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# Against Representation: A Note on Jorge Luis Borges' Aleph

## **Abstract**

Faced with the need to represent Jorge Luis Borges's classic tale "The Aleph," which also gives name to his 1949 collection of stories, for decades publishers have resorted to a variety of dependable images, including works by Borges's friend Xul Solar. Yet the argument of the tale is that no human language, either verbal or visual, is capable of summing up the fullness of the object Borges's narrator discovers in a dark Buenos Aires basement. That object—the universe itself—is unrepresentable.

## **Keywords**

Borges, Aleph

## Against Representation: A Note on Jorge Luis Borges' Aleph

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"I saw the unimaginable universe."

I have a vast collection of editions, in multiple languages, of Jorge Luis Borges' book *El Aleph* (1949). In general, there are four types of covers. One type, allergic to representation, is limited to a conventional pattern on which appears the author's name and title. This second depicts some sort of labyrinth. And the third resorts to details of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Or else it uses one of a variety of woodcuts, lithographs, and mezzotints by Dutch artist E. M. Escher, to whom Borges is frequently linked.

The fourth type appears in the original Editorial Losada cover, published in Buenos Aires three years after the end of the Second World War. It reproduces, with some adornment (invoking the work of Argentine artist and Borges' friend Oscar Agustín Alejandro Schulz Solarí, aka Xul Solar), the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which refers to the story "El Aleph," first published in the September 1945 issue of Victoria Ocampo's magazine *Sur*. There are a total of seventeen texts in the volume, including "Emma Zunz" and "*Deutsches Requiem*." Obviously, the fact that this letter is featured on the cover emphasizes the story's importance. In the story, the letter also serves as the name of the magical object Borges, the narrator, describes as he descends into the cellar of Carlos Argentino Daneri's house, where the bulk of the action takes place.

A number of Borges' "*ficciones*," among them "The Library of Babel," "Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," and "The Garden of Forking Paths," have been illustrated, a few as graphic novels, others as hypertexts. The quality, though not homogenous, is estimable. Others have been adapted to the screen, large and small, such as *The Spider's Stratagem*, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, based on "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero." In my estimation, they are all subpar.

"The Aleph" too is an image machine but it is unrepresentable. To me this is, in and of itself, what the story is about.

An homage to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with Beatriz as an elusive object of adoration, the plot is about the ephemerality of love. One of its two epigraphs is from *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2: "O God! I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a King of infinite space . . ." (15). The other is from Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

The fact that the object Borges discovers in Daneri's basement ("somewhat of a pit") is impossible to pin down is stated in the following paragraph. Arguably the best Borges ever wrote, it comes toward the end, when, after counting off nineteen steps, the narrator is finally face to face with the Aleph:

Cada cosa (la luna del espejo, digamos) era infinitas cosas, porque yo claramente la veía desde todos los puntos del universo. Vi el populoso mar, vi el alba y la tarde, vi las muchedumbres de América, vi una plateada telaraña en el centro de una negra pirámide, vi un laberinto roto (era Londres), vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo, vi todos los espejos del planeta y ninguno me reflejó, vi en un traspatio de la calle Soler las mismas baldosas que hace treinta años vi en el zaguán de una casa en Fray Bentos, vi racimos, nieve, tabaco, vetas de metal, vapor de agua, vi convexos desiertos ecuatoriales y cada uno de sus granos de arena, vi en Inverness a una mujer que no olvidaré, vi la violenta cabellera, el altivo cuerpo, vi un cáncer en el pecho, vi un círculo de tierra seca en una vereda, donde antes hubo un árbol, vi una quinta de Adrogué, un ejemplar de la primera versión inglesa de Plinio, la de Philemon Holland, vi a un tiempo cada letra de cada página (de chico, yo solía maravillarme de que las letras de un volumen cerrado no se mezclaran y perdieran en el decurso de la noche), vi la noche y el día contemporáneo, vi un poniente en Querétaro que parecía reflejar el color de una rosa en Bengala, vi mi dormitorio sin nadie, vi en un gabinete de Alkmaar un globo terráqueo entre dos espejos que lo multiplican sin fin, vi caballos de crin arremolinada, en una playa del Mar Caspio en el alba, vi la delicada osatura de una mano, vi a los sobrevivientes de una batalla, enviando tarjetas postales, vi en un escaparate de Mirzapur una baraja española, vi las sombras oblicuas de unos helechos en el suelo de un invernáculo, vi tigres, émbolos, bisontes, marejadas y ejércitos, vi todas las hormigas que hay en la tierra, vi un astrolabio persa, vi en un cajón del escritorio (y la letra me hizo temblar) cartas obscenas, increíbles, precisas, que Beatriz había dirigido a Carlos Argentino, vi un adorado monumento en la Chacarita, vi la reliquia atroz de lo que deliciosamente había sido Beatriz Viterbo, vi la circulación de mi oscura sangre, vi el engranaje del amor y la modificación de la muerte, vi el Aleph, desde todos los puntos, vi en el Aleph la tierra, y en la tierra otra vez el Aleph y en el Aleph la tierra, vi mi cara y mis vísceras, vi tu cara, y sentí vértigo y lloré, porque mis ojos habían visto ese objeto secreto y conjetural, cuyo nombre usurpan los hombres, pero que ningún hombre ha mirado: el inconcebible universo. (625-26)

This is an English translation by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni and the author:

Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery

cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me; I saw in a backyard of Soler Street the same tiles that thirty years before I'd seen in the entrance of a house in Fray Bentos; I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam; I saw convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of sand; I saw a woman in Inverness whom I shall never forget; I saw her tangled hair, her tall figure, I saw the cancer in her breast; I saw a ring of baked mud in a sidewalk, where before there had been a tree; I saw a summer house in Adrogué and a copy of the first English translation of Pliny — Philemon Holland's — and all at the same time saw each letter on each page (as a boy, I used to marvel that the letters in a closed book did not get scrambled and lost overnight); I saw a sunset in Querétaro that seemed to reflect the colour of a rose in Bengal; I saw my empty bedroom; I saw in a closet in Alkmaar a terrestrial globe between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly; I saw horses with flowing manes on a shore of the Caspian Sea at dawn; I saw the delicate bone structure of a hand; I saw the survivors of a battle sending out picture postcards; I saw in a showcase in Mirzapur a pack of Spanish playing cards; I saw the slanting shadows of ferns on a greenhouse floor; I saw tigers, pistons, bison, tides, and armies; I saw all the ants on the planet; I saw a Persian astrolabe; I saw in the drawer of a writing table (and the handwriting made me tremble) unbelievable, obscene, detailed letters, which Beatriz had written to Carlos Argentino; I saw a monument I worshipped in the Chacarita cemetery; I saw the rotted dust and bones that had once deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo; I saw the circulation of my own dark blood; I saw the coupling of love and the modification of death; I saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth; I saw my own face and my own bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon — the unimaginable universe. (26-28)

Borges' first reaction is “a shock of panic, which I tried to pin to my uncomfortable position and not to the effect of a drug” (28). He sees the Aleph in the darkness, on the back part of the step, “a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance” (28). His first impression is that it is revolving. Then he realizes that the movement is “an illusion created by the dizzying world it bounded” (28). He adds: “The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished” (28).

As he is about to describe what his eyes notice, Borges is paralyzed: “I arrive now at the ineffable core of my story. And here begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass?” (28). The paralysis is emblematic because the Aleph contains all language yet it is also beyond language.

One possibility is to see the Aleph as a TV. Black-and-white television appeared in the 1920s. Although the invention did not reach Buenos Aires until 1951, Borges, already suffering from a partial form of blindness, made notice of its arrival in Europe in the forties. More adventurously, the object he describes is imaginable as a version *avant la lettre* of the Internet: all information at once and the semblance of the entire universe at one’s fingertips.

However, what we see on TV is not reality but a reflection. And the Internet is not the universe either.

That Borges attempts a description of what he perceives is proof of his literary mind. He succumbs because he is aware that any representation of what his eyes register is about the tapering of perception. William Blake put it thus in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793): “For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern” (78).

In short, no representation of the Aleph is possible because any illustration must follow a syntax, which de facto pigeonholes the universe into a fixed language. Human language is about falsification.

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