer the hope of achieving completeness, a type of quasi-mystical union with all that there is in the universe.

This story hinges on the idea of the importance of being in the right place at the right time, the notion that we must position ourselves correctly and precisely in space in order to be able to access special powers or achieve the vision we are looking for. But what is then achieved is a vision that transcends the ordinary spatial parameters we are familiar with in our dealings with the world we inhabit. As in several other Borges stories – most notably, perhaps, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "La biblioteca

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4 It is worth noting that Borges's 1959 poem "La luna" expresses this very idea. The man referred to in that poem undertook the task of summarising the entire universe in a book (composed in verse, like Daneri's *La tierra*). On its completion, he realized his mistake:

Gracias iba a rendir a la fortuna  
cuando al alzar los ojos vio un bruñido  
disco en el aire y comprendió, aturdido,  
que se había olvidado de la luna. (2: 196)

de Babel” – we undertake an intellectual excursus into an “other-world” where the normal scientific rules and laws do not apply. On the one hand, this suggests visions of utopias and dystopias, even if the worlds conjured up in a Borges story are not presented as if they were places to escape to or escape from. Rather, they are representations of *difference*, including being the depiction of a different way of understanding the world, one that eschews the basic laws of physics that we take for granted: the Aleph, for example, subverts the assumption that space cannot be compressed.

It is this dimension of Borges’s work that has helped to encourage any number of philosophers and social geographers to formulate theoretical conceptions of spatiality that push out the boundaries of our common assumptions and traditional interpretations of space and place. Most famously, Michel Foucault developed the concept of “heterotopia,” at least partly inspired by a passage in Borges’s “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins,” an essay published in the collection *Otras inquisiciones* (1952). The concept that is discussed in this essay is relevant here since it highlights the desire to transcend classic accounts of spatiality in the context of questioning standard ways of thinking about reality, just as the concept of the Aleph does, and as the worlds described in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” or “La biblioteca de Babel” do. Foucault (xv) recounts how he was made to laugh by Borges’s references to a supposed entry in an apocryphal Chinese encyclopaedia that classified animals into the following categories:

(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies...<sup>5</sup>

Foucault’s response leads him to suggest that the most disturbing feature of this classification is the way in which it subverts our normal patterns of thinking. This comes about not because the categories include both the real (“tame”; “sucking pigs”; “that from a long way off look like flies,” etc.)

5 The original reads as follows: “(a) pertenecientes al Emperador, (b) embalsamados, (c) amaestrados, (d) lechones, (e) sirenas, (f) fabulosos, (g) perros sueltos, (h) incluidos en esta clasificación, (i) que se agitan como locos, (j) innumerables, (k) dibujados con un pincel finísimo de pelo de camello, (l) etcétera, (m) que acaban de romper el jarrón, (n) que de lejos parecen moscas” (2: 86).

and the unreal (“sirens”; “fabulous”; “innumerable”), but because one of the categories comprises all of the others, that is, category (h), “included in the present classification,” and this therefore subverts the notion that there could be any common ground where these categories could co-exist, where the things could even be listed together. As Foucault puts it:

The monstrous quality that runs through Borges’s enumeration consists . . . in the fact that the common ground on which such meetings are possible has itself been destroyed. What is impossible is not the propinquity of the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible. (xvi)

Foucault’s reading of “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins” reflects the textual rhetoric of “El Aleph” in that it reminds us that the only context in which it is possible to contemplate the phenomena conjured up by Borges (the writer) is ultimately that of the story itself as it lives in the reader’s mind. It is only in the imagined reality of the story “El Aleph” that we can envisage such an entity as the Aleph existing. Just as the categories listed in the Chinese encyclopedia include a self-referential category that has the effect of subverting any possible common-sense interpretations of the classification offered there, the self-referentiality and reciprocity that characterize “El Aleph” serve to test the limits of the human ability to grasp concepts of infinity and simultaneity. Towards the end of the long sentence enumerating the many scenes witnessed by Borges when he gets his glimpse of the Aleph, we are told that in the Aleph he saw the Earth and that on the Earth that he was looking at he could see the Aleph, in which was depicted the Earth, and so on...: “...vi el Aleph, desde todos los puntos, vi en el Aleph la tierra, y en la tierra otra vez el Aleph y en el Aleph la tierra...” (1: 625).

In this way the narrator takes the reader on a mind-boggling excursion to the outer limits of the human conception of the vastness that surrounds us, using the inclusiveness that is implicit in the notion of the Aleph to accentuate the impossibility of the vision, while also conveying a sense of what is perhaps conceivable. Ultimately, words fail him, and attempts to capture this vision in terms that make it amenable to human thought are pointedly shown to be inadequate: “mis ojos habían visto ese objeto secreto y conjetural, cuyo nombre usurpan los hombres, pero que ningún hombre ha mirado: el inconcebible universo” (1: 626). If the universe is

unimaginable,<sup>6</sup> it is implied that this is because the categories available to us in order to classify and define it in human terms are not sufficiently sophisticated.

This ineffable quality of the Aleph means that it transcends the normal limitations placed on human understanding and on human language, but the point made within the story is more than that. Given that the phenomenon is conceived and described within the context of this story, the issue of the limitations of human understanding is also expressed with subtle irony and even humor. The sceptical narrator's first response on being informed of the existence of the Aleph by Daneri is to question the latter's sanity: "me asombró no haber comprendido hasta ese momento que Carlos Argentino era un loco" (1: 623). This comment is offered just after the narrator has protested that it must surely be impossible to see anything at all since the basement in which the Aleph is located is a dark place situated underneath the stairs, a comment which Daneri dismisses with the line "La verdad no penetra en un entendimiento rebelde" (1: 623). Almost sardonically, then, we are being presented with an exploration of the quasi-mystical issue of the limits of human understanding, and the prospect of an all-encompassing vision, while at the same time being offered an amusing commentary on the inevitability of petty rivalries and on the jealousies between two peers, the writers who are characters in this story called Borges and Carlos Argentino Daneri. By the time Daneri declares to his companion that what the latter is going to witness is the "microcosmo de alquimistas y cabalistas, nuestro concreto amigo proverbial, el *multum in parvo*" (1: 624), we are ready, with the narrator, to dismiss his statements as the ravings of an eccentric or a lunatic. We are even willing to allow that the narrator may have just cause for feeling that Carlos was about to kill him: "para defender su delirio, para no saber que estaba loco, *tenía que matarme*" (1: 624). Once the narrator goes through the routine of lying down in the correct place and closing and then opening his eyes, his

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6 No doubt Borges's use of the term "inconceivable," and then of "unimaginable" as its equivalent in the translation he worked on with di Giovanni (*El Aleph* 28), refers to the notion explained by Bloch as being able to visualize something "in a clear, precise way that allows for mental manipulations" (xx). Bloch refers to the distinction that Descartes made between being able to conceive of, and imagine in detail, a triangle, for example, while one would not be able to imagine a chiliagon (a thousand-sided figure) in such a way, even though we can conceive of such a figure in the abstract.

suspicions and doubts are dismissed – at least temporarily – as the paragraph closes with the briefest of sentences: “Entonces vi el Aleph” (1: 624).

The two paragraphs that follow constitute the key moment in the story, what the narrator describes as its “inefable centro” (1: 624). Although this “center” is not located at the actual mid-point of the story, it is its conceptual heart and the point that the story has been leading up to from the beginning. The first of these paragraphs addresses the issue of how to describe the phenomenon that the narrator has witnessed, the essential problem being that of attempting to list, even in part, an infinite series. The second paragraph attempts to do just that, to convey a sense of the cosmic vision he has witnessed, and constitutes in effect a critique of the spatial parameters within which we operate, a commentary on human spatiality. This is signaled in the third sentence of the paragraph: “El diámetro del Aleph sería de dos o tres centímetros, pero el espacio cósmico estaba ahí, sin disminución de tamaño” (1: 625). And he continues: “Cada cosa (la luna del espejo, digamos) era infinitas cosas, porque yo claramente la veía desde todos los puntos del universo” (1: 625). These sentences set out the basic transcendental principle that contravenes the physical laws that rule the universe in which we live, that is, the principle of infinite spatiality, of the conjunction of everything in one small space, and they are the preamble to a very long sentence which offers just a sample of the many entities that are seen by the narrator. What is conjured up attempts to bring together all that exists in the world, and abounds in impossible or contradictory images.

The vision that is the “unimaginable universe” may in one sense be a compendium of all there is in the world, but, as a vision, it is also a set of perceptions. The entities listed are not simply enumerated as things in themselves; rather, in each instance, there is the repetition of the verb “vi” preceding each of those entities. The word is repeated a total of 40 times (once in the form “había visto”) in a continuous sentence that lasts for more than 30 lines of text: “Vi el populoso mar, vi el alba y la tarde, vi las muchedumbres de América...” (1: 625).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the vision offers a com-

7 Colás suggests that this “surely must be one of the longest sentences that Borges—famous for his economy—ever published” (87). He analyzes the sentence, with its repeated uses of the verb “vi,” in the context of a discussion of “El Aleph” as a critique of social and political (i.e., state) power. He says that “the repeated ‘vi’ serves always as the

mentary on spatiality, but also a critique of language, and confirms the inevitable link between the two. The repeated first-person verb connects the subjectivity of the narrator with the external universe via human language, reminding us of the inadequacy of language to convey the nature of that universe, but also the inevitability of the human need to attempt to use words to so do. As Mínguez Arranz puts it: “El Aleph, como la gigantesca realidad, es inefable, indescriptible, pero el único recurso que le queda al hombre para aprehender tanta inmensidad es la palabra. La única manera de poseer el universo es nombrarlo” (271).

The “hic-stans” that is the Aleph, then, constitutes a kind of deictic centre for the story; it is the place where the subjectivity of the narrator meets the objective reality of the universe at the moment when a key event takes place, when the narrator’s vision occurs. The linguistic concept of deixis is relevant to the challenge outlined in this story of attempting to link, on the one hand, the conceptual and emotional experiences of the narrator and, on the other, the narrator’s aim to apprehend such an immensity. Deixis refers to the ways in which language relates to the context in which it is used and to the spatial, temporal and personal parameters that are of relevance to the speech act at the time of enunciation, prototypically the use of words such as “here,” “now” and “I.” In using deictic terms, speakers must have sufficient awareness of the context in which they are speaking for them to be able to deploy those terms accurately; this implies that the speaker’s cognitive faculties take into account the wider parameters within which the utterance is taking place. At the same time, however, deictic terms express much that is subjective in the speaker’s world, most notably a word such as “I” but also references to the here and the now in which we are living. Thus, deictic reference, perhaps uniquely, brings together the objective and the subjective through language use in particular contexts.

This duality – the combination of objectivity and subjectivity – that characterizes the notion of deixis is clearly relevant to the story “El Aleph,”

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launching pad for a new facet of a world, at once epic and minute, which Borges, from the multitudes of America to the circulation of his own blood, does not represent but rather brings forth on this flood of writerly productivity. [...] [I]f the Aleph and Carlos Argentino Daneri’s pedantic representation of it express the zero-time dream of capital and of the state, a kind of absolute constitution, ‘Borges’s’ stammering, punctuated flow of language expresses the constituent power that everywhere eludes and brings to crisis the pretentious static of the state: ‘I saw, I saw, I saw, I saw ... multitudes’” (97).

as is the central deictic concern with establishing bonds between language and the surrounding universe. We have seen the emphasis placed in the story on the communication of precise details of time and place, both in terms of the initial resolve of the narrator to visit the Viterbo home after the death of Beatriz and in terms of the exact location that the viewer must occupy in order to be able to perceive the Aleph in the basement. These details relate to spatiotemporal location in an impersonal, objective way; they refer, after all, to situatedness in the real world. We have also seen, however, how, in parallel with such movements in time and space, the story is concerned with the – highly personal and subjective – inner angst and longings of a narrator who has lost his loved one.

Hence, when we come to the object that is the Aleph, we are led to appreciate it too in both personal and impersonal terms, in line with deictic phenomena. The orb, we are told, is tiny, to the extent that it occupies virtually no space at all. Like a geometric point, it is depicted as being infinitesimally small, so that all the infinite number of points that constitute the universe are contained in this one single point. On the other hand, within the Aleph are contained a myriad of scenes that relate to all that happens in the world, including all that happens or has happened to our protagonist. Borges sees the corpse of Beatriz and the letters she wrote to Carlos, but also certain floor-tiles that resemble ones that he had seen thirty years earlier in a house in Fray Bentos, along with “la circulación de mi oscura sangre” and “mi cara y mis vísceras” (1: 625-26). In this way, that point that can be depicted as a mere location, defined in abstract geometrical terms, is at the same time a mathematical abstraction *and* the concrete realisation of the narrator’s being, a summary of his own identity as a person occupying a place in the familiar universe, with all that that entails in terms of longings and desires, ambitions, jealousies and disillusionment. The supremely “objective” and abstract reality of a mere point in space becomes at the same time a highly subjective reality, related to the whole sum of emotions experienced by an individual human being.

This suggests that the story “El Aleph” is as much about hopes and aspirations, about human longings and the sense of loss as it is an intellectual reflection on the concept of a point in space that contains all points. This is worth bearing in mind when so many commentaries on Borges’s stories emphasize their intellectual dimension, to the extent that we may



lose sight of the human feelings that lie behind them. Sturrock, for instance, states bluntly that Borges's fictions "are think-pieces. They are stories about ideas instead of people..." (3). Given the conjunction in this story of the highly personal – an emblem of which is the narrator's own name – and the highly cerebral, we might prefer to read this tale as a commentary on that very issue of the relationship between the subject and the universe, as a way of addressing the problem of the meaning and the place of the self in the world. In the final analysis, if our place in the world can be summarized in an abstract Cartesian definition of a location that reminds us of the transitory nature of our own and our loved ones' lives, what kind of meaning can we associate with our emotions and our aspirations? Perhaps this is what Foster was getting at when he wrote about Borges's stories in these terms:

At a first reading of Borges, we feel that he has made us meaningless ciphers in a chaotic universe; however, he does move toward a conception of individual destiny and the possibility for self-assertion. (57)

How, then, are we to comprehend such mysteriously subjective phenomena as hopes, despair, rivalries and disillusionment, which may be with us all our lives, in a context where we may be viewed as being defined merely by our position in space and time at any given moment? What kind of reality can we attribute to such nebulous aspects of our existence, when the sum total of that existence is seen as transitory, in the way that Beatriz's life is both transitory and mysterious in this story?

"El Aleph" appears to imply that two apparently diverse phenomena – mathematical abstraction, on the one hand, and the recounting of human experiences, on the other – are in fact two sides of the same coin, complementary aspects of the same search for meanings. At the most fundamental level, perhaps the concern is to highlight the link between these two aspects of our being and to attempt to articulate our suspicion that we are in fact both entity and identity, mathematical ciphers as well as tellers of complex human tales. If that is the case, then statements such as that made by Lévy, to the effect that "al Aleph de Borges le falta un atributo esencial ... el Amor" (160), seem to miss the point which is in fact repeatedly stressed in this story, viz., that love and location go hand in hand, that they intersect throughout our lives, each one *requiring* the other. Just as

there can be no loving relationship to speak of without the prospect of the beloved's presence overlapping with our own, so there is no fulfilment to be gained by simply attaining physical presence: the simultaneous summoning of every entity and individual in the universe that is achieved by means of the Aleph does not lead to happiness without the complementary ingredient of love itself. The narrator's reaction to the vision he witnesses is not a positive one; rather, his immediate response, "Sentí infinita veneración, infinita lástima" (1: 626), implies a suitable combination of wonder at what he has seen and his realisation that what he has seen is somehow inadequate or defective. His failure to become excited by it and his apparent dread in relation to it find expression when he encourages Daneri to use the opportunity offered by the imminent destruction of the house to get well away from the Aleph: "agradecí a Carlos Argentino Daneri la hospitalidad de su sótano y lo insté a aprovechar la demolición de la casa para alejarse de la perniciosa metrópoli, que a nadie ¡créame, que a nadie! perdona" (1: 626).

In this story, then, a desire for love and fulfilment and the expression of a need for forgiveness go hand in hand with the sardonic mocking of literati and the "thought experiment" that is the Aleph. Susana Medina sees the story as positing "a benign and transcendental infinite in a story permeated by implicit reflections on different types of spaces, which are smoothly integrated into what in effect is a space odyssey in the midst of a love story and a story of literary rivalry" (169). All of these elements are related to the theme of spatiality, in the sense that they come together in the vision that the narrator witnesses under the stairs. Dichotomies such as lived experience versus cerebral reflections on time and space, or the contrast between the sequential nature of language and the simultaneity of the vision presented in the Aleph, or the petty jealousies of the duelling authors contrasted with the narrator's limitless devotion to Beatriz, are never quite resolved within the story. Rather, the suggestion seems to be that the only resolution that can be achieved is an uneasy accommodation with the realities of a world that is at the same time alien to the observer and familiar: the simultaneous apprehension of all human events that occurs in the Aleph will not, ultimately, translate into time standing still or the elimination of failure or human weakness. We have been taken on a journey to the outer limits of human conceptual capabilities, and, at

the end of that voyage, we find only that there is more to be learned and other possible journeys to be considered. The “Postscript” offers us additional reflections on further locations that require exploration in order for us to understand more fully the nature of the Aleph, and to appreciate how real the experience has been. In it, with evocations of colonial adventures, reference is made to the experiences of a “Captain Burton,” an Englishman that lived in Brazil, who suggested that “[l]os fieles que concurren a la mezquita de Amr, en el Cairo, saben muy bien que el universo está en el interior de una de las columnas de piedra que rodean el patio central” (1: 627).<sup>8</sup>

This process of relativising the Aleph in Garay Street, questioning its uniqueness and throwing even its universality into doubt, serves to underpin that essential connection between the idea of traversing, controlling and containing the known universe of external realities and the intimate, personal business of coming to grips with the role of memory and emotion in resolving the human issues associated with our longings and fears, so that the narrator can end by speculating on the possibility that he has seen the Aleph in the column of the Amr mosque but may have forgotten it, just as he is in the process of forgetting even the face of his deceased love, Beatriz.

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8 The Captain that Borges has in mind is the English diplomat, author and explorer, Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890), who published a ten-volume English translation of the *Arabian Nights*, which he entitled *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, in 1885-1888, as well as many other works, including *Explorations of the Highlands of Brazil* (1869). Borges writes an enthusiastic account of his life in an essay called “Los traductores de *Las 1001 noches*,” included in the volume *Historia de la eternidad* (1936). In the essay, Borges refers to him as “el capitán inglés que tenía la pasión de la geografía y de las innumerables maneras de ser un hombre, que conocen los hombres” (1: 401), and recounts his numerous adventures in many countries around the world, including a period spent practising medicine (and magic) in Cairo. The thematic links with the spatial theme in the story “El Aleph” include not only the details just mentioned, but also the references that Borges makes in the essay to the rather poor quality of the verses (also quatrains) produced by Burton in his attempt to render into English the poems that are included in the *Arabian Nights*. The manuscript of Burton’s that is referred to in the Postscript of the story is apocryphal (Bell-Villada 233). On these points, see also Block de Behar.

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