The Aleph Study Guide

The Aleph by Jorge Luis Borges

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Introduction

In his 1969 study *The Narrow Act: Borges's Art of Allusion*, Ronald J. Christ offers an important piece of advice to anyone reading Borges for the first time: "The point of origin for most of Borges's fiction is neither character nor plot . . . but, instead, as in science fiction, a proposition, an idea, a metaphor, which, because of its ingenious or fantastic quality, is perhaps best call[ed] a conceit." "The Aleph" certainly fits this description, for while it does possess the elements of traditional fiction, it is more concerned with exploring the "conceit" of infinity: if there were a point in space that contained all other points, and one could look at it, what would one see—and how would one describe what he or she saw to another person? Such are the questions raised by Borges's story.

"The Aleph" was first published in the Argentine journal *Sur* in 1945 and was included as the title work in the 1949 collection *The Aleph*. Like so many of Borges's other stories, essays, and poems, "The Aleph" is an attempt to explore and dramatize a philosophical or scientific riddle. To date, the story stands as one of Borges's most wellknown and representative works.

In a 1970 commentary on the story, Borges explained, "What eternity is to time, the Aleph is to space." As the narrator of the story discovers, however, trying to describe such an idea in conventional terms can prove a daunting—even impossible —task.

Author Biography

Jorge Luis Borges was born on August 24, 1899, in Buenos Aires, one of Argentina's most famous cities. His father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, was a lawyer; it was in his father's large library that the young "Georgie" (as he was called) discovered his love of reading. When Borges was a young boy, his family moved to Palermo, a suburb of Buenos Aires. Surprisingly, Borges did not begin attending school until he was nine years old. Because of the fear of tuberculosis, which was being transmitted at a deadly rate among schoolchildren, his mother, his English grandmother, and an English governess tutored him. Both English and Spanish were spoken in the Borges house, and many of Borges's favorite authors were ones who wrote in English. H. G. Wells, Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were some of the authors he discovered in his youth for whom he held a lifelong enthusiasm. The first book he ever read from start to finish was Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*

In 1914, Borges traveled through Europe with his family. The outbreak of World War I forced them to stay for some time in Geneva, Switzerland, where Borges finished his secondary education. In 1919, he traveled to Spain and found himself one of the members of the *Ultraists*, a number of writers contributing to a vaguely defined literary movement that aimed to renew literature through radical techniques. As Borges explains in his *An Autobiographical Essay*, however, literature was "a branch of the arts of which they knew nothing whatever." Before leaving Spain in 1921, Borges published his first poem, "Hymn to the Sea," in the magazine *Grecia.*

Upon returning to Buenos Aires in 1921, Borges collaborated on the magazine *Prisma*, notable for its unusual method of delivery—it was pasted, muralstyle, on the walls of the city. The next ten or so years saw Borges publishing a number of books, both collections of poetry and essays. His poetry collections include 1923's *Fervor of Buenos Aires*, 1925's *Moon Across the Way*, and 1929's *San Martin Copybook*. His essay collections were 1925's *Inquisitions*, 1926's *The Measure of My Hope*, 1928's *The Language of the Argentines*, 1930s *Evaristo Carriego* and 1932's *Discussion*. In 1935, Borges published his first attempt at prose fiction, *A Universal History of Infamy*. Two years later, he took a librarian's post at a small municipal Buenos Aires library.

During subsequent years, Borges remained in Argentina and perfected the techniques for his short, puzzling stories. In 1941, a collection of stories, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, was published to great acclaim. When Borges was not awarded the National Prize for Literature in 1942, the influential journal *Sur* devoted a special issue to protesting the award committee's decision. In 1944, *Ficciones*, one of his most popular and important collections, was published.

Despite his status, he was removed from his librarian's post in 1946 for political reasons. With the 1955 overthrow of the Perón government, he was appointed Director of the National Library in Buenos Aires. His reputation now confirmed, Borges enjoyed a life of travel, lecturing, honorary degrees, and worldwide recognition. In 1961, he shared

the International Publishers' Prize with Samuel Beckett and lectured on Argentine literature at the University of Texas. The year 1962 saw Borges's first two English publications: the translation of *Ficciones* and *Labyrinths*, an anthology of stories, essays, and poems. As his fame grew, his eyesight worsened, and by 1964 he was totally blind. However, this did not affect his prolific output and he continued publishing books of verse, essays, lectures, and stories until his death (from liver cancer) on June 14, 1986.

Plot Summary

"The Aleph" begins in 1943 with Borges (the narrator) informing the reader of his love for Beatriz Viterbo, who (we are told) died in 1929. In an effort to devote himself "to her memory," Borges began visiting Beatriz's father and cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, every April thirtieth—Beatriz's birthday. These visits occurred every year, and Borges gradually ingratiated himself with Beatriz's father and cousin to the point where they began asking him to dinner.

At the conclusion of one such dinner (on Sunday, April 30, 1941), Daneri begins pontificating to Borges about subjects such as "the glorification of modern man" and the idea that, at this date, "actual travel was superfluous," since modern man enjoys a number of ways to experience the pleasures of the world without leaving his home. Thinking his host a fool but not wanting to insult him, Borges suggests to him that he record his observations for posterity; Daneri explains that he has already begun to do so and then shows Borges the poem upon which he has been working for years. Simply titled *The Earth*, Daneri's poem is an attempt to encapsulate the entire planet into verse. He reads a passage to Borges and praises his own merits as a poet; Borges, however, finds the poem uninteresting and even thinks that Daneri's reasons for why his poem should be admired are actually more clever and artistic than the poem itself.

Two Sundays later, Daneri telephones Borges and asks him to meet at Zunino and Zungri's salon, located next to his house. After reading him some additional fragments of the poem and telling of his plan to publish some of its initial cantos, Daneri asks Borges a favor: will he use his influence as a writer to contact his fellow author Alvaro Melian Lafinur and ask him to pen an introduction? And will Borges himself offer to attach his name to a blurb (that Daneri himself had already composed) about the poem's greatness? Borges agrees, but thinks, on his way home, that he will do nothing, partly because of his own laziness and partly because he has found Daneri a self-important fool.

Borges expects Daneri to telephone him again and rail against his "indolence" in not securing Lafinur's preface, but Daneri never does. Months pass until one day in October Daneri telephones the narrator and complains that Zunino and Zungri are planning to expand their salon—and knock down his house in the process. This seems reason enough for concern, but Daneri further explains that the real reason he was so upset was that there was an Aleph in his basement. An Aleph, he explains, "is one of the points in space that contains all other points," and he needs the Aleph to help him compose his poem. Because the Aleph is "the only place on earth where all places are—seen from every angle, each standing clear, without confusion or blending," its loss will mean an end to Daneri's poem. Borges tells Daneri that he will come to see it, convinced that Daneri is a madman but also filled with "spiteful elation," since he and Daneri have, "deep down," always "detested each other."

Once there, Borges speaks tenderly to a portrait of Beatriz until Daneri interrupts, offering Borges a glass of cognac and leading him to the cellar, giving him instructions

to lay on the floor at the base of the stairs and look at the nineteenth step. Daneri leaves and shuts the door; Borges worries that Daneri has poisoned the cognac and then locked him in the cellar to die. These fears, however, are dispelled once Borges sees the Aleph, a point of space no larger than an inch but which contains the entire universe.

Borges then breaks the narrative by describing the "despair" he faces in using language to replicate the experience of seeing the Aleph. Because language is apprehended sequentially, a reader cannot fully grasp the nature of seeing the Aleph, where all images are seen simultaneously. Having no tools other than words, however, Borges proceeds and offers a selective list of some of the things he saw in the Aleph: the sea, London, bunches of grapes, a Scottish woman, horses' manes, armies, tigers, Beatriz's "obscene" letters to Daneri, and his own face.

Daneri returns and asks Borges if he saw everything, but to spite him, Borges evades the question and advises Daneri to let his house be demolished so that he can "get away from the pernicious metropolis" and live in the fresh air of the country. Once on the street, Borges fears that "not a single thing on earth" will ever again surprise him; after a few "sleepless nights," however, he is "visited once more by oblivion."

The story then returns to the present (March 1, 1943), where Borges explains that Daneri's house was pulled down and that his poem was published to great acclaim, wining the Second National Prize for Literature. After a discussion of the etymology of the word "aleph," Borges states his belief that the Aleph he saw in Daneri's basement was a "false Aleph." Citing the author and traveler Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton, Borges tells of other "Alephs" throughout literature and concludes with the thought that "our minds are porous and forgetfulness seeps in." Because he can no longer say for certain whether or not he did, indeed, see all things in Daneri's cellar, he is doubtful of all human memory, including that of the face of his beloved Beatriz.

Summary

"The Aleph" is a short story, which superficially is about the relationship of the narrator, Borges, to the cousin of a woman Borges once loved. The woman, Beatriz Viterbo, dies in 1929, but Borges continues to visit her home every April 30th, which is the anniversary of her birthday. Still living at Beatriz' home are her father and her cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri. Borges eventually forms an uneasy friendship with Carlos, who introduces Borges to a magical sphere, which Daneri names an Aleph.

The story opens with an epigraph consisting of two quotes: one from Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, and the other from a work titled, *Leviathan*, by Thomas Hobbs. The first quote, "O, God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a King of infinite space," is very clearly a reference to an Aleph, which Carlos discovers at stair nineteen in his basement. An Aleph is "one of the points in space that contain [sic] all other points."

The second quote also refers to the Aleph using the reference of time. Hobbs says in *Leviathan* that "eternity is the Standing still of the Present Time." The Aleph, then, contains in the exact moment when viewing it, all that happens in the past, present, and future.

On the morning of Beatriz Viterbo's death, Borges laments that a new advertisement has arrived on the billboard near his home. Borges decides to continue his devotion to Beatriz posthumously, and with this decision believes it his duty to stop by her house and visit with her father and cousin. The visit also gives Borges an opportunity to examine the many pictures of Beatriz displayed throughout the parlor.

Over the years, Borges contrives to stay longer and longer during his visits with Beatriz' kin on anniversary of Beatriz' birthday, sharing the evening meal with them and gradually gaining the confidence of Beatriz' cousin, Carlos. Borges describes Beatriz and then moves on to describe Carlos. Carlos seems to be a collection of contradictions, but it is obvious Borges thinks disparagingly of Carlos.

Borges must suffer through many one-way dialogues with Carlos, with Carlos doing most of the speaking. Carlos is self-important, believing his ideas are novel and learned. Borges facetiously suggests that Carlos write down the ideas. Carlos responds that he has done so in a collection Carlos calls "Prologue-Canto." Borges requests that Carlos read from this collection. Carlos complies by reading a stanza from a poem entitled, "The Earth." Carlos continues to read numerous more verses, stopping after each verse to point out how brilliant the work is. Borges compares the tediousness of Carlos' poetry to the fifteen thousand line work about England by Michael Drayton, believing that Carlos' writing is even more tiresome than that of Drayton.

Carlos is determined to versify a description of the entire planet. Borges points out that Carlos has a good start with much of Queensland and several other places already described in verse. Carlos believes that Borges admires his verse and reads a sample

from his Australia poetry. Carlos then gives a line-by-line analysis of the verse, pointing out how dazzling in thought and depth the poetry is.

Carlos invites Borges to join him in a newly-opened cafy for lunch. Borges accepts the invitation with reluctance, and his fears are well founded in that Carlos reads several pages of revised verses that Borges had heard two weeks earlier. Borges thinks to himself that, in addition to the insipidness of the earlier verse, Carlos has revised the lines ostentatiously, i.e., instead of a simple word such as blue, Carlos substitutes words such as "cerulean."

Carlos asks Borges to use his influence to persuade a well-known and respected writer, Alvaro Melibn Lafinur, to write the forward to his work of poetry when it is ready for publication. Borges agrees to the request. Borges, however, decides not to talk to Lafinur. For the next few weeks, Borges is hesitant to answer his telephone, afraid that it will be Carlos asking if Borges has talked to Lafinur. Carlos seems to have forgotten their conversation at the cafy; however, several weeks later, Carlos calls to complain that the owners of the building where Carlos lives are going to demolish the building in order to erect a new business establishment.

Carlos rails on and on about the sentimental feelings he has for the home in which he was born and raised, but then, he subtly interjects the real reason why he is so upset about moving: He has discovered an Aleph in the basement. The Aleph is the source of inspiration for his epic poem. Carlos tells Borges that he discovered the Aleph when he was a boy when he fell down the cellar stairs.

Borges questions Carlos about this Aleph. Carlos replies that it is "where...all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist." Carlos insists that the Aleph is irrefutably his and that is why he will win his lawsuit to keep the house. Borges asks how one can see the Aleph when it is pitch black in the cellar. Carlos replies that the Aleph contains all that exists; therefore, it contains light, so one can see inside it. Borges is quite intrigued; although, he believes Carlos is insane. Borges decides to go over to Carlos' home immediately to view the Aleph for himself.

Borges is delighted to believe that Carlos is insane. Borges believes this based upon what Carlos has said to him about the Aleph. Borges then thinks about Beatriz and decides that she, too, although beloved by Borges, was a little unstable mentally. Borges had not realized that Beatriz was a little insane up until the moment he believes it about Carlos. Despite his sudden thoughts about Beatriz, when he is shown into the living room of her home, he repeats her name several times as if he was a grieving lover, while looking at a picture of her. When Carlos enters the living room, he offers Borges a drink before they go down to the cellar to view the Aleph.

After the drink, the two men descend the cellar steps and Carlos positions Borges in the correct spot to observe the Aleph. Carlos admonishes Borges by telling him that even if Borges does not see the Aleph, it does not invalidate its existence. Carlos instructs Borges as to how to find the Aleph. Carlos adds that once Borges finds the Aleph, Borges will be able to see a multitude of images of Beatriz. Carlos leaves the cellar,

closing the trap door after his exit. Borges has a moment of panic when he imagines that in Carlos' madness, Carlos has poisoned him and is going to lock him in the cellar to die. Borges momentarily closes his eyes and when he reopens them, he spies the Aleph.

Borges falters at this point in the story in trying to describe his experience in looking inside the Aleph. Borges claims the experience is "ineffable," meaning it cannot be described. Borges writes that he saw everything in the universe, both spatially and temporally, concurrently; whereas, he must describe what he saw consecutively. Borges then itemizes many of the images he saw in the Aleph. One image Borges sees is Beatriz' decayed corpse; another is a letter Beatriz wrote to Carlos. Borges wept in awe and pity at the scenes whirling past his vision. As Borges is weeping, Carlos returns and chides Borges for Borges' initial disbelief. Carlos asks if Borges saw the Aleph. Borges, in an uninterested tone, responds that yes, he saw it. Borges decides that the way to get his revenge on Carlos is to refuse to discuss the Aleph, as though it were unimportant.

Borges acts as if he is going along with the idea of the Aleph as a way to placate Carlos. Borges suggests to Carlos that Carlos let them demolish the house and then Carlos find a nice place in the country, which will help calm his nerves. As Borges is walking home, he feels as if he has already seen everything that is happening around him. Borges is fearful that he will never again have a sense of surprise at anything, having experienced it all in the Aleph. However, after a time, Borges finds his memory of the experience with the Aleph becoming vague.

Six months later the house is demolished. Carlos publishes the "Argentine pieces," of his poetry and wins second place in the National Prize for Literature. Two other poets win first and third places. Borges does not even place with the work he submits to the contest. Borges writes a facetious congratulatory note to Carlos; whereupon, Carlos responds with an ostentatious defense of his triumph.

Borges adds a note at the end of the short story about the Aleph and its nature. Borges explains that aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and that its stems point upward to the heavens and downward to earth, signifying that the earth mirrors the heavens. Borges adds that he believes that the Aleph, which he observes in Carlos' cellar, is a false Aleph. Borges gives his rationale for this belief by listing a number of artifacts, which also have the same properties as the Aleph in the basement. Borges adds that the universe lies in one of the stone columns in the Amr mosque in Cairo. Borges asks himself if he had viewed the universe inside the column in the Amr mosque when he was observing the images in the Aleph in Carlos' basement. He does not remember if he saw the column because his memory of his experience in the basement has faded, just as his memory of Beatriz's face has faded.

Analysis

The concept of the Aleph in this story, and in other books, is rather abstract and, as such, difficult to describe in words. As Borges says later in the story, an Aleph is ineffable, meaning incapable of being expressed in words. The term ineffable is often used by mystics when trying to describe a moment of enlightenment or oneness with God during meditation. In the story, the Aleph is a window into the universe, and upon peering into this window, one is able to see images of life from the beginning of creation through eternity. The Aleph, then, transcends both space and time.

Borges, the narrator, serves as a mirror to reflect images of both Beatriz and Carlos, Beatriz' cousin. The reader learns almost nothing about Borges except for the fact of his obsessive love for a woman who rejects him when she is alive. Thus, it seems that so far, Borges' sole purpose is as an observer and recorder. However, the reader must remember that Borges is a person who is participating in the events of which he records; therefore, the information and opinions, which Borges offers, may be biased.

Borges' increasing distaste for Carlos Daneri's poetry, and the man himself, may or may not be warranted. That a few verses of Daneri's poetry are contained in the text offers the reader an opportunity to decide which man to believe - Carlos, who has no compunction about extolling the virtues of his original verse, or Borges, who very clearly judges the poetry as exceedingly vapid. Once the reader studies the few lines of verse, which are offered by Carlos to Borges, it is obvious that Borges is justified in his judgment of the verse. The reader begins to sympathize with Borges, who has had to endure both listening to Carlos' poetry and then enduring a word-by-word explanation of the text. As the story continues, the reader discovers that the interaction between Carlos and Borges concerning Carlos' poetry is only one theme in this brief short story.

The reader may wonder if Borges feels insulted that Carlos does not request that Borges write an introduction to the epic poem, even though Borges cringes at the idea of writing such an introduction. Carlos instructs Borges on how to present the idea of his epic poem to Lafinur. Even though Borges believes the poem is ridiculous, he agrees to talk to Lafinur. Perhaps Borges agrees to do this because he does not want to alienate Carlos and no longer be welcome in Beatriz' former home. Borges is willing to compromise his integrity in order to keep his obsession about Beatriz alive. The reader may question Borges' mental health.

Upon reading Carlos' description of the Aleph in the basement, the reader will probably agree with Borges about Carlos' sanity. After all, how can a tiny sphere only two or three inches in diameter contain the entire universe? Borges insists on coming to look at the Aleph, probably thinking he will expose the existence of the Aleph as a delusion.

The last section opens with Borges standing in Carlos' home, examining pictures of his beloved Beatriz. Borges murmurs to her photo as if he were whispering words of love in her ear as a living person. Carlos' comment that Borges will be able to see all images of Beatriz in the Aleph lets the reader know that Carlos is not unaware of the reason Borges has come over all these years on the anniversary of Beatriz' birthday. Earlier in

the story, Borges believes he is being subtle about the reason for his visits to Beatriz' home after her death. Ironically, Carlos, whom Borges has belittled numerous times, demonstrates more acuity than Borges has perceived. The reader, then, is privy to information about Carlos, which Borges is not. Perhaps Carlos is not the imbecile that Borges would have the reader believe.

The reader may actually believe Borges' initial fears that he has been poisoned and left to die in the cellar; after all, if the reader agrees that Carlos is insane, then why might he not commit such an insane act? However, upon reading further, when Borges also spies the Aleph and begins to list the images he is seeing, the reader has to consider whether or not either man has all his mental faculties. There are two possible interpretations for the reader; the reader must believe either that there is such a phenomenon as the Aleph in the cellar, or that both men are delusional. A third, less likely, possibility is that the narrator is deceiving the reader, in which case, the reader will be unable to believe anything the narrator has said in the book.

But to think this conundrum through further, there is another possible explanation. The fact that the narrator is named Borges, which is also the name of the author of the short story, may shed some light on how to interpret the story. If by naming the narrator Borges, perhaps the reader is meant to believe that the narrator is actually Borges himself. If this is true, then is the reader also to suppose that the events narrated in the short story actually occur? Most readers would be unable to accept that an Aleph, as described in the story, actually had existed in the basement stairs.

Perhaps, then, the Aleph is a metaphor for an idea that Borges is trying to express. The Aleph represents all that is and shows it all occurring at once, thus eliminating the concepts of space and time. The Aleph, then, may be a metaphor for the idea of oneness. The irony of the concept of oneness expressed so eloquently in this story is that the narrator, Borges, would most likely be offended were he to be lumped together with Carlos in the concept that "all are one."

The Postscript adds another layer of irony to the story. Borges, the narrator, writes about the occurrence of other false Alephs, but then points out that the real Aleph is in a column on a Moslem temple in Amr. Borges wonders if maybe he had seen the *real* Aleph while looking at the images in the false Aleph in Carlos' cellar; but then he adds that he cannot remember much of what he saw. Borges also writes that even his memory of Beatriz is fading. Borges visits Beatriz' former home year after year in order to keep her memory alive. Ironically, it is in her home when Borges views the Aleph that is the beginning of his losing his memory of Beatriz.

Characters

Borges

"The Aleph" is narrated by Borges, a fictional stand-in for the author, which allows him to foster a sense of realism. Like the author, the narrator is an Argentine writer who detests pretentious authors like Daneri and who was also passed by for the National Prize for Literature. The narrator is a man haunted by the memory of his beloved Beatriz; bereft and longing for her company, he visits her father and cousin, Daneri, each year on her birthday, thus mourning her death on the day of her birth. While at her cousin's, Borges studies photographs of Beatriz and (as if this were the price to be paid for such a visit to Beatriz's images) endures the foolish pontifications of her cousin.

As a rational and conventional man, the narrator is predictably bewildered at the sight of the Aleph—and angry that a fool such as Daneri should be in the possession of something so miraculous. As a jealous and spiteful man, however, the narrator lies to Daneri by pretending to offer sound advice: the country and fresh air are "the greatest physicians," he says, hoping that Daneri will abandon his house and allow the Aleph to be destroyed with it. Without the Aleph, the narrator reasons, Daneri will be unable to finish his poem. Daneri's being awarded the Second National Prize for Literature, however, only infuriates the narrator: "Once again dullness and envy had their triumph," he laments.

Carlos Argentino Daneri

Introduced in the story as the first cousin of Borges's beloved Beatriz, Daneri is described as a pompous, fatuous man who loves the sound of his own voice. At first, Borges does not take him seriously, calling him "pink-faced, overweight" and dismissing his "minor position in an unreadable library out on the edge of the Southside of Buenos Aires." Daneri delights in clichés (calling Paul Fort, for example, "the Prince of Poets") and overreaching pronouncements about "modern man," which Borges instantly dismisses. However, as Borges (and the reader) learns, Daneri has been recording his thoughts in a poem called *The Earth*; his speech to Borges concerning the merits of his own work mark him as unbearably pedantic. Concerned with his career, Daneri asks Borges to solicit a foreword to his poem from another author and even suggests that Borges offer himself as a "spokesman" for the "undeniable virtues" of the poem.

Daneri is a parody of a poet, a satire of the brand of literary pretentiousness that Borges obviously found ridiculous (yet also amusing). That something as wonderful as the Aleph and that an honor as coveted as the National Prize for Literature should both be conferred on such a fool suggests both the indiscriminate nature of the universe as well as the questionable taste of the judges who award literary prizes. Daneri's obnoxious letter to Borges, where he brags, "I have crowned my cap with the reddest of feathers,"

cements the reader's impression of Daneri as a bombastic opposite of the reserved and intelligent narrator.

Beatriz Viterbo

Although not a physical presence in the story, the deceased Beatriz propels the plot: because of the narrator's devotion to her, he visits her home each year. It is during these visits that he is taken into the confidence of her cousin, Daneri, and eventually learns of the Aleph.

Zungri

Zungri and his partner Zunino are the cafe owners who wish to demolish Daneri's home so that they can expand their business.

Zunino

Zunino and his partner Zungri are the cafe owners who wish to demolish Daneri's home so that they can expand their business.

Themes

The Nature of Memory

In his parable "The Witness," Borges imagines the last man to have witnessed pagan rituals dying in Anglo-Saxon England and remarks, "with him will die, and never return, the last immediate images of these pagan rites." Because of this, "the world will be a little poorer," since it will have lost its last link to a vanished historical era. Borges then wonders what images will die with him.

Similarly, "The Aleph" examines the fragile and faulty nature of memory. The story opens with Borges revealing his admiration of Beatriz Viterbo's never allowing her final agonies to "give way to self-pity or fear"; this admiration, however, is then seasoned by melancholy when he notices a new billboard advertising a brand of American cigarettes. While this detail may initially strike the reader as trivial, it helps Borges illustrate the subtle ways in which one's world is always changing and, by extension, the idea that when one dies, the memory of the world at that particular point in time will die as well. "This slight change," Borges knows, "was the first of an endless series"— eventually, the last person to have seen Beatriz will die and, as Borges reasons in "The Witness," the world will be "a little poorer." At the end of the story, Borges acknowledges this sad fact by describing our minds as "porous" and admitting that he is "distorting and losing, under the wearing away of the years, the face of Beatriz." While a reader can empathize with the narrator's despair of using his "floundering mind" to recall what he saw in the Aleph, the story also reminds the reader that the effort to truly and accurately remember something as meaningful as the face of a loved one is doomed to fail because of the effects of time on human memory. Thus the reader is told that in the Aleph, Borges "saw the rotted dust and bones that had once deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo."

The Literary Problem of Infinity

Much of Borges's power as a writer comes from his having read so much for so many years. In his essay "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal," he examines the historical notion that God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere. In his own words, "if the future and the past are infinite, there cannot really be a when," and "if every being is equidistant from the infinite and infinitesimal, neither can there be a where." By this logic (he concludes), "No one exists on a certain day, in a certain place." The difficulty in writing about such an idea is that language cannot hope to replicate the concept in words, for if a character really could see an Aleph, how could he or she hope to convey the sensation of seeing it to a reader or even to himself or herself?

Borges approaches this problem by first having his narrator apologize for being unable to "translate into words the limitless Aleph." Because all language is "a set of symbols" that can only be understood sequentially, any attempt to replicate the experience of seeing every point in the universe *at once* is doomed to fail. His apology fresh in the

reader's mind, Borges then offers a limited but selective catalog of some of the things he saw in the Aleph. To suggest the totality of what he saw, Borges includes images relating to nature ("the teeming sea," "tides," "deserts," "shadows of ferns on a greenhouse floor," "bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco"), animal life ("horses with flowing manes," "tigers," "bison," "all the ants on the planet"), history ("a copy of the first English translation of Pliny"), geography ("a terrestrial globe"), astronomy ("a Persian astrolabe"), biology ("the delicate bone structure of a hand," "my own bowels"), as well as a number of specific place names (America, London, Soler Street, Queretaro, Bengal, Fray Bentos, Inverness, Adrogue, Alkmaar, the Caspian Sea, Mirzapur, the Chacarita cemetery) to suggest the breadth of the Alpeh's contents. While the description of what he saw in the Aleph takes up only a fraction of the story, it does give the reader a sense of the sheer inconceivability of infinity. "In the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph," Borges explains; if this language strikes a reader as vague or elusive, it is only because language is not up to the task of replicating infinity on the printed page.

Style

The Story's Epigraphs

The two epigraphs that precede "The Aleph" serve as introductions to the story's plot as well as short commentaries on its issues. The first, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is said by the title character to his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "O God! I could be bound in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space." Hamlet's meaning here is (as he later says), "There is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so." By this logic, Hamlet argues that "Denmark's a prison." Here, however, Borges imagines Hamlet's lament literally: how *might* a man in a nutshell call himself "a King of infinite space?" Borges's story responds to (if not answers) this question through the idea of the Aleph, for its existence in the story forces the reader to consider the proposition that there are an infinite number of points in space and, therefore, that even a nutshell would contain an infinite number of points. This is perhaps why the Aleph in Daneri's basement is only an inch in diameter.

The second epigraph comes from Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* and suggests the impossibility of understanding what "an Infinite greatness of Place" would be like. This impossibility, of course, is what the story attempts to address; the difficulty inherent in understanding infinity is discussed by Borges before he begins his description of what he saw in the Aleph.

Setting

While "The Aleph" revolves around a fantastic element and plot, the setting is decidedly mundane: the streets and sights of Buenos Aires are depicted in unadorned language without romance, nostalgia, or wonder. Even more odd is that the Aleph is in a house like any other. Part of Borges's reason for placing the Aleph in Daneri's cellar has to do with the comic effect of the story: Daneri is a pompous fool (the likes of which Borges himself had undoubtedly met many times in literary circles), and the contrast of his lack of imagination with an object that lies beyond the bounds of imagination frustrates the narrator, who feels himself superior to Daneri (and thus bitter when reporting Daneri's literary accolades at the end of the story). Similarly, placing the Aleph in Daneri's cellar allows Borges to comically juxtapose the mind-blowing with the mundane, just as Daneri's explanations for why his verse is so good is thought (by Borges) to be superior to the verse itself.

A second reason for placing the Aleph in an ordinary cellar is that doing so grounds the story in reality. By first offering the conventions of a love story ("On the burning February morning Beatriz Viterbo died."), Borges lulls the reader into thinking that the story will be a relatively routine one about common human emotions and experience. However, when Daneri first mentions the Aleph, the reader is jarred and must reconcile the seemingly "normal" plot (lamenting a lost love) and setting (a cellar) with Borges's wild

and unpredictable element. Thus, the setting works as a kind of literary sleight-of-hand, allowing Borges to distract the reader before revealing the Aleph and thus making the impact of the Aleph on the reader much greater that it may have been had the Aleph been described at the beginning.

Historical Context

Argentine Politics and Art

In 1940, Roman Castillo replaced President Roberto Ortiz. Like many Argentines at the time, Castillo admired Hitler and Mussolini; like many citizens of Germany and Italy, many Argentines yearned for the order that fascism would presumably impose on their nation; like many of their European counterparts, many Argentines lacked the foresight to see the eventual, bloody results of such political movements.

The tide of fascist sympathy in Castillo's administration was felt by Borges in 1942, when the National Commission for Culture did not award his collection *The Garden of Forking Paths* the National Prize for Literature on the grounds that Borges's work was too "English"—a suggestion by the NCC that indirectly (but clearly) condemned Borges as one sympathetic to the Allied cause (which he was). Borges's indignant friends devoted a special issue of the influential journal *Sur* to what they saw as a clear example of a government attempting to shape the literary tastes of a nation according to its authors' political ideas. The issue was called "Amends to Borges" and its contributors feted the author at a restaurant, where the lights of the Argentine literary scene came to show their support.

Various short term governments then took turns strutting and struggling on the Argentine political stage. Castillo was ousted in a bloodless coup in 1943 and replaced by General Pedro Ramirez, who, in turn, was ousted in 1944 when he submitted to pressure from the United States to sever all ties with the Axis powers. *His* replacement, General Edelmiro Farrell, allowed the country to be run by the army and figuratively opened the door for Juan Domingo Perón (then vice president) to come to power (which he would do in 1946). While the war in Europe was coming to a close, the rise of Perón's terror in Argentina was just beginning: when, in 1944, a crowd gathered in Buenos Aires to celebrate the liberation of Paris, the police broke up the demonstration with such force that several civilians were wounded and killed. While Argentina did declare war on the Axis powers in March of 1945, there was not much left for its military to do; Germany fell that May and, through a series of maneuvers and machinations, Perón was elected president on February 24, 1946. He was incredibly charismatic; many Argentines were likewise wooed by the charms of his wife, Eva.

Borges, however, stood apart from the crowd and considered Perón a thug. As James Woodall (in his biography *Borges: A Life*) quotes Borges as writing in a Montevideo newspaper, "a great number of Argentines" were "becoming Nazis without being aware of it." Borges's hatred of Perón eventually caused him to be removed from his municipal librarian's post and not reinstated (as the Director of the National Library) until after Perón's fall in 1955.

Composed in 1945, "The Aleph" reflects Borges's contempt for committees like the NCC, which ostensibly work for the promotion of art but actually serve as politically

wayward slaves of the current regime. Carlos Daneri's winning the Second National Prize for Literature shocks both the narrator and the reader and is obviously a bitter joke about Borges's not being awarded the National Prize in 1942. "Once again," the narrator explains, "dullness" had had its "triumph"—a sentiment surely felt by Borges in 1942. The fact that Daneri also plans to compose an epic about General José de San Martín, the Argentine liberator, also reflects Borges's distaste for the marriage of politics and art: the reader is meant to assume that Daneri's poem will be a mindless piece of propaganda, much like the kind Borges saw plastered all over Buenos Aires during the rise of Perón.

Trends in Twentieth-Century Argentine Literature

The first half of the twentieth century saw an explosion of literary schools, styles, and attitudes espoused and practiced by Argentine poets, novelists, and short-story writers. By the time Borges wrote "The Aleph," his country had witnessed the birth and death of several literary movements, all of which surface in the whole of Borges's work.

At the turn of the century, Argentine literature was grounded in realism, and writers attempted (as did their European and American counterparts) to create believable simulations of everyday life. Some of the first throbs of modernism (*modernista*), however, were found in the work of Ruben Dario, a poet who expanded the possibilities of verse and, by extension, what the Argentine writer could accomplish if he or she did not rely exclusively on traditional forms. Dario's presence in Buenos Aires— which had become a widely-used setting and subject of Argentine literature—reinforced the city's reputation as the cultural Mecca of its day. The enthusiasm of Argentine writers for exploring the history and people of their homeland grew and was epitomized in 1913, when the first Department of Argentine Literature was created in the University of Buenos Aires.

A number of journals and magazines devoted to Argentine literature also began taking shape and gaining popularity. The first major example, *Nosotros*, was founded in 1907 by Alfredo Bianchi and Roberto F. Gusti; its pages were the first place that several notable Argentine writers saw their work in print. A more novel (if less durable) journal was *Prisima:* its two editions (November 1921 and March 1922) were plastered on the walls of buildings throughout Buenos Aires. In 1921, Bianchi asked Borges to compose a piece that outlined the tenets of ultraism (*ultraismo*), a short-lived literary movement that stressed economy of language and a turning away from older and (as its founders believed) more stale forms of expression. Again, Argentine writers were seeking to reinvent their national literature. Other movements and literary groups followed, such as the Boedo group (which emphasized the importance of authors' devotion to social causes) and the Florida group (which practiced the avant-garde techniques of the time). Like their predecessors, these movements gave off more light than heat and fell out of favor with readers and intellectuals always on the lookout for the newest literary fashions. These readers had to look no further than *Sur*, a journal founded by Borges's friend Victoria Ocampo that still stands as an indication of sophisticated Argentine

readers' tastes in the 1930s and '40s. Borges appeared in its pages many times; "The Aleph" was first published there in 1945.

By the time "The Aleph" was published, Argentine literature was again looking to avantgarde writers to steer the nation's literature in new directions. In the work of some writers, fiction and nonfiction seemed to meld to the point where authors were taking pains to make their work seem "real" by grounding it in actual events (something that Borges does throughout "The Aleph"). This technique allowed Argentine writers to explore their nation's past through their art or (in Borges's case) to lull readers into believing that they were reading about "real" events. Such works also led to a heightened interest in surrealism and metaphysical fiction. As Naomi Lindstrom says in her essay on Argentine art (collected in David William Foster's *Handbook of Latin American Literature*), "The results of the 1940s movement are still unfolding," and contemporary Argentine art still shows the influence of its cutting-edge predecessors.

Critical Overview

Borges is universally regarded as a major and powerful figure in twentieth-century literature; indeed, it is as difficult to find a negative critique of Borges's work as it is to find an essay on the failures of Shakespeare as a dramatist. Most critics agree with James E. Irby, who boldly states in his preface to the 1962 collection *Labyrinths* that Borges's work is "one of the most extraordinary expressions in all Western literature of modern man's anguish of time, of space, of the infinite."

"The Aleph" is conventionally praised as one of Borges's most important stories. In her 1965 study, *Borges the Labyrinth Maker*, Ana Maria Barrenechea argues that "the most important of Borges's concerns is the conviction that the world is a chaos impossible to reduce to any human law." She specifically praises "The Aleph" as an example of "the economy of Borges's work" in its ability to erase "the limits of reality" and create in the reader "an atmosphere of anxiety." In his 1969 study, Ronald Christ contends that "The Aleph" stands as wholly representative of Borges's art and his attempts to "abbreviate the universe in literature." To Christ, the Aleph of the story's title is a symbol of Borges's style and desire to compose another of his "resumes of the universe." Martin S. Stabb, in his 1970 book *Jorge Luis Borges*, suggests that "The Aleph" is Borges's attempt to explore his dominant themes in a lighthearted fashion that may not possess the depth of his other work that reads as a "half-philosophical, basically playful composition — generously sprinkled with Borgesian irony and satire," the story "comes off rather well." Perhaps the most effusive praise of the story comes from George R. McMurray, who (in his 1980 study *Jorge Luis Borges*) states that the story not only reflects the "mystical aura of magic that imbues so many of Borges's works," but also "emerges as a symbol of all literature, whose purpose . . . is to subvert objective reality and recreate it through the powers of imagination."

Other critics have examined the story from different angles. In his 1996 biography, *Borges: A Life*, James Woodall examines the ways in which "The Aleph" can be read as a piece of veiled autobiography containing references to Borges's discovery of a kaleidoscope (which becomes the Aleph in the story), his love affair with Estela Canto (who becomes the story's Beatriz) and his opinions of some fellow writers (who are mocked through the character of Carlos Daneri). According to Woodall, "women, sex and love" were "preying" on Borges's mind while he composed the story.

One of the most startling and cutting-edge approaches to the story, however, is found in Floyd Merrell's *Unthinking Thinking: Jorge Luis Borges, Mathematics, and the New Physics* (1991). In this complex study that combines literary analysis with current scientific theories, Merrell argues that "The Aleph" dramatizes the discovery of what physicists call a space-time singularity: a point in the universe where a star collapses and "the limits of space and time have been reached." Like his fellow critics, Merrell praises Borges's work for its ability to illustrate abstract and difficult ideas.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Moran is an instructor of English and American literature. In this essay, Moran examines the ways in which Borges's story reads like a prophecy of modern telecommunications technology.

In 1995, Bill Gates, the world-renowned founder of Microsoft and personal computing visionary, published *The Road Ahead*, his study of computing history and examination of the ways in which computers will transform the lives of people all over the world. His enthusiasm for what is now commonly called the Information Age is found on every page, particularly in those where he speaks (almost in a hushed awe) of the ways in which computers will surmount space and time—those two pesky and seemingly insurmountable barriers that humans have tried to dodge since time immemorial. Gates argues that the phrase "information highway" is an inadequate metaphor, since it suggests "landscape and geography, a distance between points, and embodies the implication that you have to travel to get from one place to another." Gates corrects this metaphor saying:

One of the most remarkable aspects of this new communications technology is that it will eliminate distance. It won't matter if someone you're contacting is in the next room or the next continent, because the highly mediated network will be unconstrained by miles and kilometers.

Gates further argues that the speed of computer networks using fiber optics will deliver "streams of information at very high speeds—up to 155 million bits per second at first, later jumping up to 622 million bits per second and eventually up to 2 billion bits per second." Thus, video will be as easy to send across networks as the human voice is currently sent along telephone lines. Eventually (as Gates, cheerleader-like, imagines throughout his book), people will live in an age where "the network will draw us together" and "give us choices that can put us in touch with entertainment, information and each other."

"The Aleph" was first published in 1945, fifty years before *The Road Ahead* and before the first waves of enthusiasm for the personal computer crashed on the shores of the modern world. But who can read Borges's story and not sense the slightest hint of the embryonic Bill Gates? "Our twentieth century," Daneri explains, "had inverted the story of Mohammed and the mountain: nowadays, the mountain came to the modern Mohammed." Is this not reminiscent of Bill Gates's talk of eliminating distance? Consider also Daneri's vision of "modern man," alone in his "inner sanctum . . . supplied with telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, wireless sets, motion-picture screens, slide projectors, glossaries, timetables, handbooks, bulletins. . . ." Daneri's vision of modern man "as though in his castle tower" strikes the modern reader as very much like that of Bill Gates's modern American receiving his "2 billion bits per second" at his desk or in his living room. Borges (the story's narrator) dismisses Daneri as a fool, but who among us (like myself, who downloaded a copy of "The Aleph" before composing this essay,

which I will then email to my editor) cannot sense in Daneri's musings a vision of modern life, where we regularly download Mohammed's mountain from remote servers?

If literary taste proves Daneri an awful and pedantic poet, the history of technology and communications has proven him a prophet. The narrator condescendingly calls Daneri's poem *The Earth* a "boring" attempt to "set to verse the entire face of the planet." While the poem might be not as clever as its author's reasons for why it should be admired, it is very much like the "virtual reality" which modern consumers have heard so much about in the media (and in the plots of numerous science-fiction films, such as 1990's *Total Recall* and 1999's *The Matrix*). At the time in which the story takes place (1941), Daneri has only partially completed his goal of simulating, in verse, the experience of seeing the whole planet. The reader in 1945 would have laughed at this fool's errand, but a modern one may call to mind video games where a person stands on a pair of skis while "virtually racing" through a projected slalom course or modern airline pilots, who train in incredibly sensitive and accurate flight simulators to hone their skills. What Daneri attempts in verse, modern man has achieved, in part, with the microchip.

The Earth is also reminiscent of the numerous multimedia encyclopedias or websites where one link leads to another and to another and to anothe. A fifth-grader writing a report on tulips, for example, could visit a website devoted to flowers, read a description of the tulip, follow a link to Holland's tourism page, have her eye caught by a link on *that* site that leads her to one detailing current trends in music of the Netherlands, and so on. In some ways, "the entire face of the planet" *is* available to "modern man," or at least any modern man with a modem.

An Aleph (Borges tells the reader) is a point in space that contains all other points. To replicate the experience of Borges the narrator seeing the Aleph was, understandably, a daunting task for Borges the author. In a 1982 interview (collected in *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*), Borges spoke of the scene as one that gave him "great trouble:" "I had to give a sensation of endless things in a single paragraph." The beauty of the paragraph where Borges sees the Aleph is indisputable and meant to contrast the dullness of Daneri's poem:

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 entry of a house in Fray Bentos; I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam . . . I saw the delicate bone structure of a hand; I saw the survivors of a battle sending out picture postcards . . .

This passage is reminiscent of Walt Whitman, whose cadences are heard throughout Borges's description and whose musical qualities contrast with the forced metrics and rhymes of Daneri's *opus*. But if Daneri's poem lacks the beauty and splendor of Borges's paragraph, it does so only because Borges the narrator is a better writer. Both men see the same thing; one of them is just more skillful in describing it. This, too, has its technological counterpart: imagine the Aleph as a perfect and infinite network of computers, each capable of linking to an infinite number of websites without being slowed by the traffic of innumerable users or the limits of broadband, however wide.

If, as Walter Pater remarked, all art aspires to the condition of music, all computing and telecommunications innovations aspire to the condition of the Aleph. Our world is not yet fully "Alephed," but with the seemingly daily innovations in speed, surely the day will come when the perfect computer network is created—and such a network will be very much like the Aleph.

In his 1952 essay "Kafka and His Precursors," Borges notes the ways in which works written *before* Kafka (by writers as varied as Aristotle and Robert Browning) are notable for their Kafkaesque qualities. Because of Kafka, Borges argues, we read older works differently than we would have if Kafka had never written: "In each of these texts we find Kafka's idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist." Borges's point here is that "every writer *creates* his own precursors" and "modifies our conception of the past." What Kafka does to our reading of Aristotle and Browning, modern computing has done to our reading of "The Aleph."

But perhaps the final word should go to Bill Gates, once dismissed by many as a Harvard dropout, just as the narrator dismisses Daneri. "New technology," he asserts, "will offer people a new means with which to express themselves." The information highway (or Aleph) will "open undreamed-of artistic and scientific opportunities to a new generation of geniuses." While Daneri's Aleph is destroyed with his house, modern computing companies have proven themselves more than ready to create newer, more permanent Alephs. These will, in turn, give rise to legions of Daneris. Emerson (one of Borges's favorite authors) famously said, "To be great is to be misunderstood," and it has taken the fifty years since "The Aleph's" publication for readers to understand (and newly appreciate) Daneri's ideas about moving the mountain to Mohammed.

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on "The Aleph," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Elia explores the influence of Islamic mysticism permeating Borges's work, particularly in "The Aleph" and "The Zahir."

Studies of Jorge Luis Borges's work invariably highlight the wealth of philosophical and theological influences that underlie his □uvre. Yet a search through the bibliography tracing these sources reveals disappointingly few titles elaborating on what strikes me as one of the major threads running through many of his works: Islamic mysticism. The paucity of such studies is especially surprising when one considers that Borges himself frequently referred to Islam and Islamic thinkers both in his written work and lectures at various academic fora. In *Seven Nights*, the series of public lectures originally given in Buenos Aires, he devotes a full chapter to a discussion of *The Thousand and One Nights*, claiming that the first translation of this collection was "a major event for all of European literature." In *Borges on Writing*, an edited volume based on lectures he gave at a graduate writing seminar at Columbia University in 1971, he unambiguously acknowledges his attempt at writing in the Arab Islamic tradition. Thus he says of his short story "The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths." that he wanted it to sound as "a page-overlooked by Lane and Burton-out of the *Arabian Nights*." In his fiction, he makes direct references to aspects of Islamic mysticism, as well as demonstrates a familiarity with Islamic esoteric writing that goes beyond superficial, mundane information. That Borges should be familiar with Islam is in no way surprising. He is an extremely erudite writer steeped in metaphysical tradition, but also in the Spanish heritage. That heritage itself reflects eight centuries of close interaction with Arabs (the Moors), as Giovanna de Garayalde reminds readers and critics in *Jorge Luis Borges: Sources and Illuminations*, one of the very few works that foreground a link between the author and Sufism. "But eight centuries of coexistence," de Garayalde writes:

are not easily eliminated from a country's past, least of all in the case of Spain, where the Arab influence is evident in the physical aspects, the habits and the arts in general. And Sufism, precisely because it is not tied to any dogma, seems to have been one of the main factors uniting the two cultures, separated though they were by politico-religious fanaticisms.

In this essay, I wish to further foreground the Islamic concepts Borges weaves into his writing, by focussing on two short stories, "The Zahir" and "The Aleph." I will also be referring to other works by Borges, in order to both support my thesis that Islamic references have permeated many of Borges's stories, and are thus not to be dismissed as haphazard or tangential, and because these various references also reveal the depth of Borges's knowledge of the Islamic cultural heritage. While I do not seek to suggest that Borges ever embraced the religious aspect of Sufism, I nevertheless would advance that his fascination with that sect's privileging of layered writing and multiple interpretations is a direct result of his own view that reading and writing are intimate companions, and that the best reading is a rewriting. (This view is best exemplified in "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," an analysis of which falls outside the scope of

this essay). The "burden of interpretation" is incumbent on the Sufis, as I demonstrate below.

"Belief in the Zahir is of Islamic origin," wrote Borges, the narrator in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Zahir." This narrator is not absolutely sure who he is, nor what has happened to him, but he is sure something has happened to him, which has changed the course of his life. He has come across the Zahir. Borges, the narrator of "The Aleph," is at a loss for words: "And here begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past." But his experience is unique, and therefore uncommunicable. For he has seen the Aleph.

"The Zahir" and "The Aleph," although written a number of years apart, are frequently paired by critics, as a number of stylistic and thematic parallels invite the comparison. The narrator in both stories is a man, Borges, who has had an experience that proves to be a revelation. This experience, in both cases, has left an indelible trace on him, left him a different person. In both cases, he finds himself questioning his sanity and unable to express what he has seen. In both cases, he becomes obsessed with his vision. Even minor, textual details correspond in the two stories: both begin with the death of a beloved woman and take place in Buenos Aires, as distinct from some abstract "universal" locale. The spiritual affinity, however, spans further back in time and space.

That belief in the Zahir should be of Islamic origin is not surprising, since *zahir* itself is not merely an Arabic word, it is, like all Arabic words contained in the Koran, ultimately an Islamic word: the Koran canonized the Arabic language of the seventh century A.D. (first century After the Hejira, or A. H.), and bound it forever to Islam. Today, even in countries where Arabic is not the native language, it is nevertheless acknowledged as the language of Islam, and devout Muslims everywhere outside of the Arab world recite the Koran not in their own language, but in Arabic. Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, is a case in point: the official language there is Indonesian, with Arabic being the language of religious (Islamic) studies. Indeed, the better non-Arabic renditions of the Koran are appropriately called "interpretations," for the language of Islam is held to be "untranslatable." In the case of non-Muslim Arabs, I contend that these are influenced by Islam, since it is my belief that language and culture are inexorably linked.

Moreover "*zahir*," as Borges points out, means visible or apparent, and is one of Allah's attributes, since Allah is "apparent" in all his creation. *Zahir* as a concept is traditionally coupled with, and opposed to, *batin*, thus making up a complete entity comprising thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. *Batin*, another Arabic word, is the antonym of *zahir* and means inner, innermost, concealed. The *zahir* and the *batin* are as inseparable as two sides of a coin, and the Zahir is indeed a coin in the short story by this title.

Who is qualified to look into the *batin* is at the root of a dispute in Islam dating back to the late second century A. H. For grasping the *batin* requires initiation if it is not to be detrimental to the seer. But seeing the *batin* is also mandatory for those who "have vision," failing which they would be sinners. And Borges, our narrator, has seen the

Zahir, Allah's apparent aspect. Let us examine his thoughts and feelings upon coming across this threshold to the *batin:*

I stared at it for a moment, and went into the street, perhaps with the beginnings of a fever . . . As if in a dream, the thought that every piece of money entails such illustrious connotations seemed to me of huge, though inexplicable, importance . . .

Sleepless, obsessed, almost happy, I reflected that there is nothing less material than money, since every coin whatsoever . . . is, strictly speaking, a repertory of possible futures.

Borges then goes on to say that he is a different man for having seen the Zahir, and that he cannot go back to his "pre-Zahir" state. This closely echoes the assertion of the Islamic thinker and mystic al-Ghazali that "there is certainly no point in trying to return to the level of naive and derivative belief once it has been left, since a condition of being at such a level is that one should not know one is there. When a man comes to know that, the glass of his naive beliefs is broken." This level, according to al-Ghazali, is lost as soon as one has had an insight into divinity.

An experience of the Zahir, according to Borges, leads to "madness or saintliness." The two terms are also paired, almost equated, in the Koran: "We know very well how they listen when they listen to thee, and when they conspire, when the evildoers say, 'You are only following a man bewitched!'." References to Islam and the linguistic aspects of the Koran itself also bound in "The Aleph." The Koran is most difficult to read because, unlike the Bible, which contains considerable narrative stretches and can be read with the expectations readers bring to narrative texts, the Koran does not offer this familiar pattern: it was revealed as a whole to Muhammad, who merely had it transcribed. As such it is believed to be a pure expression of Allah, and one of his attributes. The Koran recounts universal creation in divine terms, and makes therefore no distinction between past, present, and future. The Aleph, Borges writes is "the only place on earth where all places are seen from every angle." But Aleph is also the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, the language of Islam and its book. Further on Borges adds: "What my eyes saw was simultaneous, what I shall transcribe is successive, because language is successive." He finds himself, however, utterly incapable of giving a coherent account of his vision.

Here, once again, we are confronted not with reluctance but with the impossibility of recounting an experience that does not belong to this world, or at least to the quotidian —a feeling most familiar to the Muslim mystics, or Sufis. Thus al-Ghazali refers us to Ibn-al-Mu'tazz who, after a mystic experience, told the uninitiated: "Of the things I do not remember, what was, was,/ Think it good, do not ask an account of it." Nor is it insignificant, in the context of our study, that Islam alone of the three monotheistic religions is one where a revelation most frequently results in failure to communicate. In Judaism, Yahweh revealed himself to prophets so that they, in turn, might share what they have seen with their fellow-believers. Some Hebraic prophets, such as Ezra and Baruch, were expressly instructed in their mystical vision not to occlude that vision, but this implies that they would have otherwise been able to express it. In Christianity, the

emphasis is on "spreading the word." Moreover, both the Old and the New Testaments, with the exception of the Mosaic laws, are books about God. The Koran, on the other hand, is not a book about Allah as much as it is Allah's book. It is "A Book We have sent down to thee." The Koran frequently refers to its own ambiguities, reminding the Muslims that some passages must be read at face value (literally, *zahir*), while others ought to be interpreted by "those who have been given knowledge in degrees," for the Koran is "a book whose verses are set clear, and then distinguished."

Yet a further digression is necessary here, before I move on to a discussion of Borges's style, which I shall try to show as a conscious attempt at *batini* writing. I had referred earlier to the *batin/zahir* dichotomy as the cause of a dispute in Islam. Although we cannot speak of a *batini* school as such, a group of thinkers, heralded by al-Ghazali (1058-1111), believe that with proper training, anyone can reach the *batin*. Al-Ghazali wrote two seminal books, *Deliverance from Error and Attachment to the Lord of Might and Majesty*, in which he presents Sufism as the only way to spiritual salvation, and *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (The Incoherence of Philosophy), in which he argues that Muslims should not be barred from attempting a *batini* reading of the Koran since, as he says, this allows for a greater grasp of the truth than philosophy will even make possible. Al-Ghazali supports his argument by citing the *sunna:* "There is the saying that the man who is mistaken in independent judgement receives a reward, but the man who is correct a twofold reward." One is rewarded simply for having tried, regardless of the outcome of the attempt. Moreover, the risk of leading a member of the masses astray is moot to al-Ghazali, since interpretation is undertaken by the Sufis, who "are not men of words." The word Sufi is believed to come from the Arabic "souf," meaning wool, since the Muslim mystics wore woollen garments. They traditionally withdrew from society, leading an ascetic, solitary life. Another etymological identification is with the root word *safa*, meaning purity. Some scholars argue that Sufi comes from Sophia, for wisdom. This would however imply that Greek "philosophy" influenced the Sufis, an untenable thesis, since Greek philosophy is grounded in the rational, an approach Sufism frequently disregards.

At the other end of the scale, the *zahirite* school, whose spokesperson is Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198), believes that a member of the masses should not attempt to understand the inner (*batin*) meaning of ambiguous passages in the Koran, since this may lead to disbelief in the *zahir*—a sin under all circumstances—and will inevitably result in miscomprehension of the *batin*. For the masses, the Koran tells us, simply cannot understand, since God has not given them "knowledge in degrees." "And those who interpret for the layman are calling him to heresy, and they are heretics themselves," warns Ibn Rushd. Thus a member of the masses, a person who has no vision or intuition, no practice in "learning," is saved if s/he believes in the *zahir* of the ayah (Koranic verse): "The Merciful sat upon the throne." But should s/he be told that God has no material body, and can therefore not sit, s/he will stop believing in the *zahir*, yet will still fail to grasp God's immateriality. "As to the one who is not versed in learning, he must take things at face value, for interpretation in his case is heresy, and will lead to heresy."

Ibn Rushd was highly disturbed by the growing influence and popularity of al-Ghazali's ideas, and set out to write *Tahafut al-Tahafut* (The Incoherence of Incoherence), an overt attack on al-Ghazali's book, in which he repudiates mysticism and *batini* reading, and *The Decisive Treatise, Determining the Nature of the Harmony between Religion and Philosophy*, in which he argues that reason, not mysticism, can help clarify the complexities of Islam.

Borges sets up an analogous set of dialectical counterpoints in his various essays on the Platonists and Aristotelians, or the Realists and the Nominalists. Thus, in the short story "Averroes' Search," Borges deals with the dispute between the Muslim thinkers, suggesting that Averroes will always fall short of full understanding. Both schools refer to interpretation as the "rending of the veil," that essential image in Islam, which Borges picks up twice in "The Zahir."

In this story, Borges the narrator has seen a most perplexing and disturbing aspect of Allah: "There was a time when I could visualize the obverse and then the reverse. Now I see them simultaneously," he says of the coin. Unable to comprehend this phenomenon, he struggles to forget or ignore it, but his attempts are all vain, and he begins to lose his own identity: "Before 1948, Julia's destiny will have caught up with me. I shall not know who Borges was." Julia is in a madhouse, for she too has had a vision, leading to "madness or saintliness," Borges says, to madness *and* saintliness, the Koran suggests. Clementina's sister Julia— and we shall soon see what these women symbolize— was thought to have lost her sanity: "Poor Julie! She got awfully *queer*, and they had to shut her up in the Bosch," laments one of her friends. "Why, she keeps on talking about a *coin*, just like Morena Sachmann's *chauffeur.*"

Borges himself sees no reason to fear such a destiny, should it befall him too: "To call this prospect terrible is a fallacy, for none of its circumstances will exist for me. One might as well say that an anesthetized man feels terrible pain when they open his cranium." Indeed, Borges is yearning for a yet greater obsession with the coin, for only then will he be fully anesthetized, self "unconscious." This he knows is a *sine qua non* for grasping the *batin*, and putting an end to his torment.

In order to lose themselves in God, the Sufis recite their own names, or the ninety-nine divine names, until they become meaningless. I long to travel that path. Perhaps I shall conclude by wearing away the Zahir simply by thinking of it again and again. Perhaps behind the coin I shall find God.

The Aleph is not as material, as obvious a manifestation of Allah, hence the person who sees it must be closer to selflessness, to a total immersion into God's creation, to a loss of all that is proper to his/her individuality. "I saw all the mirrors on earth, and none of them reflected me," Borges recalls, thus suggesting that, at least while his vision lasted, his individual existence was uncertain. Immediately after this vision of "the inconceivable universe," Borges manages to "pick [him]self up and utter: 'One hell of a —yes, one hell of a—' The matter-offactedness of my voice surprised me."

Borges the narrator and Carlos Argentino, in "The Aleph," were rivals, competing for Beatriz's attention. A *zahiri* reading of this passage would therefore refer to a reluctance on Borges' part to admit Carlos Argentino's clear advantage, for the latter is Beatriz' cousin, and the Aleph was seen under his own roof. A *batini* reading is much richer: Borges, having experienced a direct vision, grows indifferent to Beatriz, the mediator, the guide (who, moreover, was not sufficiently qualified to guide the visionary Dante through Paradiso, but abandoned him instead at the outer gates of Purgatorio). Borges' voice, his medium of expression and communication, becomes "matter of fact." But Borges and Carlos Argentino are also two writers competing for the same literary prize, which the latter wins, because Borges could not put, in "successive language," his vision of the universe. In this instance too, Borges is indifferent to Carlos Argentino's material, worldly, and wordly success, and to his own failure.

A very similar change had occurred in "The Zahir." Borges had gone to Clementina's house and, while there, inquired about Julia. Upon being told that she had been hospitalized, he reflects that this prospect is not terrible. "Clementina" means gentle, complacent, undemanding, yet Borges now thinks of "the arrogant image of Clementina, physical pain," hence his yearning to be "anesthetized." Julia, on the other hand, means "God's gift," hence "I long to travel this path . . . Perhaps behind the coin I shall find God."

But did Borges have a revelation, or was it just a dream, as he seems to suggest at the beginning of "The Zahir?" Again, the Muslims equate both: "God most High, however, has favoured His creatures by giving them something analogous to the faculty of prophecy, namely dreams. In the dreamstate, a man apprehends what is to be in the future, which is something of the unseen; he does so explicitly or else clothed in a symbolic form whose interpretation is to be disclosed." Borges feels the same way. As the narrator of the "Zahir," he spoke of the coin as a repertory of possible futures," like a dream. As a nonfictional persona, he wrote in *Seven Nights:* "In a psychology book I greatly admire . . . Gustav Spiller states that dreams correspond to the lowest plane of mental activity—I would maintain that, at least for me, this is an error."

The Muslim mystics, al-Ghazali tells us, are "men who had real experiences, not men of words." Yet some of the most beautiful Arabic poetry is written by Sufis, probably because of their effort to find the words most apt to describe the ineffable. Borges, again, is aware of this:

How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols . . . Perhaps the Gods might grant me a similar metaphor, but then this account would become contaminated by literature, with fiction.

But why is Borges writing at all, if literature contaminates the truth, and if words for him suffer from "the guilty condition of being mere metaphors?" One is tempted to venture a bold and ambitious suggestion. The Islamic mystics believed that they belonged to the elite who "had vision." They could, to put it in simpler terms, read between the lines of their own writings, and knew that their fellow-mystics could and would do the same.

Moreover, as al-Ghazali points out, "whoever sits in their company derives from them this faith, and none who sits in their company is pained." None is pained because their literature, like the Koran, reads on a number of levels, has a *zahir* and a *batin*. For Sufi writing is, above all, esoteric writing.

Source: Nada Elia, "Islamic Esoteric Concepts as Borges Stategies," in *Variaciones Borges: Journal of the Jorge Luis Borges Center for Studies and Documents*, Vol. 5, 1998, pp. 129-44.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Thiem examines Borges's reluctance to acknowledge the influence of Dante in "The Aleph."

Readers and critics of Borges's "The Aleph" ("El Aleph,") 1945 have long recognized the Dante allusions, some subtle, some obvious, woven into the text of this intricate, famous tale. In various unmistakable ways Borges alludes to Dante Alighieri, to Beatrice, and to elements of the *Commedia*. Even so, he never refers directly to Dante or the *Commedia*, in spite of the fact that in "The Aleph" he cites numerous "precursors." Furthermore, in his 1970 "Aleph" commentary Borges virtually denied that the allusions to Dante were intentional:

Critics . . . have detected Beatrice Portinari in Beatriz Viterbo, Dante in Daneri, and the descent into hell in the descent into the cellar. I am, of course, duly grateful for these unlooked-for gifts.

Although a number of critics have glossed the major Dante allusions in "The Aleph," few have tried to explain Borges's reluctance to recognize Dante as his precursor in this instance. Yet an awareness of Borges's curious method of appropriating Dante, one of his favorite poets, seriously affects how we read the story. It also reveals a puzzling moment in which Borges's practice as a writer seems to conflict with his own pronouncements on literary influence.

Such pronouncements, in defying critical platitudes about literary indebtedness, originality, and the autonomy of the author, have attracted the attention of contemporary writers and theorists, such as John Barth, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Gérard Genette, and Harold Bloom. Increasingly, Borges's ideas have become an obligatory touchstone for critics doubtful about more traditional ways of studying literary relations. The well-known 1951 essay "Kafka y sus precursores" offers a convenient summary of Borges's thinking in this respect. Here Borges would "purify" the term "precursor" of all of its polemical association. Echoing T. S. Eliot, he claims that "each writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past just as it will modify the future. In this interdependency the identity or plurality of men does not matter at all," . . . So, having read Kafka, for example, we will reread Browning and Kierkegaard differently, more appreciatively than before. In the precursor we discover Kafkaesque features that we would have missed had Kafka not written. One suspects that Borges has inverted the usual order of poetic obligation: now the precursor owes a debt to the epigone, for the latter has caused the former to be read anew. In the end, literary debts between precursors and epigone cancel each other out. Elsewhere, Borges toys with the idea that all authors are ultimately avatars of one Universal Author, so that influence, plagiarism, priority—literary relations in general—are, strictly speaking, illusory. Indeed, Borges's delight in revealing his own precursors suggests that he suffers little from the anxieties of influence. Nor is it surprising that among the avantgarde critics who have taken Borges's ideas on influence seriously, the most critical has been Harold Bloom, who, though agreeing with Borges that writers create their own precursors, rejects

Borges's "aesthetic idealism" in which the relation of poet to precursor is seen as "clean" rather than malign. Bloom holds that the new poet fashions his own precursors by misinterpreting them, a process that "malforms" the new poet. Poetic influence is a kind of disease that makes strong poets suffer an "anxiety of influence" Precisely the plurality, the agonizing individuality, of poets is what matters most.

From a Bloomian perspective interesting questions emerge concerning Borges's ideas and poetic practice. Is Borges's metaphysical rejection of literary relations itself a defense mechanism, a revisionary ratio in Bloom's terms, made to evade the psychological perils of influence? In "The Aleph" Borges neglects to cite Dante in spite of conclusive evidence that the story owes much to Dante. Would not Bloom's concept of poetic anxiety better account for Borges's omission in "The Aleph" than Borges's own notion of influence?

We know that Borges has worked a great deal with Dante. Like other twentieth-century writers— one thinks of Joyce, Mann, Eliot, Pound, Beckett, Flannery O'Connor, and Solzhenitsyn—Borges has shown an extensive, often penetrating, knowledge of the Italian poet (see the "Estudio preliminar"). He claims to have read through English or Italian versions of the *Commedia* at least ten times; the first time he read Dante in the original was probably in the late 1930s, long before he wrote "The Aleph" His writings attest to an intense interest in Dante: the parable "Inferno, I 23" 1955; his introduction to a Spanish translation of the *Commedia* which includes short essays on Ulysses, Ugolino, and Beatrice in the earthly paradise; several occasional essays published between 1948 and 1962, never reprinted (e.g. "El noble castillo" and "El verdugo piadoso"); and numerous references and allusions scattered not only through the stories collected in *El Aleph*, but also throughout his whole opus. Nor does Borges profess to hold any writer in higher esteem than Dante. As early as 1943, in "Sobre el 'Vathek' de William Beckford," he wrote that "*La Divina Comedia* is the most justifiable and the most solid book of all literature," . . . And over thirty years later: "Had I to name a single work as being at the top of all literature, I should choose the *Divina Commedia* by Dante." A Bloomian might well argue thus: if for Borges the *Commedia* is the paradigmatic poem, then it is possible that he would regard its shadow in "The Aleph" as an "intolerable presence," one he could not acknowledge.

This does seem plausible since "The Aleph" is one of Borges's most ambitious stories. As the title story of one of Borges's two main collections it retains a strategic place in his oeuvre. Like the *Commedia*, it tries to elicit a total vision of the cosmos. The Aleph of the title, a bright sphere about an inch in diameter, is a magical microcosm, a point that contains all other points in the cosmos. The Aleph makes all things visible without diminishing them or making them overlap. As the epigraph from Hobbes suggests, the Aleph is to space what eternity is to time. The heart of the story is a partial listing of what the narrator saw in the Aleph. This listing, the description of the Aleph, and an inventory of various precursors of the Aleph constitute about a third of the account. The rest of the story sets down how Borges, the narrator, is gradually drawn into the confidences of the Aleph's owner, the poet Carlos Argentino Daneri, in whose surname many readers have recognized an abbreviation of Dante Alighieri. Borges knows Daneri through the latter's cousin, Beatriz Viterbo, who was Borges's great, unrequited love,

long deceased at the time of the main events of the story. After her death in 1929, Borges, on her birthday, would pay a nostalgic visit to her old house in Buenos Aires, still occupied by Daneri. In 1941 Daneri, now an intimate of Borges, reads to him sections of his topographico-encyclopedic epic *The Earth, La Tierra*, which, when finished, will include a complete inventory of every natural and artificial feature of the planet. About a third of the story involves a critical assessment of Daneri and his encyclopedic epic. Shortly after this reading a distraught Daneri notifies Borges that Beatriz's house is to be demolished and with it the Aleph, which is in the cellar and which Daneri has used to gather the vast materials for *The Earth*. Daneri leads Borges to the cellar where the latter experiences a total vision through the agency of the Aleph. But on returning, Borges spitefully refuses to recognize the existence of the Aleph and even implies that Daneri is deluded. In the postscript, where the narrator lists numerous earlier references to Alephs, we learn that Daneri's Aleph has been destroyed, that *The Earth* has received the Second National Prize for Literature, and that the narrator's own entry failed to get a single vote.

Of the numerous parallels between Dante's work and "The Aleph" the most significant for an interpretation of the poetics of Borges's story relate to the *Paradiso*. These in particular have been convincingly established in separate studies by Alberto Carlos, Roberto Paoli and Ruggiero Stefanini. Foremost is the striking similarity between Dante's God in the *Paradiso* and the Aleph, Borges's total point. Borges the narrator sees the Aleph as "a tiny, iridescent sphere of almost intolerable brilliance," . . . Similarly, Dante the pilgrim sees God as a mere point of light which nevertheless makes the eye want to close because of its piercing brilliance. Just as Beatrice describes God as "that place where every *ubi* and every *quando* is centered in a point" . . . so too the Aleph is "one of the points in space that contains all the [other] points," . . . The pilgrim in his final vision of the divine point of light sees confined in its depths "all that lies scattered in pages throughout the universe," . . . Likewise Borges sees in the Aleph the whole "unimaginable universe," "el inconcebible universo." More important still, each work presents a spatial paradox that also involves a perceptual anomaly: not just a point that is all points, but a point in which all other points remain discernible to the human eye. Each work, in short, concerns itself with the nature and scope of total vision.

Other parallels suggest that Borges uses the *Paradiso* to set up a poetics of total vision, in other words a study of the principles and limits of expressing a total vision by means of verbal art. The first canto of the *Paradiso* states the well-known problem: "through words it is not possible to signify transhuman matters," . . . Throughout the *Paradiso* Dante regrets his inability to remember or put into language his visionary experiences. These regrets reach a crescendo in the last canto where he repeatedly laments that the ultimate vision he has received exceeds a human's verbal and mnemonic capacities to set it forth, and he likens the evanescence of his vision to the "unsealing" of snow by the sun and to the scattering by the wind of the light leaves of the Sibyl so that the "meaning," "sentenza," of her oracle is lost. His difficulty lies not only in the magnitude or totality of the vision, but also in its remarkable concentration, for, as he says, he sees "confined, / bound by love into a single volume, / all that lies scattered in pages throughout the universe," . . . Thus, though the pilgrim sees all-in-one, the poet cannot describe allin-one by human means, except scatter-fashion, as a sort of sequence in

which the all ceases to be all, and the one becomes several, presented in succession. Similarly, we learn from Beatrice that the spirits the pilgrim meets distributed among the planets are there only as appearances or signs ("per far segno"), put there as a concession to the pilgrim's human faculties, which at this point can only apprehend trans-spatial things in a spatial, sequential order. In fact these spirits reside in the first circle of the Empyrean, their seeming dispersal among the planets a kind of illusion engineered for the pilgrim's gradual introduction into the metaphysics of total vision. The reader nearly forgets, here, that it is the poet who has devised this spectacle for the reader, not the angels for the pilgrim, and that Dante's problem relates as much to poetics as to celestial metaphysics.

Like Dante, Borges the narrator shows a keen awareness of the limits that language and human cognition impose on the re-presentation of a total vision. Before he begins the "ineffable center," "inefable centro" of his story, that is, the catalog of what he saw in the Aleph, he speaks of his "desperation as a writer," "desesperación de escritor," and of the problem of how to "convey to others the infinite Aleph, which my timorous memory can scarcely comprehend," . . . Writing must also fail to re-present the alephic vision because what he sees is simultaneous but its "transcription [is] sequential, for such is the nature of language," . . . Just as Dante in the last tercets of the *Commedia* refers to his incapacity to grasp his vision for long, so too Borges gives the last sentences of his story to the failure of his memory to confirm that he even saw the Aleph or had a total vision. One might, of course, see in this correspondence merely the recurrence of a stock motif: the ineffability and evanescence of total vision. Yet the positioning of the motif in Borges and his use of it in conjunction with the Aleph, which almost certainly owes its main features to the God of the *Paradiso*, argue powerfully that this is a case of direct influence.

Generally, the Dante parallels in "The Aleph" are explained as instances of Borgesian parody, an indisputable finding, which, however, does not take us very far. In my view these parallels only begin to take on significance when the reader concentrates on Borges's "sin of omission," namely, his not acknowledging Dante as his precursor . . .

Total enumeration by means of a comprehensive catalog or encyclopedia is, of course, a longstanding method for re-presenting a total vision. In fact it is Daneri's method in his encyclopedic epic *The Earth*, the poetics of which Borges takes such pains to discredit. The method does not work well because total inclusiveness in the arts, if not elsewhere, remains a chimera. Even if it were not, there would always remain a serious disjunction between a total enumeration and a total vision, for the former is sequential and encyclopedic whereas the latter is simultaneous and unified. Hence that ineffability of total vision which is the despair of mystical poets from Dante to Borges, and a central theme of "The Aleph." The narrator himself makes this point when he complains that this alephic vision was instantaneous but that his means of expression is sequential. And in 1970 the author explained that his "chief problem in writing the story" was in "the setting down of a *limited* catalog of *endless* things" (my emphasis). Here, however, the discrepancy between total enumeration and total vision reflects the dichotomy limited/endless, that is, the inevitable incompleteness of a "total enumeration" rather than its sequential nature. Thus the narrator's omission of Dante references in an

inventory of precursors illustrates a specific defect of total enumeration. Moreover, this "sin of omission" is ironic, for the defect in the telling of the story reflects the story's subject: the inadequacy of total enumeration . . .

In this context, a remark by Borges from an essay of 1949 is revealing about his view of Dante. Borges imagines a total picture, a magical engraving, "lámina," of which he says that "nothing on earth is not included there," . . . In this engraving one sees all that is, was and will be—the history of the past and that of the future. It is a "microcosm," "microcosmo." "That engraving of universal compass," . . . he says, is Dante's *Commedia*. For Borges then, the *Commedia* is an anomaly, a human fabrication that miraculously achieves the quality of all-inclusiveness. In this respect Dante's masterpiece suspiciously resembles Borges's Aleph.

Given Borges's preoccupation with the inclusionary obsession, it is hard not to infer that in "The Aleph" Borges has excluded the mention of Dante so that the authorial audience will see reflected in the narrator/pseudo-author the pathos of unintentional omission. The Dante omission, which is at once conspicuous, supposedly unintentional, and broadly significant, offers a key to understanding Borges's own procedures in dealing with total vision. He knows that the law of unintentional omission invariably undermines the inclusionary process. Out of this knowledge he has drawn the paradoxical conclusion that a method of *significant* omission is essential to a modern poetics of total vision.

Thus the theme of total enumeration and the method of significant omission coexist in the story in a relation of ironic tension. They also have something in common: each points to the epic as a poetic vehicle of all-inclusive vision. The omission of Dante references in a parody of the *Commedia* calls to mind the fact that for Borges, as for many moderns, Dante's magnum opus is the paradigmatic epic. So too, total enumeration is one of the main procedures by which epic poems create the effect of all-inclusive vision. In this matter I follow Tillyard and a host of others who regard epics as long poems distinguished by their amplitude and inclusiveness. Tillyard's perspective is useful here because he differentiates the heroic poem from the epic, which need not have a "heroic matter" but which does give a "heroic impression" through the ambitiousness and comprehensiveness of its project. In fact, this accords well with medieval views of the epic poet as encyclopedist/polymath and of the classical epic as a compendium of knowledge. The encyclopedia is ultimately the most comprehensive type of total enumeration. When critics refer to the epic as encyclopedic, they mean that its mode of narration, extended and digressive, tends to generate an enumeration of all things. In this sense, the major epics from the *Iliad* to *Paradise Lost* become the summas of their worlds.

Yet epic is not the only literary mode of allinclusive vision, nor is total enumeration the only means to convey such a vision. The short poem or the prose meditation can also convey a total vision, usually through the mystical apprehension of the unity of all things in God. Here the mode is lyrical or meditative rather than encyclopedic. The rhetoric, depending as it does on the method of significant omission, employs oxymoron, apophasis, the *via negativa*, and the ineffability topos to communicate the experience,

rather than the content, of total vision. The works of the Spanish mystics and the English metaphysicals are the best known examples of the lyric or meditative mode of total vision.

These divergent modes necessarily entail different versions of total vision: the one, extensional and objective, describing the contents of total vision; the other, intensive and subjective, centering on the paradoxical experience of total vision. It is perhaps yet another measure of its all-inclusiveness that Dante's epic incorporates both modes and both versions of total vision. As we have seen, this is especially evident in the *Paradiso* where the enumerative or sequential presentation of the cosmos is declared an enabling fiction and where the encyclopedic description of the heavenly order is ruptured by lyrical moments of significant omission, of blindness, muteness, and amnesia. Here paradox and oxymoron reflect the inadequacy of total enumeration in the face of the pilgrim's mystical experience of the unity of all things in God. In this way the *Paradiso* offers paradigms for both the encyclopedic epic of total vision and its lyrical, apophatic counterpart.

If taken too seriously as an evaluative principle, this neo-Crocean typology of visionary modes would not be very tenable. But it does serve as a helpful way of approaching both the theme and method of "The Aleph," where it accounts for three models of poetic form for total vision offered by the story: Daneri's *The Earth* (an encyclopedic epic), Dante's *Commedia* (which uses both encyclopedic and lyric modes), and the story "The Aleph" itself, whose mode of total vision is lyric-meditative.

Borges presents *The Earth* as an encyclopedic epic. We learn, for instance, that *The Earth*, like Dante's epic, unfolds in cantos, that it has the epic aim of putting into verse "the whole wide world," "toda la redondez del planeta," and that it uses such epic conventions as the digression and the apostrophe. It is not surprising that Borges compares *The Earth* to the encyclopedic *Polyolbion*, a "topographical epic," "epopeya topográfica" by Drayton. And four of the quoted verses from *The Earth* allude to Homer's *Odyssey* and Hesiod's *Works and Days*, thereby signalling the encyclopedic range of Daneri's work. Yet the narrator rarely tires of pointing up the mediocrity of *The Earth*, in spite of the Dante legacy suggested in Daneri's name.

The second model, covertly present, is Dante's epic, especially the *Paradiso*. The Dante parodies, allusions, and parallels in the story continually bring the authorial reader back to Dante's own poetics of total vision as set forth in the *Paradiso*. Drawing on Borges's comments as well as his practice, one can infer three aspects of the *Commedia* that make it for Borges the paradigmatic long poem: it encompasses the medieval cosmos in a total vision ; it exploits the method of significant omission to give the impression that it is neither incomplete nor redundant ; and, also by this method, it enforces the illusion of its own unity and thereby the transcendental unity of all things . . .

Borges conveys the effect of amplitude within small compass by relying on suggestion, a mode of significant omission, rather than on total representation through total enumeration, the ponderous method of Daneri. For Borges, re-presentation, the extended, exhaustive description of objects, results in works that are "large,"

"considerable" but "limited," "limitado," to use the narrator's characterization of *Polyolbion*, and by implication *The Earth*. The results of encyclopedic re-presentation reverse or overthrow the alephic principle, which seeks to confine the unlimited in something small. Suggestion, as opposed to re-presentation or direct expression, is alephic. Suggestion draws on ellipsis, allusion, apophasis, *pars pro toto*, and veiling, all techniques of significant omission. An analogy from the visual arts illustrates well the power of suggestion through significant omission. As E. H. Gombrich has noted, Rembrandt and Leonardo deliberately blurred those features of the face that would be most expressive. Paradoxically, this partial omission of the most expressive features makes the face much more expressive than if they were fully expressed. This method foreshadows Borges's neo-Symbolist poetics, already enunciated in 1932 in his essay "Narrative Art and Magic." Here Borges speaks of blurring as a means of emphasis, citing William Morris and Mallarmé as examples. Thus omission, which is a serious defect from a re-presentational viewpoint, becomes a virtue in evocation. Through omission evocation is alephic: it encompasses more with less. Even so, Borges asserts that this method can never achieve the complete presentation of the essential object: "I think you can only allude to things, you can never express them."

Source: Jon Thiem, "Borges, Dante, and the Poetics of Total Vision," in *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Spring 1988, pp. 97-121.

Topics for Further Study

Research the philosophical puzzles known as the paradox of Zeno and Pascal's sphere. How do stories such as "The Aleph" dramatize these paradoxes in narrative form?

During his lifetime, Borges wrote extensively of other authors and gave numerous interviews where he shared his opinions on literature. Read some of his essays or interviews to learn about his tastes. To what degree are his tastes reflected in "The Aleph," in terms of both style and content?

Part of what makes "The Aleph" a success is Borges's setting it in an everyday location and describing the fantastic event in everyday language. Compose a story in which a character discovers a fantastic object or event and use Borges's style to describe it. How does the use of everyday language (rather than inflated diction) heighten the believability of the event for the reader?

Research trends of thought among physicists and other scientists who seek to better understand the relationship between space and time. How does "The Aleph" reflect their ideas, such as the possibility of a "naked singularity" or the theoretical foundations of chaos theory?

In 1946, Borges was removed from his librarian post by the Perón government. Research Borges's life to learn more of how he opposed the Peron government and eventually became a spokesperson for human rights.

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Latin-American literature is not widely studied in North American high schools or universities.

Today: Many universities sponsor whole departments devoted to Latin-American literature; works by writers such as Borges, Julio Cortazar, and Gabriel García Márquez are included in many high school curricula.

1940s: Argentina's fascist Perón government grows in power; Borges is eventually removed from his post at the Miguel Cane Municipal Library for signing anti-Perón petitions.

Today: Since the overthrow of Perón in 1955, Argentina has undergone a series of revolutions and suspensions of its constitution. The followers of Perón (the Perónists) are still a vigorous political party. Perón's story became more well known in 1978, when Andrew Lloyd Weber's Evita, a stylized musical about Perón and his wife, premiered.

1940s: Scientists studying subatomic particles have discovered the strong and the weak nuclear forces in addition to the electromagnetic and gravitational forces. They continue to develop quantum theory as they discover a zoo of subatomic particles in addition to the proton, neutron, and electron.

Today: Over a quarter century after the November Revolution of 1974, when evidence for the charmed quark was discovered at Stanford Linear Accelerator (SLAC) and at Brookhaven National Laboratory, the Standard Model of quantum field theory is still the leader in the field. This model suggests that all matter and energy is made up of quarks, gluons (particles that exchange forces between quarks), leptons (light-inmass particles), and electromagnetic waves. However, because of the inability to test predictions requiring higher energies than current particle accelerators can produce, many physicists have turned towards Chaos Theory, a branch of physics that seeks to explain how the seemingly random behaviors of systems (such as the universe and the stock exchange) rely on mathematical laws.

1940s: Science fiction is viewed as a wellestablished yet whimsical genre: science fiction writers are able to sell their work to vast audiences, but many are viewed by the critical establishment as trivial and derivative.

Today: There is little doubt that science fiction writers are addressing some of the most pressing issues of our time. Authors such as David Brin, Orson Scott Card, and William Gibson stand as literary descendents of Borges, often exploring the same issues addressed by Borges in his work.

What Do I Read Next?

Borges's story "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941) does with time what "The Aleph" does with space. In it, a German spy during World War I learns about the multitudinous dimensions of time and the nature of eternity.

Borges's essay "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal" (1951) explores the issue of infinity by addressing the philosopher Blaise Pascal's notion of God as a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

Italo Calvino's 1965 collection *Cosmicomics* traces (through a series of humorous short stories) the evolution of the universe. Like Borges, Calvino enjoys meeting thorny matters such as the nature of space and time head-on and with subtle humor.

James Joyce's 1916 novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* features a long chapter in which a Jesuit priest attempts to explain (with horrifying results) the nature of infinity to a school of teenage boys. Like the narrator of "The Aleph," the priest must address the limitations of language to describe something beyond the scope of words.

Borges's 1967 work *The Book of Imaginary Beings* is a catalog of mythical and literary creatures. As he does in "The Aleph," Borges treats the fantastic as if it were a part of everyday life.

Like "The Aleph," Emily Dickinson's poem "The Brain Is Wider Than the Sky" (1890) explores the nature of infinity and eternity—in this case, the limitless nature of human thought.

H. G. Wells was one of Borges's favorite authors; his story "The Crystal Egg" (1897) was one of Borges's inspirations for "The Aleph." In Wells's story, an antiques dealer finds an object that exists simultaneously on Earth and Mars.

Like Daneri's poem *The Earth*, the American poet Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) features a number of verses in which images and sensations are catalogued, producing a sometimes-hypnotic effect.

The cognitive-science professor Douglas Hofstader's 1979 book *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* examines the mathematical theories of Kurt Godel, the drawings of M. C. Escher, and the music of J. S. Bach to explore (like all of Borges's work) the nature of matter, the composition of the universe, and the workings of the human mind.

Further Study

Borges, Jorge Luis, "An Autobiographical Essay," in *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969*, E. P. Dutton, 1978.

This essay, first published in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1970, offers a glimpse of Borges's childhood reading habits and life as an up-and-coming writer in Buenos Aires.

_____, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, University of Texas Press, 1988.

This volume contains over thirty of Borges's essays; the topics range from literature and history to the nature of time.

_____, *A Universal History of Infamy*, Penguin Books, 1975.

Borges's first collection was originally written for the pages of an Argentinian newspaper. A reader of this entertaining volume will note Borges's trademark blending of fact and fiction.

Burgin, Richard, ed., *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*, University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

This collection features the text of sixteen conversations with Borges, ranging from 1966 to 1985. There is also a valuable index, so readers can quickly find Borges's opinions on a number of topics and writers.

Smith, Verity, ed., *Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997.

This exhaustive reference work features comprehensive entries on the work of Borges and other Argentinian literature.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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