

THE EFFECT OF THE ATOMIST CLINAMEN IN THE CONSTITUTION OF  
BORGES'S "LIBRARY OF BABEL"

*Kane X. Faucher*

In order to better address the problem of Borges's famous Babelian library and how it is constituted, we must scale back and have recourse to the debates of antiquity between the finite Aristotelian universe and the infinite "all" (*pan*) of the Greek Atomists. Moreover, we ought to consider the problem of the seemingly infinite permutations of the texts in the Library of Babel, the diffusion of the librarians, and the architectural structure of the library itself according to our provisional assertion that these are a product of the atomistic clinamen (*klynamen*). Borges himself leaves the question suspended as to whether this library is indeed infinite or merely apparently so (a functional infinite that denotes our lack of seizing the entire library as a conceptual or dimensional whole). We will here (re)consider an Aristotelian version of the Library of Babel to place in higher relief the more dynamic and intriguing conception of the Library as having fidelity to an atomist cosmology. The thrust of our investigation will be to determine the role of the clinamen in the constitution of the Babelian library. Borges's narrator effectively is forced to side with the atomist view of the library, a library that is indeed a *biblio-chaosmoi*. The issues under consideration will include the prospect of the library's dimensionality as either finite or infinite, a special case of motion to support both these views, contrasting the Aristotelian and atomist viewpoint. Finally, we will postulate that the only access we have to

this library and its meaning is through a modified method of analogical reading.

## MOTION

The universe, according to the atomists, is distributed by means of the vortex: a kind of sorting arena by which atoms are distributed according to weight, size, and shape; the finer atoms eventually move centripetally to the periphery, while the heavier atoms gravitate by centrifugal motion to the centre.<sup>1</sup> As opposed to Anaxagoras's formation, the vortex is not a sorting agency prompted by a Mind, but is rather an innate function of the atoms-void relationship that abides by its own laws (be it Necessity for the Epicurean atomists or Destiny for the Stoics). The atomists will assert that the circular motion of atoms in a "vortex" has a strictly mechanical nature. This opposes the pseudo-materialist conception of Anaxagoras's Mind as causal agent, and engages the adiaphoristic element that contradicts Empedocles's notion that this sorting is waged on the order of innate love and strife of the matter involved. The problem of a vortex is this: if the first system is formed as a sphere, how and why does it form in this way? Is not a vortex formed along a linear axis? This problem is not duly resolved in the atomist literature since spherical formation is opposed to vortical motion. Abiding by the spherical postulate for the formation of the universe, it would seem that the atomists are more Aristotelian than expected since Aristotle asserts that not only that the universe is a sphere (representing geometric perfection), but that heavier elements gradually make their way to the centre. However, the one difference between the Aristotelian and atomist conception is that for the former motion is resolved in telos, whereas the atomists assert that motion is eternal and privy to constant destabilizations and reformations.

Aristotle, observing the circular motion of the heavens, and the

---

<sup>1</sup> However, the use of the term "vortex" is not native to the atomist philosophy; this is the imputation given by Aristotle and his commentators. We leave it active here, but suspend it with quotation marks.

vertical motion of falling bodies, concluded that there are two distinct types of natural motion (forced motion being the product of a rational agent that is not the prime mover) whereas the atomists only forwarded the one: infinite motion (in the “vortex”) unless hindered by collisions.<sup>2</sup> In *Physics* (II.4, 196a24-8), Aristotle rejects the monistic vortical motion theory on the grounds that it would be tantamount to a) accepting that the genesis of the kosmoi is aleatory rather than purposive, and, b) that such an aleatory universe without a purposive organizing principle cannot admit of resolution into final causes.

For Aristotle all things come to be for the sake of some purposive end. Hence, animals come to be with a purpose to generate more of their species, plants have the purpose to yield fruit. In this case, all things and their existence make all possible ontogenesis subordinate to its end. Along this line of argument, Borges’s library is endowed with a *telos*, a purpose by which its existential meaning will be actualized according to an essential purpose. That no such purpose has been conclusively and convincingly brought forward does not necessarily debunk that such a solution is possible; i.e., that the purpose has not yet been discovered does not logically mean that there is no purpose or that it is impossible to discover. It is this “Aristotelian hope” that motivates a certain segment of the librarians’ mania for retrieving this purpose from an apparent aleatory concatenation of texts. Such Aristotelians will doubtless point to the order and structure of the library as proof of its having been organized by some initial purposive causal agent, a “prime mover”. However, an atomist counterstrike on this posi-

---

<sup>2</sup> This accords with a particular idealization in modern physics. Ideal motion would run in a rectilinear fashion along a tangentially uniform vector; however, the explanation for the curvature of particle motion is described by means of external forces acting upon that particle such as the effect of gravitation and collision with other particles. This notion of minute external particle bombardment affecting movement is known as Brownian motion, but the phenomenon is much better explicated by so-called Galilean relativity insofar as the motion of particles is relative to the given coordinate system (CS) it occurs in. Since, arguably, there is no “perfect” or inertial CS, motion may be perpetual or erratic (perhaps best exemplified by the motion of an object like a Foucault pendulum in an imperfect CS like the earth which itself is a CS rotating on a solar plane, etc.).

tion would be to assert that the mechanical nature of sorting is its own order without intermediary Mind acting as agent, and that the structure appears as though organized by a higher rational agent. This may be an unsatisfactory argument on the grounds that texts are themselves the product of some rational agent, and since they do not occur in nature, some agent necessarily must have placed them there. For the atomists, it is sufficient to explain apparent order by the innate motive nature of the atoms themselves that occasion themselves, oriented according to their distribution of weight, size, and shape. Although Aristotle will ask in *Metaphysics* (XII.6 1071b31) how this natural motion is possible, whence it began, the atomists will reply that the collision of atoms was caused by previous collisions *ad infinitum*, well in accord with their committed view that time and space is infinitely without beginning or end.

The clinamen makes possible the existence of permutation. Left to their own motion, falling atoms descend in a rectilinear fashion (if they do not collide with other atoms); however, this line of descent represents the thinnest possible minimal line. Although the atomists were cautious not to import oblique motion as a *post facto* feature of their theory, they explain the clinamen as a “jumping of track” from one linear minimum to an adjacent one. Although imperceptible at the phenomenal macroscopic level, there still appears to be a kind of oblique motion from one parallel line of descent to another. However, this can be explained by claiming that the line of descent is smaller and thinner than the atom following it, and if there is even the most minute unevenness in the atom, this would be sufficient enough for it to deviate its course even slightly as a means of demonstrating how it “changes tracks.” One can map this clinamen to the constitution of texts in the Babelian library if we are willing to admit that each orthographic figure represents the formative character of one of these linear minimums. One can imagine the Babelian library-universe as an enormous type-setter wherein the atomic orthographic unit gains its orthographic character according to what path of linear minimum it happens to be on at the moment it reaches the page (making the letters effectively atomic, a finite group of forms we may dub “or-thons”<sup>3</sup>). This would mean that we would need to import a notion

<sup>3</sup> These “or-thons” as atomic elements would need to have their law of motion

that the linear minima themselves have a stable causal independence from the formation of things by atoms. This would necessarily incite the question as to what agent granted this formative power to these linear minima. If we are to assume this model of causation, then we are left with the ambiguous space of the "I know not what" that acts as a causal foundation for the nature the atoms possess in being "shaped."

However, even this explanation would falter if we hold fast to the atomist dictate, for these atoms are already given in their formation as complete, and that the linear minima only "guide" the atoms along their path toward the page. In this sense, the linear minima only facilitate the sorting process. Despite how this analogy may appease our demand of how these permutations among texts occur, it does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that each text is a singularity. That is, due to the indeterminacy aspect of this falling permutation of atoms, the possibility of producing two identical texts is still possible, if not probable. When computing permutations with a view to producing solely singularities, it is necessary to set the parameters: a) permutations rely on a finite set of elemental constituents, and so therefore permutations themselves are finite, and, b) in order to have a complete list of singular permutations, repetitions must be deselected so that an identical occurrence of each text type is not reproduced. So far, the atomists cannot grant us a suitable explanation of how this aleatory process can avoid perfect repetition of texts. From the information provided in Borges's story, we are still uncertain if there are indeed identical texts since the narrator would need to be himself temporally infinite in order to assess the verity of this assertion. That is, it is only assumed from the collected experiences of the librarians that no two identical texts exist, whereas the proof of this assertion is lacking.<sup>4</sup> One would need to possess the

---

discovered by means of their distributions, conjugations, and permutations in a given finite-field of activity. We leave for another paper the "metaphoric" transfer of relativity fields between the linguistic "electric" and "magnetic".

<sup>4</sup> To enlist Lucretius to our aid, "nothing in the universe is the only one of its kind, unique and solitary in its birth and growth" (Lucretius 92). That would mean, according to the atomist position, that the composition of the identical is a requisite for the perpetuation of any series or species. However, if we retain fidelity to our

luxury of immortality to scour each and every text, endowed with a memory commensurate with the number of texts perceived, to transition this empirical hypothesis into a law. Instead, we are given a deductive conclusion based on a few experiential findings and syllogistic extrapolation which can only furnish a conceptual generalization on the nature of the library itself.

In an earlier work<sup>5</sup> I resolved the permutative problem of the texts by posing the problem in an Aristotelian and mathematical register, utilizing the given data Borges's narrator furnishes (books per hexagon, pages per book, lines per book, characters per line, etc.) to compute all the permutative possibilities to arrive at a number which would designate exactly how many books the library could possibly possess without duplication. This exceedingly large number concluded that, given the data, there could be a maximum of 1.312.000 to the power of 25 books in the library.<sup>6</sup> In this manner, I was complicit with two Aristotelian notions: a) assuming a centrality around which the architecture and constituent elements of the library exist (the Aristotelian absolute centre point), and, b) assuming the finite extension of the library-universe that is a self-contained totality with no remainder beyond its most extended boundary. I may have been misled by the narrator's statement that the "Library is a sphere whose exact center is only one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible" (Borges "Babel" 52). Interpreted in Aristotelian terms, there is an

---

notion that this pertains only to more complex compositions, like the books themselves, we may retain the special uniqueness of the orthographic combinations themselves.

<sup>5</sup> Kane X. Faucher. "A Few Ruminations on Borges' Notions of Library and Metaphor". The purpose of this self-criticism is to demonstrate the more Aristotelian leaning the past article possessed toward the resolution of an enigma. In that vein, I am not attempting to overturn the prior work as much as I am providing another alternative.

<sup>6</sup> The vast and astronomical nature of this number is difficult to convey; if each book were a hydrogen molecule, it would have an accumulated mass of 57 metric tons. This number works out to be roughly  $8.9 \times 10$  followed by 152 zeroes. This amounts to roughly  $1.3 \times 10$  to the power of 150 hexagonal galleries. Unfortunately, I lack the technical instruments to determine, according to a honeycomb theory of the library's construction, the exact formation.

assertion of the existence of a center point (an absolute or ideal CS, in modern parlance), and that the circumference of the sphere is inaccessible does not necessarily mean that there is no circumference per se—merely that it is inaccessible for undisclosed reasons. Not knowing exactly where the center lies, nor being able to access the outermost periphery, is not proof enough against the existence of a self-contained library-universe. The atomists pose the problem of the periphery by asking what would happen if a person were at the boundary and stuck a hand or a dart beyond it; what is it that allows such egress if not more universe? Aristotle, sensitive to this argument, rebuts by making a terminological distinction between limit and contiguity (see *Physics* III.8). The atomists will claim, along with Melissus, that a thing is limited (determined) by its container, and so for the universe to be limited, the paradox of infinite regress applies here insofar as every limiting container must itself be contained by something else. Aristotle objects to this formulation of determination by stating that a thing is also partially determined in itself by its own constituent properties (the relation of substance to the four causes), and so not entirely dependent in all cases upon a physical exteriority to determine it. Moreover, Aristotle objects to what he deems a fanciful thought experiment of supposing an individual at the edge of the universe as just that: imagination. He will claim that we can extend our thoughts to assume infinite numbers by merely continually adding one, but this does not guarantee accord between what is thought and what actually is. Just as one can imagine an immortal human or a green centaur, what is imagined is merely the concatenation of real conceptual parts in the imagination that do not have their perfect analogue in reality.<sup>7</sup> It is this same argument that Descartes uses in his third meditation when demonstrating the mind's ability to have notions that are merely composed of real parts without having any direct existence in the world. How-

---

<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that Lucretius is forced to respond to the fancies of imagination insofar as he rejects certain atomic combinations as untenable. There are some atomic components that, according to their gross disparity of size or shape cannot enter into conjunction. In his words: "*It must not be supposed that atoms of every sort can be linked in every variety of combination*" (Lucretius 80).

ever, what Aristotle appears to lack is the particular insight into an intuition of space that may indeed be infinite, since space is that which can be traversed and is physically limited by things.

Lucretius's response to Aristotle's bounded cosmos elaborates upon the earlier atomists's supposition of the individual at the periphery of finite space. As a salvo for the atomist position on space hitherto placed aside by Aristotle's rejection, Lucretius reasonably demonstrates that either outcome of throwing a dart at the alleged limit of the universe would still prove the infinity of the cosmos. If the dart continues beyond the limit, then one is forced to admit that there is more space in which the dart can move. If the dart is blocked, then there is some other material thing which blocks it, and so therefore there must be some space that contains it; therefore, affirming the continuity of the universe. Furthermore, says Lucretius, if the universe is indeed finite and we accept the downward motion of atoms (which would themselves be of finite quality in the Aristotelian universe), then all matter would eventually tend toward a dense "heap" (Lucretius 55-56). Therefore, in order to explain the perpetual motion of atoms, one must also affirm that space, time, and atoms are infinite. If space were infinite, and atoms finite, then this would not resolve the issue either, for if a finite number of atoms distributed themselves throughout an infinite space, the likelihood of atoms bonding together to form larger objects would be highly improbable. There is one problem that inheres in the atomist conception of motion insofar as they speak of the downward motile tendency of atoms in an infinite universe in which, geometrically, it would be impossible to speak of "up" or "down" any more than one can speak of "top" or "bottom". This may be resolved by making a critical distinction between relative and absolute centers. Since the atomists believe in multiple *kosmoi*, then each of these may possess its own internal orientation where their center is relative only to itself. In this view, an absolute center does not exist, but only a pluralism of relative centers distributed throughout a kind of "mega-verse." However, the reason for the formation of these separate *kosmoi* remains a lacuna, since the atomist theory of motion in the "vortex" does not seem to provide any internal regulatory reason why the universe



would be constructed pluralistically; and one may pose the question that if each center is relative, what is it relative to if not to one absolute center? However, the notion of an absolute centre can only hold if the universe is spatially finite.

But we must return to the library. How is it, with all our contraindications, that the library can actually be conceived as infinite when our permutations of the given data point to a finite number of books, a finite *morphography*? Borges's narrator presents two ineffaceable axioms pertaining to the library: the first demonstrating its infinite nature, and the second its finite constituency. That is, the first axiom claims that the library exists *ab aeterno*, and the second axiom presents the finite conditions of there existing only 25 orthographical marks (Borges, "Library" 54). Following this, the narrator makes a corollary assertion that no two books are identical, and so therefore we would be forced to admit—in conjunction with the premise of limited orthographic variation—that the books are not infinite. As we said above, the narrator is not qualified to make this assertion as an absolute truth without himself being able to empirically view the books as a whole. As well, there appears to be a paradox between these two axioms that Lucretius already circumvents: how can an infinite space contain a finite amount of matter? If the narrator's axioms are to be believed, then it must face the problem of finite dispersion within an infinite space, which would make the library itself an improbable construction. Lucretius once again comes to the aid of our quest to determine the library's probability insofar as he tenders two axioms of his own: the forms the atoms can take are themselves finite in number, while the number of each form is infinite (Lucretius 74-75). This would mean that if the orthographic marks represent the atomic forms, and these are finite as the narrator asserts, it does not mean that the number of orthographic marks are themselves finite in each of their forms; they can be duplicated innumerable times.

Notably, there is an inherent architectural problem with the library.<sup>8</sup> If the hexagonal galleries are, as the narrator reports, "in-

<sup>8</sup> I would like here to postulate an approximate measurement of each hexagonal gallery. Assuming that each shelf fills an entire wall, and there are 35 books

variable," then theoretically its egress hallway would be placed along the same wall for every hexagon (the egress of one being the ingress of the adjacent hexagon). If this were the case, the hexagonal galleries on every floor would be one continuous line stretching in two directions rather than an interconnected "honeycomb." Lateral movement within the library would be restricted to making one of two choices, whereas in ascending or descending motion upon the staircase the librarian is able to negotiate other floors. If we take the invariability of the hexagonal galleries not to mean their internal architectural variation but rather that each possesses an ingress and an egress in whatever orientation, then other architectural formations are possible. The more pressing problem is the incommensurability between the architectural environs and the texts themselves; each of the galleries is a somewhat faithful duplication of every other, while the texts are supposedly singularities in terms of their content. The books themselves are materially identical insofar as they are all the same size, number of pages, etc., but this invariability houses the absolute variability of its textual contents. How is it that these two principles, repetition and difference, exist in simultaneity? Even the singularity of texts seems indirectly to support repetition insofar as every possible explanation the librarians may have as to the meaning of the library already exists in these books. This curiously points to the notion that meaning itself is merely the repetition of a fully given totality, of which the books are the exemplars, and so therefore meaning itself is finite. Rather than to make this self-contained "aleph" of meaning a transcendent principle, Borges makes it tantalizingly immanent since the "solution" to the puzzle of the library is

---

per row of shelf, each book being a case-bound text of 410 pages, then we may calculate page and cover thickness so that each book is approximately 3 centimetres in width, multiplied by 35. This would make each wall, to form a perfect hexagon, roughly just over a metre wide. This would mean that each hexagonal gallery would have an area of 2.86 metres. This would grant the entire library an area of roughly  $3.718 \times 10$  to the power of 147 km. From one door to the other, it is 2.1 metres. Therefore, if one were to run without stopping at 10 km / hour to cover the entire distance of  $2.73 \times 10$  to the power of 147 km, it would take one  $3.11 \times 10$  to the power of 143 years to visit every gallery. This does not factor in the small passageways interconnecting the galleries.

housed in one of the vast number of books, and although their number is finite, the probability of alighting upon it is statistically negligible; moreover, without a transcendent criteria by which to measure the truth or falsity of the text's solution to the library, the librarians are left with merely a plethora of combating possibilities. As immanent, the Truth of the library is in the world, but it is lost among an oceanic distribution of competing interpretations, and no supersensible criteria of evaluation exists that may point to the right solution. To invoke Lucretius's axioms stated earlier, even the form of the library may be explained by the finite form and the infinite number expressing that form.

The situation the narrator finds himself in is Platonic. As Deleuze and Guattari state, philosophy "struggles in turn with the chaos as undifferentiated abyss or ocean of dissemblance" (207). For the Platonists, the problem was between philosophy and science, opinion and truth. However, when this truth was not apparent, it had to be invented. Plato devised two means by which to determine truth-value among a constituency of opinions: the dialectic as a process of selecting "the most right opinion", and his frequent recourse to myth in the dialogues (where dialectic was not sufficient to resolve the issue). Borges's narrator, devoid of any real access to the Truth of the library, has recourse to a series of opinions by other librarians. This census of opinions and his own experiences leads him to form his own opinion, and these opinions are indeed like competing suitors for the hand of Truth. In doing so, the narrator forges an *Urdoxa* through the dialectical process of deselection and gives it a rational backing with the aid of imposing transcendent principles upon an immanent world. However, this claim to truth is not enough in itself to quell the disquiet in the narrator's philosophical stance, and his desperate cry for the universe to "be justified" still lingers in his formation of a truth claim. It is evident that the narrator has considered the rival opinions in their move to grounding truth, and his emendation is not self-convincing enough, leading him to implicitly conclude that the matter of the library's ultimate and unfathomable meaning is impossible without transcendent intervention by which it may be revealed to the librarians the instruments by which to

appropriately evaluate what opinion is the true one. To complicate this matter further, it is also possible that there is not just one truth, but that there are multiple truths that form an irreconcilable composite, or that one would have to understand the library in its totality before being able to make any truth claim.

The narrator is on unstable Aristotelian ground insofar as he seeks an answer to the cosmological question of both the library's genesis and presupposes that there is a purpose, and yet cannot conceptually derive the answer. This leads the narrator to seek a principle of a "prime mover" from which the stock of sequentialized texts may be metaphysically justified.

#### FINER ATOMIC POINTS

In "The Total Library", Borges gives considerable pause to the issue of the genesis and history of the idea of such a complete library. Tracing a line up through Democritus, Leucippus, Aristotle, Cicero, Pascal, Swift, Huxley and Lewis Carroll, he emerges upon Kurd Lasswitz's literary version of the total library (Borges, "The Total Library" 214-16). It is Kurd Lasswitz's data set that Borges faithfully reproduces for the library of Babel, incorporating the elemental orthographic constituents of the 22 letters, space, period, and comma. Theoretically, this all-encompassing library would possess the sum total of all known and unknown lore, but sporadically interspersed among "millions of meaningless cacophonies, verbal farragoes, and babblings" (216). Borges sets himself the task of constructing a literary vehicle by which to transmit this notion: "I have tried to rescue from oblivion a subaltern horror: the vast, contradictory Library, whose vertical wilderness of books run the incessant risk of changing into others that affirm, deny, and confuse everything like a delirious god" (216). It is enough here to invoke the impossible memory of Funes, vast yet uselessly devoid of sense, a cognitive problem similar to K. Luria's synaesthesia patient. Funes becomes the library, a hypermnemonic cripple, and forced into solitude due to the incommen-

surable indecipherability of immediate presences, thereby hindering Funes from making conceptual distinctions. Aristotle already forecasts this when he cites that it is nearly impossible to unite abstract generality and the concrete individual as a harmonious simultaneity.<sup>9</sup> "To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there are only details, almost immediate in their presence" (Borges, "Funes" 66).<sup>10</sup>

Atoms etymologically mean "uncuttable". This can be said of letters as well, since their "sense" or recognizable shape would be lost if they were cut further. The forms of the letters are themselves finite, but their number is infinite; for although some of the more woebegone librarians will assert that anything that can possibly be written already occurs in the library, what is truly an instance of difference is in the sensible comportment the writer has in relation to text (Borges illustrates this quite effectively in "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote"). The "life" of text, even if two identical texts exist, will differ *in time and space*. That is, a single text will occupy a given measure of space distinct from its copy, and may exist prior to, after, or contemporaneously with its double. Moreover, the two identical texts may undergo different situations (rough handling by a librarian, tossed over the railing, or completely undiscovered), and so the relation these texts have in time and space is enough to call them different, even if their constituents are identical. These properties of space and time are added to the qualitative constitution of the text itself. It is in the same way that one can clone a human being and, through its individual experiences in space and time, end up with a different

<sup>9</sup> It may be no accident that Borges makes Ireneo Funes a modern Argentine equivalent of Albertus Magnus who, it is rumoured, had come about his genius by means of an accident with a horse, thereby bringing to an end his former doltishness. The connection to Albertus Magnus is not a mere fancy in this regard, for beyond the reputed encyclopaedic memory of Albertus Magnus, one of his preoccupations in his journals was a series of allegedly magic letters whose combination would create an "android".

<sup>10</sup> According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, Funes would be an example of anti-genius insofar as genius is described by Aristotle as having the capacity to locate similarities between dissimilarities. This can only be done at the conceptual level, which is to say that abstract generalization must occur for these associations to emerge.

outcome. Against the notion that there indeed seems to be a finite supply of “orthons,” this remains as valid a speculation as to also state that there is indeed an infinite supply of “orthons” that have yet to be actualized; and one can ask whether or not these “orthons” would necessarily have to only emerge in the narrow confines of a book with its many pages, or to recombine into something altogether different.

Since the Babelian library has its share of curiosities that theoretically test the limits of our atomist hypothesis, we must consider the absurd (and statistically probable) existence of a text with only a single letter repeating in its 410 pages. Lucretius states, “*there is no visible object that consists of atoms of one kind only*. Everything is composed of a mixture of elements. The more qualities and powers a thing possesses, the greater variety it attests in the forms of its component atoms” (Lucretius 77). He further on states: “Not that there is any lack of letters common to several words, or that there are no two words composed of precisely the same letters; but they do not all alike consist of exactly the same components” (Lucretius 80). To be fair, Lucretius’s “linguistic atomism” could not have foreseen the genius of Borges or the concentrated form of a linguistic aleph.<sup>11</sup> The single-letter text does not present us with a serious jeopardy in considering the library as an atomist universe insofar as we need not consider each text *separately*, but as a combinative and collective whole, thereby granting the otherwise lost variety. It is the texts in their relation that constitute identity, and not in their isolation. A text in its isolated context, as the librarians unwittingly demonstrate in the multitude of failed interpretive projects attempting to foist hasty meaning on the library in general, has no chance of gaining in ultimate meaning. In fact, the library is not static, and it continues to “evolve” as librarians engage with, move, alter (and even destroy!) some of the texts. Taken as a whole, the library is a *chiffre* whose secret number is impossibly long and constantly changing, for “when there is a change in the combination, motion, order, position, or shapes of

<sup>11</sup> The atomists’ notion of the universe would be a prime example of an amplified aleph since everything that is possible is given; however, in a constrained way insofar as certain atomic combinations are impossible.

the component matter, there must be a corresponding change in the object composed" (Lucretius 90), to which we extend this definition to meaning at large.

The narrator's conclusion to account for finite constituents in an infinite space is this: "*The Library is infinite and cyclical*. If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order, the Order)" (Borges, "Library" 58). This cyclical universe would be more in accord with Aristotelian cosmology if taken in strictly crudely spatial terms. If the narrator is speaking metaphorically at this point, one can easily advance the atomist position that certain combinations repeat, and that given an infinite time (and assuming the inevitable deterioration of texts over time) there would come a recombination of atomic elements to reproduce a pattern, if only by accident. That is, to put it more simply, if one existed eternally in infinite time, the possibility of re-encountering a certain order of books is likely since there has to be some point in time that this combination would be recreated. But one ought more to worry about the enthusiasm of such an infinite wanderer in relation to such a vast library, especially since "there is nothing so mighty or so marvelous that the wonder it evokes does not tend to diminish in time" (Lucretius 90). It would be more likely that an eternal librarian would succumb to boredom and ennui well before discovering the "secret" to the library.

The "all" or "nothing" in Borges's treatment replaces the disjunction with a copula of pure substantiation. All is nothing. This is as true for Borges's library as it is for his conception of the divine. This appears to be Borges's extrapolation of ontological determination where Being is determined by the limit of what it is not (i.e., something Other). That is, the "all" is determined by the "nothing" it is not, but in doing so collapses in an Hegelian flourish to be indistinguishable since it lacks qualification. Recall that, for Hegel, the dialectical motor that pushes developmental becoming by its fits and starts begins with a biconditional determination between Being and Nothing (which thereby accumulates qualitative detail, granting determinate and concrete qualities to

otherwise empty empirical things that are indicated in rather barren terms by mere demonstratives in language). However, Borges is not so hasty as to assume a fundamental opposition between Being and Nothing, and if he does so it is only provisional toward demonstrating their fundamental equivalence. Specific beings are something, but taken as a whole, become nothing. It is in this way that the individual books, taken out of their context of the whole, are something in the existential sense, but their essentiality is nothingness. It would be too convenient for us to marvel at Borges's use of paradox when the library has a more likely naturalist explanation. That is, although we are apparently left with a paradox that object-p exists yet is said to emerge *ex nihilo*, we are overlooking the clever linguistic variance in the proposition, "the essence of an existential is nothingness". If we keep in mind the atomist charge against the existence of the gods as progenitors of the universe, first and final causes, we come to understand that there is no essence to matter, that it is completely existentially immanent, and that essence itself is an abstraction inapplicable to the causal explanation of matter as such. What bearing will this have on our conception of the library when the library as a whole (in its "essentiality") does not exist? All the books, taken collectively, have the truth-value of nil. An atomist rendering may come to assist in explaining this in two senses: a) the library, being the totality of books, is nothing more than an abstract concept having no independent reality of its own since it is devoid of particularities which make up all existential things, and, b) since the books are infinitely extended, no essentializing concept like "library" can limit or determine them. Since the books belong to an existential rather than an essential series, they must be infinite in number even if not infinite in form. What is not considered in the calculation of allegedly finite textual permutations is the one free radical that is also composed of atomic combinations: the librarians themselves: "My grave will be the fathomless air; my body will sink endlessly and decay and dissolve in the wind generated by the fall, which is infinite" (Borges, "Library" 52). "Death does not put an end to things by annihilating the component particles but by breaking up their conjunction" (Lucretius 89).



## ANAGOGIUM

The struggle of understanding these texts relies on a somewhat medieval conception of *metanoia* versus *conversio*—namely, anagogical reading versus the possibility for textual equivalence. At the level of *conversio*, the texts ought to produce their ultimate meaning in three of the four methods of scriptural reading: literal, historical, and allegorical. The narrator indeed considers these three reading methods in order to give a satisfactory explanation for the library and its constituents, without any concrete results. The only option left him is the path untried, the vertiginous anagogical path. However, it is not the variety of *metanoia* frequently ascribed to medieval scriptural study, but rather one on a different order. How is anagogical reading possible in the Babelian library? To engage in this type of reading is to take issue with Aristotle's poetics insofar as such a reading method is not in accord with the Aristotelian view that metaphors are merely the subordinate and figural transport of a privileged thought or Concept. Aristotle maintains that the Concept is best revealed at the level of minimum language, a kind of pre-linguistic and non-figural Truth.<sup>12</sup> Anagogical reading, on the other hand, is hyper-linguistic, and the rise above of spirit in relation to text must take place through a kind of excess of signification or meaning to attain its "sense". The three registers of the proposition—denotation, manifestation, and signification—are not in themselves sufficient in accessing this domain of the anagogical. However, the anagogical quality of the library is not a culmination of the three other reading methods taken to their extreme, but rather a re-cognition of their absolute lack or vacuity. It is the total assemblage of their absolute lack, but not in the sense where there is still one prejudice: absolute lack, the totality that has been forgotten. For the librarian, the passageway to a literal understanding of the text is blocked, and so therefore is the allegorical. Moreover, the historical aspect is thrown into dubiety as

<sup>12</sup> See Aristotle, *Poetics*, esp. Ch XXI and XXII. Although Aristotle attributes significant importance to metaphor, he still subordinates it to the revealing of the concept. Ideally, for Aristotle, conceptuality would be able to be rendered perfect if unmixed with the inherent impurities of language.

well since the permutation factor of the books will reveal every possible rendering of the library's genesis and the "ultimate purpose" of the librarians in the library. The librarian is left only to play a kind of cryptological semantic judo or at worse to be a bridge that spans two chaosmoi: the inaccessible text and its concrete meaning. The narrator, has no other recourse than this futile "elegant hope": "For the mind wants to discover by reasoning what exists in the infinity of space that lies out there, beyond the ramparts of this world – that region into which the intellect longs to peer and into which the free projection of the mind does actually extend its flight" (Lucretius 91).

Although the case of the library's constitution by the motion of the clinamen is still a somewhat difficult matter to parse out without more details and the resolution of a few Aristotelian objections located in the text (not to mention the perennial question as to what kind of agency placed these texts there in the first place), we have been able to offer a speculative treatment that pushes the notion of the library closer to that cosmology of the atomists rather than the self-contained sphere of Aristotelianism. There may in fact be a "solution" at hand in considering the Gnostic register of the library, viewing it within what Umberto Eco calls "hermetic drift"; however, such a project is best left for the future. It may actually turn out that the library's contents do indeed conform to a modified version of psychological atomism insofar as they could be sensuous textual emissions from the collective sleep of the librarians. For, it must be said, that the movement of the librarians is not limited in the Borges's Babelian universe to the realm of waking alone, but that there is a fertile existence of the dreamer who touches the periphery of the aleph every night.<sup>13</sup>

*Kane X. Faucher*

*University of Western Ontario*

---

<sup>13</sup> The author would like to acknowledge the brilliant insights of Ruggero Pierantoni who was the first to muse on a possible relation between the clinamen and the Library of Babel in the context of a conversational exchange.

## WORKS CITED

- Aristotle. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Trans. J. Barnes. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Library of Babel". *Labyrinths: Selected Short Stories & Other Writings*. Ed. and trans. James E. Irby and Donald Yates. New York: New Directions, 1964. 51-58.
- . "Funes the Memorious". *Labyrinths*. Trans. James E. Irby. New York: New Directions, 1964. 59-66.
- . "The Total Library". *Selected Non-Fictions: Jorge Luis Borges*. Trans. Eliot Weinberger. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Faucher, Kane X. "A Few Ruminations on Borges' Notions of Library and Metaphor." *Variaciones Borges* 12 (2001): 125-37.
- Lucretius. *The Nature of the Universe*. Trans. R. E. Latham. New York: Penguin, 1994.

