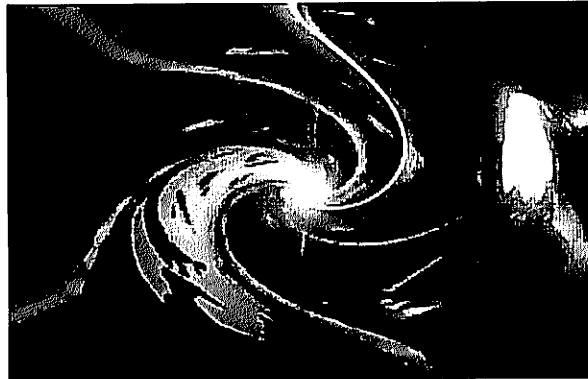




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## Aleph, Beatriz, Carlos Argentino

By Barbara Joan Schaffer

In Henri-Georges Clouzot's documentary *The Mystery of Picasso*, we watch the artist, working in pen and ink, draw lines and create images which he later largely obliterates by inking them out or drawing something else over them. It's painful to watch, because each line seems so perfect. Yet one finally gets the sense that each completed work contains all of its now (mostly) hidden elements. Perhaps this is how Borges also worked, because so many of his stories, short as they are, explore various seemingly unrelated themes. Each reading, and each reader, foregrounds one or another of these themes and this constant shifting of perception is, arguably, Borges's greatest genius as a writer.

### NO HOPE, NO HUMILIATION

The Aleph of the title is reported to be "one of the points of space that contains all its points." As wonderful as the Aleph is, it plays a rather small part in the story. Its existence is not even mentioned until the story is over half-way through. Before there is an Aleph, there is the death of Beatriz Viterbo, who had in life spurned her would-be lover, the fictional Borges, who is the first person narrator. With her dead, he says, "I could consecrate myself to her memory, without hope but also without humiliation."

Thus, the first narrative theme is that of the hapless and foolish lover. This is the man who contrives to develop a friendship with Beatriz's cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, just to have the opportunity to visit her old house (where he lives) and to see her many portraits: Beatriz at her wedding, Beatriz after the divorce, at her first communion, at the Riding Club, etc. Borges's muse is a tarnished Beatriz, who he later learns had been her cousin's lover.

### A DREADFUL VERSIFIER

Carlos Argentino Daneri (the Argentine Dante: *Dante Alghieri* [see

*Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Jorge Luis Borges: Ficcionario (México) 1985* 454] turns out to be a dreadful versifier. He believes, of course, that he has written great poetry. The fictional Borges, who is also a writer, gives such an excoriating and passionate description of what constitutes bad writing that one is tempted to say it is the author's own opinion. The three stanzas that are included in the text are in turn banal and ridiculous. [Norman Thomas de Giovanni omits two of these stanzas in his English translation.]

He read me many other stanzas that also won his approval and his profuse commentary. There was nothing memorable in them; I wouldn't even judge them much worse than the first. Application, resignation and chance had collaborated in his writing; the virtues that Daneri attributed to them were after thoughts. I understood that the work of the poet was not in his poetry; it was in the invention of reasons why his poetry was admirable; naturally, this later effort modified the work for him; but not for other people. Daneri's oral diction was extravagant; his heavy-handed metrics kept him, with a few exceptions, from transmitting this extravagance to the poem.

The poem is meant to catalogue in verse the entire planet. "[B]y 1941 he had dispatched some hectares of the state of Queensland, more than a millimeter of the course of the Ob, a gas-meter to the north of Veracruz. ..."

The story thus moves on to its second theme, the poetic vision of the deluded Carlos Argentino Daneri and his efforts to get his work published. Borges does nothing to discourage him, because it is only through him that he has access to the memory of Beatriz, who has now been dead for some 11 years.

#### THE ALEPH IN THE BASEMENT

One day a very agitated Daneri calls Borges to announce that his landlords Zunino and Zungri, "under the pretext of enlarging their already oversized café, were going to demolish his house." His only hope is that his lawyer, Zunni, would sue them for damages. It is only after naming the three Z's that Daneri first mentions the Aleph, which he discovered as a child in the basement of the dining room. The Aleph, he explains, is the source of his poetry. Borges immediately assumes that Daneri is crazy and takes some malicious pleasure in this insight. A family history of insanity might explain some of the beloved Beatriz's shortcomings: "her negligence, distraction, disdain, her genuine cruelty"?

Borges's descent into the basement and his encounter with the Aleph (the third narrative strand) starts with a comic send up of Poe. First he is given a drink of "pseudo cognac," then he is left alone in the dark cellar with the trap door closed behind him.

Suddenly I understood the danger; after drinking poison, I had allowed myself to be buried alive by a madman. Carlos's boasts revealed his innermost fear that I would not see the marvel. Carlos, to defend his hallucination, to avoid confronting his madness, *had to kill me*. I felt a confused malaise, which I tried to attribute to my stiffness, and not to the operation of a narcotic. I closed my eyes, I opened them.

Then I saw the Aleph.

### I SAW A BROKEN LABYRINTH

What follows is a prose poem reminiscent of Whitman, one long vertiginous list of disparate images.

...I clearly saw the universe from every point... I saw a broken labyrinth (it was London), I saw a silvery spiderweb in the center of a black pyramid... I saw in Inverness a woman whom I will not forget, I saw her long, violent locks, her haughty body, I saw a cancer in her breast, I saw a circle of dry dirt in a sidewalk where there had once been a tree... I saw a copy of the first English version of Pliny... I saw at the same time every letter of every page (as a child I used to be amazed at how the letters of a closed book didn't get mixed up and lost in the course of the night)... in a desk drawer (and the handwriting made me tremble) incredible, precise, obscene letters which Beatriz had sent to Carlos Argentino, I saw a beloved tombstone in Chacarita, I saw the atrocious remains of what delightfully had been Beatriz Viterbo, I saw the circulation of my dark blood, I saw the mechanics of love and the modification of death... I saw in the Aleph the world, and in the world once again the Aleph and in the Aleph the world, I saw my face and my guts, I saw your face, and I felt dizzy and I cried...

Now we can compare Borges's litany with the Alexandrine verses of Carlos Argentino, whose opening stanza reads:

*I have beheld, as did the Greek, the towns of man,  
Their works, their days of shifting light and hunger pains;  
I alter not the facts, nor falsify the names,  
But the voyage I tell is... autour de ma chambre.*

Another stanza comes from his section on Australia.

*Let it be known, just to the right of the routine pole  
(Approaching, of course, from the north-northwest)  
A skeleton is bored --Color? Whitish celeste --  
Lending to the sheepfold the countenance of bones.*

The fictional Borges, who is otherwise portrayed as somewhat of a nebbish, is -- in his description of the Aleph -- indistinguishable from Borges the author of the Borgesian oeuvre. The point is very clear: it is not access to a unique experience or perspective that makes one a poet, but rather knowing how to write.

### TWO YEARS LATER

In an epilogue dated March 1, 1943, we learn that Daneri, who now lives in the country, has just won second prize for National Literature, while Borges did not get even a single vote for his *Cards of the Tajúr*. "Once again," he says, "ignorance and envy have triumphed!" Although

his jibe is directed at the literary establishment, it also applies to Borges, who has not been transformed by his numinous encounter with the Aleph.

Finally, there is a farcically overwrought debate (including a library, mysterious manuscripts, mirrors, and references to the *Arabian Nights* and *The Fairie Queene*) over whether or not Borges's Aleph was the true Aleph -- which undermines and obscures the brilliance of his vision of it. Borges ends the story by acknowledging that the argument is moot (another subversion of the text!) because he has, "with the tragic erosion of the years," begun to falsify and lose both his experience of the Aleph and the features of Beatriz.

Please send comments to Barbara Joan Schaffer

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