

A Certain Melancholy Vanity: Sir Thomas Browne in Borges's *El Aleph*

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From his youth until the end of his life, Jorge Luis Borges cultivated with Sir Thomas Browne a unique form of friendship that one could label *metempsychotic*. Unlike those English friendships that first do away with intimacy and eventually with dialogue, such as that held by Herbert Ashe and the narrator's father in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," Borges never ceased to converse with Browne. Impervious to the constrictions of time and space (for Borges, friendship is a bond stronger than romantic love precisely because it can dispense both with frequency and with physical presence), the kinship that the Argentine writer established with the seventeenth-century English physician was based on intellectual and temperamental affinities, something one can appreciate in their shared wit, an exquisite sense of style, and a common love for extravagant notions. Browne, a man who in Coleridge's words had "a little twist in the brains," was responsible for many ingenious conceits. He speculated, for example, that just like for some ancient pagans there was a transmigration of souls, there is also a transmigration of ideas. Borges was particularly fond of this

notion. In “La esfera de Pascal,” he rephrases it: “Quizá la historia universal es la historia de unas cuantas metáforas” (OC 636). It is not outlandish to propose that he saw himself as a fitting vessel for Browne’s ideas to reincarnate.¹

Borges first came across the work of Browne in 1919, or 1920, while he was living in Spain. That first impression was powerful, overwhelming even, to the point that many years later, toying with the trope of transmigration, he confessed that as a young man he did his best “to be Sir Thomas Browne” (Woodall 68). So too, borrowing an expression from Robert Louis Stevenson (who was also a fervent Browne admirer), he would claim that in his youth “he played the sedulous ape to Sir Thomas Browne” (Irwin 131).² His 1925 essay on Browne, published first in the journal *Proa* (2.7) and later that year in the collection *Inquisiciones*, is most likely the first piece ever written in Spanish about the physician and writer, as well as Borges’s only prose text entirely dedicated to him.³ In it, one can appreciate the diligent pupil’s attempts to imitate the master. Baroque, abstruse and at times—to borrow a compliment that Borges would later pay to a scene in Dante’s *Purgatorio*—“de una complicada fealdad” (NED 89), the young writer’s prose in this early collection of essays reminds one of the end of “Tlön” and of the narrator’s project to translate Browne’s *Urn Burial* into Quevedo’s Spanish—a translation, he adds, that he does not intend to publish.⁴ In fact, Borges includes in that early essay passages

1 The interest in metempsychosis is one of many shared by Borges and Browne. For more on this see Stephens.

2 Borges elevated *Urn Burial* to the status of *Hamlet* and argued that the quality of its music had never been surpassed in any language (Rodríguez Monegal 147). See also “Fragmento sobre Joyce,” published in *Sur*, in 1941 (*Borges en Sur* 169).

3 The only other text Borges dedicated entirely to Browne is the poem “Religio Medici, 1643” included in *El oro de los tigres* (1972). Bioy Casares reports in a diary entry from Wednesday, September 26th 1956, that Borges “está por escribir un cuentito sobre Sir Thomas Browne y la quema de brujas” (203). Sadly, the idea did not come to fruition. The theme was inspired by an episode out of Browne’s biography. In 1664, the physician was called in as an expert witness in a trial against two women accused of witchcraft in the village of Bury St. Edmonds. The women were ultimately found guilty and burned at the stake (Barbour 365 ff.). For more on Borges’s taste for biographical writing, see Fontana.

4 Interestingly, Borges never allowed *Inquisiciones* to be reprinted and excluded it, along with other juvenilia, from the complete works.

from *Urn Burial* and *Religio Medici* translated into a Golden Age redolent Spanish.⁵ The latinate and convoluted style reflects precisely what Borges claimed many years later that he was doing at this point in his career: "... Quevedo and Saavedra Fajardo stood in their own stiff, arid, Spanish way for the same kind of writing as Sir Thomas Browne in *Urne Buriall*. I was doing my best to write Latin in Spanish..." (*The Aleph* 160).⁶

In spite of its rhetorical extravagance, "Sir Thomas Browne" contains brilliant insights. First, Borges understands Browne as a "literato," which is more than simply a man of letters, or a master stylist, as he was commonly perceived in England after the publication of Samuel Johnson's biography. A "literato" is a man who *makes* literature. Browne wrote a small number of unclassifiable works that have elements of the essay and the treatise, the letter and the diary, the commonplace book and the spiritual exercise. On occasion, he wrote poetry (*Religio Medici* includes a few of his poems), he was quite fond of lists and enumerations, and he penned a catalogue for an imaginary collection. Interestingly, the English adjective "literary" is one of Browne's many coinages. Borges's enthusiastic but not for that less sharp reading of Browne also leads him to label the physician a "mystic"—a word that, as far as I know, only one other reader of Browne (seventeenth-century French physician Guy Patin) had previously used to refer to him. Finally, and more importantly, Borges argues that Browne's style, famously obscure with its labyrinthine syntax and its abundance of Greek, Latin, and newly coined terms, was actually the reflection of an effort to achieve perspicuity. We should bear in mind that in the mid-17th century, Latin (and, to a lesser degree, Greek) was still the educated language, so this latinate English allows him to reach wider audiences in the Continent and engage in dialogue with his peers with a lexicon that prevented misunderstandings. The young Borges took note of this lesson in the importance of clarity as he elaborated his own style. As Andrew Hurley has shown in his examination of Borges's enduring engagement with ele-

5 Rosenstein compares some of these fragments with the translation of chapters 4 and 5 of *Urn Burial* that Borges and Bioy Casares published in *Sur* (111), in 1944. For more on the connections between "Tlön" and the *Sur* translation see Weed (38-42), García, Blanco (38), and Johnson (175). For the Javier Marías fiasco of the fake attribution see Marías, Rosenstein (301-302), and García.

6 For more on Borges's latinate Spanish and its baroque origins see Blanco (45) and Hurley (75).

ments from the Baroque style of his early writings, throughout his career the Argentine writer continued to use these etymologized adjectives (“Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la *unánime* noche” is perhaps the most famous example), and never lost that taste for “Baroque shocks” which he had acquired from Browne and Quevedo (Hurley 78-79).⁷

Even though he never again dedicated a whole prose piece to Browne, the English physician makes periodic appearances in Borges’s work. Whereas oftentimes he is referenced and cited, just as often he is not; his notions and conceits, his elaborate syntax, and his taste for all kinds of extravagances showing up without attribution, appropriated by Borges and incorporated into his own literary imagination.⁸ In the words of Rosato and Álvarez, “la lectura de Browne fue tan profundamente asimilada por Borges que formaba parte de su repertorio personal” (71). While critics who studied Borges’s engagement with Sir Thomas Browne have almost invariably centered their attention on these explicit references (and overwhelmingly on the one at the ending of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”),⁹ I would like to draw attention to lesser known moments in Borges that evoke Browne.

Let us begin with an idea that plays a key role in the Argentine writer’s literary imagination, “the fallacy in duration.” First expressed by Browne in *Urn Burial* (1658), this notion describes the vanity that throughout history has driven certain, usually powerful, men to have funerary monuments built for them in the hopes of persisting after death. This delusion rests upon what Browne calls the “fallacy in duration” (308), a self-serving, vain, and misleading logic that overlooks the fact that everything is perishable and that nothing is eternal but eternity itself; in Browne’s words,

7 Roland Christ examined this habit of etymologizing adjectives in his 1968 monograph *The Narrow Act* (35). This is the first full-length analysis of Borges’s work published in English, after a handful of doctoral dissertations from the 1960s that remain unpublished. For more on the early reception of Borges in the Anglo-Saxon world, see Caballero (64-82).

8 Christ argues that the most valuable lesson Borges learns from Browne is methodical, “the construction of a literary work with purely, or almost purely, literary elements” (Christ 159).

9 The most brilliant reading of Browne’s role at the ending of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” remains that by Kaplan, who argues that the story itself is the actual translation referenced by the narrator. Building up on this notion of translation as rewriting, Johnson argues that translation for Borges is the ultimate form of *imitatio* (175).

“pyramids [are] pillars of snow, and all that’s past a moment” (309). In “La supersticiosa ética del lector,” an essay first published in 1930 and later included in *Discusión* (1932), Borges takes up this idea to condemn a variation of it that he sees as prevalent among writers and critics. By the superstitious ethics of the reader, Borges means a dogmatic belief in the superiority of form (or style) over content. And he denounces a trend among some of his contemporaries—one for which he ultimately blames fundamentalists of style like Flaubert who read looking for particular stylistic traits that they consider to be marks of quality.¹⁰ Borges argues instead that the importance and endurance of a work like *Don Quixote*, for example, whose prose is excessive and unpolished, proves that stylistic perfection is nothing but a fatuous fixation. And he goes on, “[e]sta vanidad del estilo se ahueca en otra más patética vanidad, la de la perfección”; in particular, the notion that a “perfect” work of literature constitutes a monument destined to guarantee the writer’s immortality (OC 203). Herein lies, Borges adds, the “falacia en perduración (Sir Thomas Browne: *Urn Burial*).” Whereas for Browne, a pious Anglican, the antidote against such mundane vanities is Christian faith and the belief in a spiritual form of immortality brought upon by resurrection upon Judgement Day, for Borges, a staunch agnostic, the fallacy in duration collides against the hope (and the fear) that death be the instance of total dissolution, absolute annihilation, complete and utter oblivion.

This idea informs the plot of “El Aleph,” first published in *Sur* in September of 1945. A young woman dies and a man who loved her unrequitedly swears to keep her memory alive against the overwhelming forces of time. In the first line Borges reaches out to Browne without mentioning him. The allusion here is not to *Urn Burial* but to a lesser known text, *A Letter to a Friend*, published posthumously by Browne’s son in 1690. Borges begins,

La candente mañana de febrero en que Beatriz Viterbo murió, después de una imperiosa agonía que no se rebajó un solo instante ni al sentimenta-

10 Piglia points out the irony of this denunciation since it is precisely what Borges’s adversaries accused him of; a cold, cerebral and lifeless obsession with stylistic perfection (154). Berveiller, in turn, points out an even bigger irony: Borges, who considered *Urn Burial* to be stylistically perfect, uses ideas from it to denounce the obsession with stylistic perfection (249).

lismo ni al miedo, noté que las carteleras de fierro de la Plaza Constitución habían renovado no sé qué aviso de cigarrillos rubios; el hecho me dolió pues comprendí que el incesante y vasto universo ya se apartaba de ella y que ese cambio era el primero de una serie infinita. (OC 617)

To the narrator, the new billboards in Plaza Constitución bring stark confirmation that time is already moving on and will continue to do so relentlessly, sinking the beloved more and more into the abyss of the past and into forgetfulness. In *A Letter to a Friend*, Browne communicates to his friend Sir John Pettus the death of one of his patients, very possibly a man named Robert Loveday who was also a dear friend to Pettus (Huntley). Loveday was a young man, a writer and translator, who died of tuberculosis in 1656. Browne's letter is a wise and compassionate appeal to a grieving friend that ends with a series of pieces of advice on how to live well and on how to face the inevitability of death with piety and moral integrity. As he breaks the unfortunate news to Pettus, Browne writes: "...for tho' he left this world not very many days past, yet every hour you know largely addeth unto that dark society" (391). This "dark society" is death understood as a community formed by all the things that have passed away. The notion of a progressive advance towards it resonates strongly with Borges's "incesante y vasto universo" that slowly recedes away from Beatriz Viterbo.

Paul Elmer More has suggested that *A Letter to a Friend*, "with its lingering absorption in the present mystery creeping upon the world before the very eyes of the watcher like an all-obliterating shadow out of the infinite, may be regarded as a complement to the *Urn Burial* with its rhapsody on the memorials of the past" (508). This is a sensible suggestion, not least because both texts were written around the same time, between 1656 and 1658. *Urn Burial* centers on the aftermath of death and on the different ways in which cultures throughout history have handled the bodies and preserved the memory of the departed. Like all of Browne's works, it is a strange text that defies comparison and eludes generic distinctions. It begins as an archeological examination of a group of funerary urns found in a field in Old Walsingham, not far from Norwich, but it immediately becomes an erudite survey of funerary practices across history to eventually turn into a metaphysical meditation on death, eternity, the afterlife, and the vanity that impels men to build monuments to themselves in

the hopes of being remembered and (so they hope) becoming immortal. Browne's conclusion is categorical: "In vain do individuals hope for immortality, or any patent from oblivion, in preservation below the moon [...] there is nothing strictly immortal but immortality" (312). And, later on, he adds: "Pyramids, arches, obelisks were but the irregularities of vain-glory, and wild enormities of ancient magnanimity" (314).¹¹

In "El Aleph," the narrator understands early on the futility of any attempts to fight against the implacable forces of oblivion. He knows that time is bound to handle the memory of the deceased with much more violence than that with which the process of corruption treats the corpse—after all, bones turn into fossils and endure for millennia, whereas names and memories last but a few generations at best. That early awareness of time going by relentlessly upon noticing the new billboards is followed by a romantic outburst immediately mitigated by the acknowledgment of its own superfluity: "Cambiará el universo pero yo no, pensé con melancólica vanidad" (OC 617). In realizing that the thought is fueled by melancholy and vanity, the narrator embodies at once the misguided hope to perpetuate the memory of the dead *and* an understanding of the fallacy in duration. Borges's narrator stands thus in a contradictory, or rather in an extemporaneous position; determined to preserve the memory of Beatriz from forgetfulness like a *porteño* Dante, while at the same time aware that his project is invariably doomed since, as George Harrison sings paraphrasing Timothy Leary's psychedelic gloss of the *Tao Te Ching*, "all things must pass."

The narrator's enterprise is quixotic in the strictest sense; it unfolds simultaneously in two different spheres of reality. Appropriately, the conundrum finds a strictly literary solution. Whereas in the natural world all things are in fact destined to disappear and Browne's (and Borges's) fallacy in duration is a fair critique of any attempts to prevent that, the literary imagination *is* able to create worlds where nothing ever passes. The fantasy of the Aleph is precisely that, an infinitesimal point hidden in the unlikeliest corner of the universe that contains and preserves everything

11 "Magnanimity" here means not so much generosity, but nobility and a perceived greatness of one's own spirit that derives in affectation of grandeur (OED). It is worth pointing out that "magnánimo" is one of the examples provided by Hurley of Borges's baroque habit of etymologizing adjectives (74-75).

that is. We see then that the contradiction of the narrator's emotional state in the beginning is resolved in the climactic epiphany of the Aleph. The "incesante y vasto universo" might move away from her with every passing hour adding unto the dark society, but she will always remain in that mysterious vortex of totality. The extemporaneous vantage point of the beginning of the story thus prefigures its climax intimating a realization that Borges, borrowing from Thomas de Quincey, will capture beautifully some two decades later in the first line of "Everness," "Solo una cosa no hay. Es el olvido."¹²

Although the Aleph guarantees permanence, it is not the kind sought after by vainglorious men. In it (or, rather, in the description of it), the world is preserved as a random collection of fragments. London is a broken labyrinth (post World War II? After the Great Fire of 1666?). There is a sunset in Querétaro, an empty bedroom in Buenos Aires, a circle of dirt where a tree once stood, a breast tumor. Beatriz Viterbo lives on in an obscene letter that she once wrote to her cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, and in her mortal remains, "una reliquia atroz." As complete and universal as the Aleph is, in the hopelessly abbreviated description that accounts for it, it becomes something more akin to a cabinet of curiosities. The narrator's description thus presents an alternative to Carlos Argentino Daneri's naïve and pretentious attempt to give a full account of the Aleph in an impossible poem titled "La Tierra." Daneri has regular access to the Aleph and his project, as he boastfully announces to the narrator, consists in a complete description of the planet. The narrator compares "La Tierra" with Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (first published in 1612, and subsequently in 1622 in an extended version), a maniacal portrait of England in its topography, geography, hydrography, history, and more --basically, an attempt to contain the country in a book that makes one think of "Del rigor en la ciencia" (1946), where Borges presents a *reductio ad absurdum* of cartography by imagining a map large as the territory that it represents. Against this attempt to contain the whole universe, the narrator in "El Aleph" adopts the attitude of the antiquarian. And while Michael Drayton serves as the explicit model for Carlos Argentino Daneri, Thomas Browne provides a silent prototype for the narrator who, aware as he is of the limi-

12 Christ points out the connection between the notion of forgetting as an antidote to immortality in Borges's "Funes el memorioso" and in De Quincey's writings (212-213).

tations of language, behaves as a collector of wonders and offers a brief but exquisitely curated enumeration.

Urn Burial might be Browne's best-known exercise in antiquarianism, but it is also a text that mutates so strangely that ends up self-consuming.¹³ While the short treatise begins as a study of Anglo-Saxon urns (Browne mistakenly took them to be Roman), the historical survey that ensues leads Browne to the fallacy of duration and to the assertion that antiquities, relics, and other memorials to the dead are futile and vain. In spite of this, Browne's antiquarian sensibility impregnates all of his works. His house in Norwich, according to John Evelyn who visited him in 1671, was a "cabinet of rarities" (Barbour 396); and among the *Miscellany Tracts*, a collection published posthumously, there are fragments on mummies, instructions on how to dissect and embalm animals, discussions on medals and coins, and even a catalogue that includes the many relics and treasures of Norwich cathedral, ransacked and destroyed by the Roundheads during the Civil War. His most remarkable collection is, however, *Musæum Clausum, or Bibliotheca Abscondita*, the catalogue of a non-existent museum-cum-library. As a "literato," Browne understood that enumerating is the literary equivalent of collecting. Borges too was immensely fond of enumerations--the Chinese emperor's inventory in "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins," Pierre Menard's bibliography, the cast of past lives from "El inmortal" are only the best-known examples, but there are many more, including the description of the Aleph.¹⁴

For Browne, as for the narrator, collecting is at once an aesthetic and moral enterprise grounded in the humbling acceptance of the inevitabil-

13 Ironically, in the very influential *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, Stanley Fish portrays Browne as the epitome of the controlling writer who prevents the reader from engaging with the text in productive and transformative manners. Browne, for Fish, is "the bad physician" who infantilizes the reader and denies them any agency by depriving them of the tools to oversee the process of self-consumption that so many other (in Fish's opinion, more exemplary and praiseworthy) seventeenth-century texts undergo. Fish's shortsighted and malicious reading resulted in over two decades of critical neglect of Browne's work.

14 The ending of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" can also be read as a vindication of the collector's attitude. Faced with the nightmarish perspective of a homogenous future with no linguistic variety, the narrator undertakes a flight to the past and to a world of infinite variety--the past of the antiquarian and the collector of rarities; the world of Francisco de Quevedo and Sir Thomas Browne.

ity of ultimate loss but, more importantly, impermeable to the illusion of exhaustivity. Collections are always fragmentary and a good collector is fully cognizant of their own limitations. This awareness, consonant with the denunciation of vanities such as the fallacy in duration, also comes into play in what I will call “the epistemology of the quincunx,” a cognitive paradigm suggested in Browne’s *The Garden of Cyrus*. Published along with *Urn Burial*, *The Garden of Cyrus* introduces the geometric pattern of the quincunx (Browne also calls it “rhombus,” “lozenge,” and “texture”) and records its pervasiveness across the natural, artificial, and spiritual worlds. Like *Urn Burial*, the text begins with an analysis of a concrete phenomenon; in this case, a particular gardening technique that calls for planting trees and bushes forming a rhomboidal shape. And like *Urn Burial*, it soon becomes something else. First, a survey of *quincuncial* artifacts, cities, armies, a dizzying array of living organisms, planets, etcetera; then, a meditation on the very design that informs divine creation. Whereas other authors who discussed the quincunx (among them, Browne cites Virgil, Quintilian, Benoît de Court, and Giambattista della Porta) focused merely on gardening, for Browne the pattern transcends the sphere of plantations; its ubiquity, in fact, provides concrete evidence of the connection between human, natural, and divine design. “Todas las cosas son artificiales porque la naturaleza es el arte de Dios,” Borges summarizes quoting from *Religio Medici* in “Del culto a los libros” (1951) (OC 716).

The network pattern of the quincunx is the fabric of everything that is. Amidst the formidable variety of examples, Browne includes lattice windows (*fenestræ reticulatæ*) in which he sees a symbol of the double nature of Christ, at once visible and invisible, flesh and spirit. The quincuncial window allows us to see through it while its net-patterned frame marks the limits of our perception. As such, it suggests a way of conceiving knowledge. The lines represent the method of knowing by dividing, categorizing, and compartmentalizing, while through the holes in the warp of the quincunx looms the never-ending ocean of the unknown. The epistemology of the quincunx conflates our quest for knowledge with the revelation of the unfathomable abyss that lies beyond. And so, the quincunx is the net that we cast on the universe simultaneously hoping to catch some scraps of understanding and aware of the fact that all knowledge we do catch will be invariably fragmentary.

In the early 1940s, when Borges wrote the stories that would eventually win him international recognition, he was reading Browne voraciously, and not just *Urn Burial* as this essay has argued.¹⁵ The figure of the quincunx makes key appearances in some of his best-known texts. It features in the yellow lozenges of a window at Emma Zunz's childhood home, in Lanús, and in the lobby of the apartment where she loses her virginity, thus connecting the two spaces, and acting in her as an emotional reminder of the pressing need to move forward with the *vendetta*. More notably, the pattern plays a crucial role in "La muerte y la brújula." The connection between the red and yellow rhombuses on the front of the paint store where the second crime is committed, the drunken harlequins in yellow, red, and green lozenge-pattern outfits, and, finally, the (also yellow, red, and green) lozenges on the window of the house at Triste-le-Roy draws a map leading Erik Lönnrot to his tragic fate. Lönnrot is the fourth victim (I am, of course, including the fake victim), which makes Red Scharlach the fifth point that completes the quincunx.¹⁶

But there is a much subtler and significant allusion linking "La muerte y la brújula" with Browne. By comparing Lönnrot with the *Ur*-detective Auguste Dupin, the story calls attention to Poe's pioneering work "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), which opens with an epigraph from *Urn Burial*. In doing this, Borges recognizes Browne as the patron saint of modern detective fiction. The quotation reads, "What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture" (307). This notion bespeaks Lönnrot's motto: reality has no obligation to be interesting; hypotheses, on the other hand, do. A detective's conjectures are lines drawn to make sense of the horror of murder. In turn, the morass of human passions (in this story, like in "Emma Zunz," the killer

15 Apart from the fragmentary translation of *Urn Burial*, published in 1944, between 1944 and 1947 Borges and Bioy Casares spent long and--according to Bioy--very happy hours editing and annotating a volume of selected works by Browne for a collection of "Sumas" that was due to be published by Emecé. Unfortunately, the project never saw the light of day. For more on this see Balderston (174).

16 The first one who noticed this and drew a connection between "La muerte y la brújula" and *The Garden of Cyrus* was Christ (130 and 142, note 34). For another insightful take on the significance of the rhomboidal pattern in the story see De Ipola (8-14).

is motivated by a thirst for revenge) stands for the background chaos that lies beyond.¹⁷

The narrator of “El Aleph” also evinces a quincuncial understanding of death when he swears to keep Beatriz Viterbo’s memory alive while acknowledging the melancholy vanity of his oath. In the epistemology of the quincunx, the need for order and the drive towards the advancement of understanding coexist harmoniously with the acceptance of a great unfathomable mystery. This ambivalent certainty also informs the main theme in “El Aleph.” The totality and simultaneity of the narrator’s vision and the limited and successive nature of language, collide resulting in an account—an enumeration—that is ineluctably fragmentary. In the narrator’s words,

el problema central es irresoluble: la enumeración, siquiera parcial, de un conjunto infinito. En ese instante gigantesco, he visto millones de actos deleitables o atroces; ninguno me asombró como el hecho de que todos ocuparan el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es. Algo, sin embargo, recogeré. (OC 625)

In the second epigraph that introduces the story, a quotation by Thomas Hobbes (incidentally, another seventeenth-century English writer), we have the theoretical distillation of the Aleph prefigured as an *hic-stans*, an “infinite greatness of place” that functions as spatial correlate to the notion of *nunc-stans* by means of which Scholastics explained eternity. Hobbes, a materialist many of whose writings have a pungent smell of atheism, mentions these concepts in order to assert their intrinsic incomprehensibility. The epigraph therefore functions as a disclaimer, a warning to the reader that no one can understand eternity just like nobody would be able to comprehend an Aleph. And yet the narrator—a writer—as well as his nemesis, Carlos Argentino Daneri—also a writer—cannot help but try. The acceptance of the contradiction between the simultaneity of the Aleph and the successive nature of language, resonates strongly with the narrator’s

17 There is a much more explicit allusion to *The Garden of Cyrus* in “El Aleph” when the narrator includes among the many things he sees “las muchedumbres de América” (OC 625). This hints at the end of *The Garden of Cyrus* and the extemporaneous vision in which Browne evokes the “huntsmen in America” waking up to start their day as he prepares to put the pen down and go to sleep (387).

initial acknowledgment of his goal to preserve the memory of the beloved as nothing but melancholy vanity.

As I mentioned earlier, *The Garden of Cyrus* was published alongside *Urn Burial*. The two are companion treatises; they not only complement each other but are also mirror images of one another. Divided into five chapters each (ie. quincuncially), they both take as departure point a concrete topic/object (funerary urns, a plantation technique) of which they include an illustration. Early on they both become surveys (enumerations, really), and eventually mutate into metaphysical meditations. Their topics are complementary, too. Whereas *Urn Burial* reflects upon death, corruption, the afterlife, and the fate of mortal remains, *The Garden of Cyrus* considers life, verdancy, growth, and the invisible design of creation. "Garden, ashes," to say it with Danilo Kiš, who was too a transmigratory friend to Browne and to Borges (and De Quincey, and W.G. Sebald, *et al.*).

In "El Aleph," Browne's companion essays converge like underground rivers and become one single stream of influence that shapes the narrative. The epistemology of the quincunx and the fallacy in duration, along with the insight about the inexorably accumulative force of time, act as building blocks for the story. Towards that end, when the narrator tries to describe what he saw, he realizes that he can only produce a fragmentary enumeration. He prefaces his selection with an expression of awe in the face of that inexhaustible and ineffable vision that is the Aleph. This is reminiscent of the ending of both *The Garden of Cyrus* and *Urn Burial* where Browne brings attention to the great mystery of eternity and to the never-ending enterprise that human knowledge entails.

In Borges's story, however, total knowledge is possible. After his vision, the narrator knows each and every single thing in existence and he has seen every nook and cranny of the universe. Walking down the street, all faces seem familiar; the narrator has seen them all.¹⁸ The realization

18 Faces play a key role in Browne's writings. The writer cultivated a long-standing interest in physiognomy and marveled at the fact that no two human faces are exactly alike (136). But there is also the idea, which Borges picks up in "La escritura del dios," that the surface of the body is a parchment where God writes his masterpiece, the natural world. Newton de Molina (37) points out the connection between that story and this passage from *Religio Medici*: "[T]here are mystically in our faces certain characters which carry in them the motto of our Soules" (135). And in *A Letter To A Friend*, Browne calls to his addressee's attention a most peculiar phenomenon he witnessed during the dying young

terrifies him and one cannot but think of the atrocious plight of Funes, el memorioso. In the end, oblivion comes to the rescue like a *deus ex machina*.

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

We end where we began, Plaza Constitución, a generic, gray, massive transportation hub; a non-place that functions as an antidote to the all-encompassing space, the *hic-stans* of the Aleph. However, this is a fake ending. The story includes a postscript where the narrator expresses his doubts regarding the authenticity of the Aleph he saw, a classic Borges metanarrative twist. The postscript also informs the reader that, after Daneri's house was demolished and he was deprived of any further access to the Aleph, the narrator's hated adversary published a selection of "trozos argentinos," fragments from his many viewings. Unlike his previous project, the impossibly comprehensive account of planet earth, this fragmentary piece by Daneri is well received and is even awarded the second prize at a contest in which the narrator also participates, although his work does not receive even one vote.¹⁹ Ever the underdog to Daneri, resentful and disgruntled, the narrator then suggests that the Aleph in the house on Garay street was a fake. Of course, he cannot be sure of it because ultimately—and with these words the story *does* finally end—"Nuestra mente es porosa para el

man's final moments, "that odd mortal symptom [...] not mention'd by Hippocrates, that is to lose his own face and look like some of his near Relations; for he maintain'd not his proper Countenance but looked like his Uncle, the lines of whose face lay deep and invisible in his healthful visage before: for as from our beginning we run through variety of looks before we come to consistent and settled faces; so before our end, by sick and languishing alterations, we put on new visages: and in our retreat to Earth may fall upon such looks which from community of seminal originals were before latent in us" (392). This very idea appears in "El Zahir" when the narrator notices at the funeral of Teodelina Villar how "en los velorios el progreso de la corrupción hace que el muerto recupere sus caras anteriores" (OC 590).

19 Borges's typical self-deprecation acquires here a metanarrative dimension when we learn that the work submitted by the narrator was titled *Los naipes del tahúr*. This was the title of an anarchist essay written circa 1919, that Borges later burnt. As Aguilar points out, "tahúr" is also a word used to describe Erik Lönnrot (OC 499) and one that features more than once in his detective fiction, including in the stories penned with Bioy Casares under the pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq (278).

olvido; yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo, bajo la trágica erosión de los años, los rasgos de Beatriz” (*OC* 628). The actual ending, like the fake one, takes us back to the beginning and to the inevitability of Beatriz’s vanishing.

In 1646, Thomas Browne published *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, an encyclopedia of vulgar errors and superstitious beliefs, each one carefully assessed with daunting erudition by the author and ultimately debunked. Borges knew this work well and used it as a source for *El libro de los seres imaginarios* (1967).²⁰ In the introduction, Browne disputes the Platonic notion according to which knowing is remembering things that our disembodied souls once learned and forgot after crossing the Lethe on their way to new incarnations. It is actually the other way around, Browne argues; knowledge is built gradually as we forget all of our false notions and erroneous beliefs. Therefore, oblivion, for Browne, is both the fate of all that ever lived and the condition of possibility for human knowledge. In a similar vein, “El Aleph” describes the journey of man from resisting to accept the ineluctability of forgetfulness to realizing that oblivion allows one to focus on the world intelligently and to understand it in all its fragmentary and overwhelming variety.

Borges’s literary career is bookended by two texts in which the influence of Sir Thomas Browne is as clear as it is profound. In *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, the fledgling poet writes,

No arriesgue el mármol temerario
 Gárrulas excepciones a la omnipotencia del olvido.
 [...]

 Ciegamente reclama duración el alma arbitraria
 Cuando la tiene asegurada en vidas ajenas
 Cuando tú mismo eres la continuación realizada
 De quienes no alcanzaron tu tiempo
 Y serán otros a su vez tu inmortalidad en la tierra. “Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro”

The first two lines refer the reader both in style and in content to *Urn Burial* as they warn against the fallacy in duration. But towards the end,

²⁰ See the chapters on the Amphisbaena, the Borametz, and the Basilisk (*LSI* 13, 60, and 52).

the poet asserts his own idea of immortality, one that differs dramatically from Browne's. Neither as disembodied souls awaiting Judgment Day, nor on marble and stone do we live on, but in and through others, Borges concludes. In his old age, Borges would insist time and again in his wish that dying would bring utter annihilation. "Estoy harto de Borges," he'd famously say in interviews when asked about the impending reality of death. But like the narrator in "El Aleph," Borges knew that this too was an expression of melancholy vanity. Nearing the end of his life, the old poet says a prayer,

Defiéndeme, Señor, del impaciente
 Apetito de ser mármol y olvido;
 Defiéndeme de ser el que ya he sido,
 El que ya he sido irreparablemente.
 No de la espada o de la roja lanza
 Defiéndeme, sino de la esperanza. "Religio Medici, 1643" (OC 1103)

The address to the Lord is formulaic. This is the prayer of a superstitious agnostic who stands between the burden of the past and the vanity of hope projecting its bright shadow into the future. The plight of having been and the fear of continuing to be for all eternity alternates with the impatient desire for his name, written in marble or on the cover of a book, to persist. In his life-long friendship with Browne, Borges found tools to ruminate on this fundamental dilemma as well as words to turn it into literature.

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