



Research Article

<https://doi.org/10.22455/2541-7894-2024-17-117-139>

<https://elibrary.ru/BCRQKR>

UDC 821.111(73).0

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## BORGES: EL OTRO ARABESK. CASE STUDY: *THE ALEPH*

**Abstract:** This paper will address the question of the Borgesian approach towards writing multilayered philosophical fiction. It will attempt to stratify his artistic prescription towards constructing deep philosophical testimonies which amalgamate different historical and fictional narratives. The latter will be thoroughly examined in his oeuvres which introduced Islamic heritage specifically, wherein the researchers argue that the fascination which Islam seems to exert on Borges, *écrivain préféré* of Derrida is far less concerned with remote isolated small desert villages, minarets, raging sultans, swords, harems of T.E. Lawrence and Richard Burton and so on. It is rather drawn on more advanced methods of intellectual anatomy that cites supposed informants who are knowledgeable enough to define figures like Omar El-Khayyam, Averroes, Ibn-Khaldun, and El-Baladhouri. The findings show that the authority is often authorial, and sometimes dependent on complex narratological weaves in addition to standard Orientalist package.

**Keywords:** Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph*, Postmodernism, Islam, Orientalism, representation, imagery.

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**For citation:** Sedrati, Yasser, and Walid Djari. "Borges: el Otro Arabesk. Case Study: *the Aleph*." *Literature of the Americas*, no. 17 (2024): 117–139. <https://doi.org/10.22455/2541-7894-2024-17-117-139>



Научная статья

<https://doi.org/10.22455/2541-7894-2024-17-117-139>

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## «АЛЕФ»: АРАБЕСКИ БОРХЕСА И ПРОБЛЕМА ДРУГОГО

**Аннотация:** В статье будет рассмотрен вопрос о борхесовском подходе к созданию многоуровневой философской фантастики и предпринята попытка дать классификацию его поэтики, нацеленной на создание глубоких философских произведений, объединяющих различные исторические и художественные повествования. Эти нарративы будут проанализированы на материале его новелл, посвященных исламской теме. В статье выдвигается тезис о том, что для Борхеса, «любимого писателя Деррида», очарование ислама, судя по всему, было в гораздо меньшей степени связано с отдаленными изолированными маленькими деревнями в пустыне, минаретами, гневными султанами, мечами, гаремами в духе Т.Е. Лоуренса, Ричарда Бертона и т. п. Скорее, интерес Борхеса к исламу был основан на способе интеллектуального препарирования, когда приводятся цитаты предполагаемых информаторов, достаточно осведомленных, чтобы рассуждать о таких фигурах, как Омар Хайям, Аверроэс, Ибн-Халдун и Эль-Баладхури. В ходе исследования демонстрируется, что авторитет часто оказывается авторским, а иногда зависит от сложных нарратологических переплетений в дополнение к типичному для ориентализма набору тем, мотивов, идей.

**Ключевые слова:** Хорхе Луис Борхес, «Алеф», постмодернизм, ислам, ориентализм, репрезентация, образность.

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**Для цитирования:** Седрати Я., Джари В. «Алеф»: арабески Борхеса и проблема Другого // Литература двух Америк. 2024. № 17. С. 117–139. <https://doi.org/10.22455/2541-7894-2024-17-117-139>

### Introduction

Postmodernism blurs the schism that distinguishes different cultures and de-authenticates any quest for cultural uniqueness, as well as it parenthesizes the established conventions which monopolized the right of defining the truth. As a postmodern forerunner, the vision that Borges maps in the selected short stories will show how postmodernity is still breeding in subtler ways old orientalist tenets. In other words, Foucault challenges the fundamental inclination that posits the divine as an entity beyond recognition and experience. He argues instead that God continually brings about his manifestation through the use of language. This interpretation suggests that Foucault questions the traditional view of God as completely transcendent and emphasizes the role of language in shaping and manifesting the divine presence.<sup>1</sup> Foucault affirms the Nietzschean conclusion that to believe in Grammar is to believe in God. This belief is considered one of the most persistent neuroses invented by the West. The “Unthought” that Foucault discussed is linked to the Western pursuit of contemplating the unthought, manifested in the Divine Whole that transcends ordinary language. Foucault examined the evolution of contemporary thought towards a stage where man's Other is required to mirror himself, prompting a revisitation of the essential counterpart in the exploration of the unthought. This progression involves the amplification of subjectivities of the two Dependent Others who are naturally conceived within the context of the prevailing mobilization of the Modern age.

As a postmodern landmark, Borges' oeuvres remain a garden of forking paths that overwhelms its readers. He exerted a strong influence on the direction of literary fiction through his genre-bending metafiction, essays, and poetry. Known for his contributions to the Western canon, he introduced writing conventions that perplexed critics and specialists with its intricate semantic and syntactic structures. Influenced by the fantastical works of Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka, he skillfully merged literary and non-literary genres to craft a genre that is both dynamic and electrifying, as highlighted by Alberto Julián Pérez in the Dictionary of Literary Biography. Pérez pointed out that Borges's writing stands out for its meticulous linguistic craftsmanship and its ability to encapsulate a multitude of ideas in a concise and impactful manner, thus pushing the boundaries of

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of Human Science*. New York, London: Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005: 325.

narrative techniques to new heights. Through his groundbreaking literary innovations and his insightful commentary on literature itself, Borges has had a profound influence on the trajectory of literary development. His exploration of Eastern subject matter was distinguished by a fusion of various mystical and philosophical traditions. Borges' *The Aleph* spilled rivers of intellectual ink that have drawn borders of a vast civilizations and established maps of meaning which will inspire and influence generations who shall perceive Islam 'à la Borges'. "The Aleph", "Averroes Search", "Hakim of Merv" are epistemological triangle from which he sprouted his philosophy.

The current paper will attempt to approach Borges' aforementioned stories from an Orientalistic perspective through the amplification of the Borgesian postmodern layers. The research will refer to hadith science principles to judge the veracity of the alleged prophetic narrations in the selected stories. Also, a brief critical analogy will be proposed to compare between Muslim historians approach towards history and Borges' perspective. The three short stories will be spotted to address the question of Orientalism and how it is still evolving epistemologically in Borges' works both artistically and philosophically.

### **Borges' Many Islams**

The fascination that Islam seems to exert on Borges (*écrivain préféré* of Derrida) is far more concerned with remote isolated small desert villages, minarets, raging sultans, swords, harems of T.E. Lawrence and Richard Burton and so on. It is rather drawn on more advanced methods of intellectual anatomy that cites supposed informants who are knowledgeable enough to define figures like Omar El-Khayyam, Averroes, Ibn-Khaldun, and El-Baladhouri. The authority is sometimes authorial and sometimes dependent on standard Orientalist package borrowed from Captain Burton and Ernest Renan. Quotations from the Quran and references to the *Arabian Nights* are bubbling sequentially each time Other's structure is mentioned. Borges Islam encompasses myriad of geographical variations (Persia, Egypt, Spain, and surprisingly not Mecca or Medina), theological tendencies (Ismailis, Sufis, Esotericist), philosophical disputes between commentators of Aristotle like Averroes and anti-philosophers like Al-Ghazali:

At different times he can be the sardonic commentator on obsolete practices, the detached chronicler of distant events, the cynical observer of alien

beliefs, the warm and sympathetic reporter of a subject he feels personally engaged in [Almond 2007: 66].

The various tones that Borges accredits to his stories include a collection of metaphors which is called Islam, in its turn it differs from one story to another based on the content that is addressed each time. The latter represents the complexity that characterizes his depicted material about the oriental Other from 1933 to 1956. In “The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald” the amount of the supposed cited intellectuals work to inform the reader who is for the first time introduced to such material (Obar ibn Ibrahim, Nizam Elmulk, Ikhwan al-safa, Alfarabi, Avicenna...). What mainly distinguishes the stories of Borges that are concerned with Islamic metaphors is the abrupt indefinite shift in the intellectual gear, where a casual scene of a wanderer in the desert turns into wide speculations and stream of gnostic consciousness. Borges does, indeed, belong to the Orientalist tradition with all the negative and the positive sense that Said attributed to the word. His East is the host of European travelers and scholars who are there to narrate their story about the Other. It is blatantly the open wide Sahara of Burton, Sykes, Muller and Renan, he starts his “The Hakim of Merv” with a string of academic references to Al-Baladhuri in his *A History of Persia* to give credence to his Orientalist pen. Therefore, in each story he uses different voice to narrate his vision through Orientalist lenses, whether it is magical, mystical, cynical, or fantastical... etc. In the coming pages each of the selected stories will be scrutinized to show the orientalist narratives Borges is relating there in a way that reflects his complex intellect that amalgamates fiction with reality.

In “The Mirror of Ink” Borges presents a picture of Islam that is found (as he claims in the story itself) in the exploration travels of Richard Burton.<sup>2</sup> The most remarkable patterns which circumscribe the timeline of the story are collection of themes and motifs that are found in the *Thousand Nights*. Unlike the romantics, Borges’ knowledge about these tales comes not from Galland’s French translation, but rather those by William Lane [Di Giovanni 1984: 39–45]. Such stories sardonically depict the tireless shortsighted human quest to reverse the divine paradigms which govern the flow of the temporal and spatial frame of work. Borges’ Islam in “The Mirror of Ink” is pure, safe, devout and orthodox. It is a world that is mor-

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<sup>2</sup> Borges’ claim is probably fictitious: “The Story of the Mirror of Ink” for example cannot be found anywhere in the pages of the book. It is allegedly lifted from Burton’s *Lake Regions of Central Africa*.

ally driven and promotive of Islamic aesthetics which are found in Muslim authors' tales that underlie theocentric stability of their world, "Glory be to him, who endureth forever, and in whose Hands are the key of unlimited Pardon and Punishment".<sup>3</sup> What is found in the latter ambiance is an atmosphere that is definitive and delineating in representation. In other words, ambiguity and mystery unlike all his stories are dislocated and abrogated to clearly trace the general guidelines of a just world where acts of pride and evil are punished, prophesies are fulfilled, and piety has the upper hand. More importantly is the umbrella of the divine deterministic notion that maps the constitutive ontological finalities which are incorporative of daily life affairs. Thus, what is resonated in this story is the European Orientalist tradition that exacerbates the idea of fatalism in Islam. However, a shift towards merging divine and human attributes is sensed when the notion of omnivisuality is introduced not Godly but Manly; the ruler Yaqub the Ailing forces his weary and imprisoned sorcerer to show him all things in a pool of ink, nestled in the palm of his hand:

This man, whom I still hate, had in his palm everything seen by men now dead and everything seen by the living, the cities, the climates, the kingdoms into which the earth is divided; the treasure hidden in its bowels; the ships that ply its seas; the many instruments of war; of music; of surgery; fair women; the fixed stars and the planets.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of god-like image will be one of the most prevailing leit-motifs used in the future stories of Borges who will expatiate the esoteric Sufi belief of Union, Pantheism, and incarnation that is found in Ibn-Arabi most famous pantheist Sufi thinkers, and garnered by Borges through his reading of Palacios works who expounded the metaphor of 'the infinite world of images' which will occupy much of his story writing style. Similarly, twelve years later, another iteration of the mirror made of ink emerges in "The Aleph," portraying the omnipotent nature in a miniature sphere measuring just an inch in diameter. This sphere contains the reflections of all entities, yet it is not situated in any exotic Oriental backdrop. Instead, it is found in the mundane basement of a meticulous poet from Buenos Aires. Gazing into this mirror provides a glimpse of the incomprehensible entirety of existence, as Yaqub the Ailing's pool of ink:

<sup>3</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *The Mirror of Ink*. London: Pocket Penguin, 2005: 125.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: 123.

I saw the teeming see, I saw daybreak and nightfall, the saw the multitudes of America, I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London)... I saw bunches of grapes, snow tobacco, lodes of metal, steam, I saw convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of sand.<sup>5</sup>

As an early Oriental version of “The Aleph,” “The Mirror of Ink” was thrown splashing in Islamic stagnant swamp that is morally driven and drawn by theological strictures. However, “The Aleph” is but a defamiliarizing antonymic revision of a remote landscape that was brought to civilization, but still possess its supernatural power, albeit, without Islamic denominators. Unlike the just world in “The Mirror of Ink,” “The Aleph” introduces the pedantic poet who is struggling with his love to a woman whom he knew that she was wooed by his hated rival; an example of a theme that was absent in “The Mirror.” The latter, which is typical of an old Oriental tradition that centers the religious topos which ornament the Islamic mosaic, although, this category of his stories are told from the point of view of a Muslim narrator. In addition to a Muslim’s narration, stories like “The Aleph,” “The Zahir,” and “Hakim of Merv” tackles themes of sinfulness, crime and punishment, as well as the idea of futility and sadness. His Muslim narrators are to a far extent inside beholders and sober historians who are, knowledgeable, detached observers, and nutritional of Borges fascination with Andalusia and Granada’s Islamic bygones. With bits of sprinkled fragments which create Islamic ambiance in his stories like: ‘salam Allah alayhom’ (peace be upon them), ‘Al-Rahman Al-Rahim’ (The all Merciful), Borges attempts to authenticate his narrative process by citing bibliographic references that assure first hand reports from Arab sources, albeit being either Persian or Spanish. Through the use of first-person narratives from Abd-Alrahman Al-Masmoudi or Al-Isshaki, Borges skillfully rephrases, rearranges, and embellishes the already paraphrased and elaborated accounts, ultimately metamorphosing them into Magic Realistic corpus that straddles fiction and reality. “Borges tales in other words are translations of translations. The fact that, after these early stories, Borges never uses a Muslim or Arab narrator, which perhaps suggest gradual disillusionment with the validity of such an exercise.” [Almond 2007: 71]. Such stories hinge on the reiteration of images like:

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<sup>5</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*, transl. by Andrew Hurley. London: The Penguin Press 1999: 20.

‘emirs, viziers, deserts, scimitars, turbans, and camels’ which clearly shows Borges indebtedness to the European Oriental material. However, the likelihood of replication is based on commonly misguided representations that compromise the integrity of credibility, as evidenced by Borges' citation of Gibbon's claim that the Quran does not include a single reference to a camel<sup>6</sup>. In *Universal History of Infamy* Borges dedicates his (for encyclopedic purpose) book's material to present slices of iniquity in the history of mankind. Islam in these early tales was just as colorful as normal settings which are idiosyncratically reassuring and self-presentable. It is, in these tales, a moral shelter that establishes ontological patterns that guarantee the consequences of any act of infamy; nevertheless, the god of this world is never devoid of irony. Borges encapsulates these ideas in his concise work "A Double for Mohamed," which spans a mere page in length:

Borges lifts “A Double for Mohamed” directly out of paragraphs 829 and 830 of Swedenborg's *The True Christian Religion*, from a chapter entitled “Mohammedans in the Spiritual World” the translation is brief but verbatim, none of Swedenborg's positive remarks concerning Islam and its believers — their respect for Jesus, as “the greatest of all prophets”, their ability “to love justice and do good from a religious motive”, their greater number and their oppositions to idolatry [Almond 2007: 73].

The above lines were dismissed from Borges process of replication. What is amplified is the reiteration of the bizarre, grotesque, and ridiculous depiction of a fanatic image of a prophet who bobs up out of a cloud with a black face to say his name briefly before he disappears once more below, which leaves behind a bafflement augmented by the brevity of the text. What is remarked in such stories is that a sort of an “expert” comment always parallels the flow of narration. “Averroes Search” begins with a quotation from Renan's work on the thinker, just as “The Zahir” will end with the observations of a fictitious Islamologist (Julius Barlach and his *Urkunde zur Geschichte der Zahirsage*). It is rare that Borges ever venture to represent Orient without professional company that is reassuring for the reader. He uses a collection of exotic metaphors to enrich and enliven his mode of narration and introduce colorful settings. It became one of Borges' most special characteristics that an almost always present leitmotif of an Arabian denominator is objectively dynamizing the story's plot. If an

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<sup>6</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981: 215.



array of exploits, for example, crossing centuries and continents is to be described, then a hero like Sinbad or a city like Samarkand will inevitably be mentioned. Although, the legacy of presenting Islam as serious, object to irony, and sober stoned orthodoxy is manifested in this postmodern pattern of emplotment which are found, for example, in Rushdie's and Pamuk's material, Borges, nevertheless, hinges his style on the playfulness of the text that offers an academic façade driven more by an encyclopedic purpose that constellates list of references which work to blur the thread between fiction and reality:

However indiscreet or threatening they may be, so long as their words are not in conflict with orthodox faith, Islam is tolerant of men who enjoy intimacy with God.

He is an atheist, but is well able to interpret in the orthodox manner the most exacting passages of Koran, since every cultured man is theologian, and since, in order to be one, faith is not indispensable.<sup>7</sup>

Both stories are informative rather than amusing. In both narratives, the life stories of two intellectuals, Omar El-Khayyam and Mokanna, are presented, highlighting their divergence from conventional faith — apostasy and heresy, respectively. “Hakim of Merv” revisits the account of the veiled prophet of Khorasan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, drawing from a mix of genuine and imaginary sources, including the non-existent compendium of heresies called *The Dark Rose*. If a reader returns to one of the cited sources, namely, Percy Sykes's *A History of Persia*, he will find scant four lines about the prophet, whereas Borges has written around ten page biography. The purpose is artistic — to embellish and create an Oriental atmosphere that is an amalgamation of classic traditional representation and new mode of dialogic imagination which talks about estranged individuals in the face of their theological system:

At the end of the moon of Sha'ban, in the year 158, the desert air was very clear and from the gate of a caravan halting place on the way to Merv a group man sat gazing at the evening sky in search of the moon of Ramadan, which marks the period of continence and fasting.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*: 82, 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 79.

He even finds himself explaining for his reader the fasting in Ramadan. Borges is in perpetual straddling of being the Academic intellectual and the artistic author who is so much indebted to Renan, Burton, Palacios, and Margret Smith in the academic orientation and the visual representation of the *Arabian Nights*:

In describing an episode ninth-century Persian history, Borges makes a comparison with a collection of later medieval Arabic texts; in Western terms, this would be akin to an Arab historian trying to explain a scene from Anglo-Saxon history with a reference to Boccaccio. For Borges, the *Arabian Nights* and the story of Almokana obviously have one thing in common, Islam. The breadth of Borges' Oriental library is, in this sense, surprisingly narrow: on the same shelf we can find Baladhuri and *Thousand and One Nights*, the Quran and *Mantiq al-Tayr*, fact and fiction sitting next to each another and cited together quite unproblematically [Almond 2007: 78].

Inconsideration and non-linearity, blending fiction with reality, amusement with seriousness, and the fantastic with the factual are what personalize the style of Borges; however, the prospect lies on the idea of perception by the reader. In other words, how much credible is the material presented? Is it to be perceived as mere fiction or factual academic informative content?

What is most noticeable about "The Hakim" is the overarching totality of sobriety that overwhelms the very moment one starts reading the story. Fragments of sadness, whims of melancholy, whizzes of omens, and beats of darkness are what territorialize this region of the world, all of which contribute to a definite tristesse which seems to linger with the reader throughout the tale. In addition to classical denotations of the early Orientalists there is harem – a common leitmotif of such tradition, and "The Hakim of Merv" is no exception, where we find prophet's harem of blind women who are kept for "reasons of meditation and serenity" to provide an outlet for the distracting lusts of the prophet's "divine body". This prophet considers all colors abominable and sanctifies colorlessness. Borges' description of the prophet's hometown in Turkestan is a good example of the nondescript, almost resigned tone which runs throughout *Hakim of Merv*:

His home was the ancient city of Merv, whose gardens and vineyards and pastures sadly overlook the desert. Midday there, when not dimmed by

the clouds of dust that choke its inhabitants and leave a greyish film on the clusters of black grapes, is white and dazzling. Hakim grew up in that weary city.<sup>9</sup>

“Ancient”, “sadly”, “desert”, “dimmed”, “clouds”, “dust”, “grayish”... The aforementioned characteristics define this unholy world that desecrates the celestial realm, displaying hostility towards vitality and perceiving the sacred as an enemy to diversity.

The Islam followed by the Hakim of Merv is portrayed as a form of radical religion that isolates itself from diversity and all the elements that come with it, such as vitality and happiness. Even though Al-Mokanna differs from the prophet Muhammad, his story seems to mirror the core principles of Islam in this particular setting.

“The Enigma” is not exempt from “The Hakim” in Borges' works. Rarely does Borges mention a name without providing informative and definitive context that enlightens unfamiliar readers about Islam. Examples include Alfarabi, who posited that universal forms are inseparable from things, and Avicenna, who espoused the idea of the eternal nature of the world. The aforementioned is written on the pretext of proving that the writer of *Rubaiyat* and its English translator, separated by centuries, share a common, timeless soul of a secular rational rendition. Borges' representation of Islam is marked by his special interest in theologically heretical figures, like Omar Al-Khayyam, who are at odds with the substantial being of Islam. It comes as no surprise when we find that Borges' fascination with “the outsiders” of the natural Islam echoes Palacios' interest with Ibn-Arabi, Corbin's with the Ismailis, and Massignon's with al-Hallaj. In this respect an outsider thinker is the one who had been influenced by the Greek ‘Ilm Al-Kalam’ and embraced bits of their theological and rational mindset. It is the effect of “Falassifa”, be it Al-Khayyam to Plato, Averroes to Aristotle, or Al-Mokannaa to the Gnostics.

### **Borges the Infinite**

In “Seven Nights” Borges mentions that he possesses Burton's translation of the Islamic anthology, a compilation he associates with the notion of infinity: “The idea of infinity is inherent in *The Thousand and One Nights*.” Subsequently, he delves into the influence of this book on its readers, “One feels like getting lost in *The Thousand and One Nights*,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: 78.

one knows that entering that book one can forget one's own poor human fate; one can enter a world, a world made up of archetypical figures but also of individuals."<sup>10</sup> The work that Borges refers to includes quotations that have been attributed to Burton's edition [De Garayalde 1978: 82]. This identification is significant because it reveals that Burton was not just an ordinary traveler with a passing interest in Arab culture. On the contrary, he was a scholarly individual who possessed a comprehensive understanding of the language of Islam, as evidenced by his translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Moreover, it is important to note that Burton was also the initiator of a Sufi club. However, Borges also informs us that the edition he possesses is distinct from the one he mentioned, it is "limited to one thousand copies, for the thousand subscribers to the Burton Club, with the judicious commitment not to reproduce it"<sup>11</sup>. Borges' diction is such intriguing task. His method of approaching the subject matter is more like infinite spiral. On the one hand, one might presume that his approach towards understanding the Islamic material is built on Orientalist tradition inspired from the *Arabian Nights*. And on the other hand, he is academically mindful enough to acknowledge the limitations of his pen. However, a closer look on the issue is promising in understanding the nature of his representation:

A third possibility would be that Borges is merely making a playful, literary use of his knowledge of Islamic mysticism and, by presenting us with arguments in favor and against each of the above two possibilities, warning us against being too credulous. This explanation seems to do our author most justice: Borges is a wily (and weary?) writer, aware that literature contaminates experiences. If these are equally contaminated by the two components of the *zahir/batin* dichotomy, the sterility of *zahir* is remedied, and the risk of (mis)heretical interpretation reduced [Elia 1998: 135].

Borges' distinctive writing style is prominently displayed through his manipulation of time. In the opening of his essay "A New Refutation of Time", Borges cleverly uses the temporal adjective "new" in the title to undermine the very refutation he presents. Reflecting on his lifelong fascination with challenging the concept of time, despite his disbelief in

<sup>10</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Seven Nights*. New York: New Directions, 1984: 50.

<sup>11</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Historia de la eternidad*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1971 : 112.

it, Borges delves into the essence of paradox and oxymoron. He further emphasizes the significance of this theme throughout his body of work, highlighting the texts where it is foreshadowed:

This refutation is to be found, in one form or another, in all of my books. It is prefigured in the poems ‘Inscription on Any Tomb’ and ‘Truco’ in my *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923); it is openly stated on a certain page of Evaristo Carriego; and in the story “Feeling in Death”, which I transcribe below.<sup>12</sup>

In the two philosophical essays that encompass “Feeling in Death”, “A History of Eternity” explores the concept of eternity through the lenses of Platonism, Neo-Platonism, and Christian theology. On the other hand, “A New Refutation of Time” begins its argument by embracing idealism as its foundational standpoint. In the Prologue of “A History of Eternity”, Borges explicitly elucidates that eternity serves as a cognitive construct aimed at liberating humanity from the oppressive grip of linear time: “eternity, lovingly yearned for by so many poets, is a splendid artifice which frees us, albeit in a fleeting manner, from the unbearable oppression of the successive” [Bodly 2009: 49]. Borges, influenced by the Christian ethos, perceives time through the prism of the Trinity. This perception is regarded as an anomaly, a distortion that could only be generated by the terror of a nightmare. The misguided Gnostic concepts regarding the Trinity were resolved by asserting that the process of the Son being begotten by the Father and the Holy Spirit emanating from both does not unfold within the confines of time. Instead, it encompasses the entirety of past, present, and future in one definitive act, akin to the narrative style found in the Aleph, which draws inspiration from the Quran [Bodly 2009: 50].

A cosmic, a mystic, labyrinth and the incorporeal enigma maker, a disciple of metaphysical conundrums, esoteric and apocryphal promoter, a proponent of universal approach towards literature, and reality manipulator — that is what Borges is. Thus, the historical experience of his narrative is context saturated and his eternal approach towards time is context deprived. Borges is the universal wanderer of an ever-unfamiliar univocity. He is an omnipresent entity that aligns different narrational testimonies to

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<sup>12</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. “A New Refutation of Time.” In Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. New York, New Directions, 1964: 318.

produce undetermined astatic oeuvres which multiply varied civilizational segments. However, Borges repeatedly denied being a mystic:

Many people have thought of me as a thinker, as a philosopher, or even as a mystic. [...] People think that I've committed myself to idealism, to solipsism, or to doctrines of the cabala, because I've used them in my tales. But really I was only trying to see what could be done with them.<sup>13</sup>

Concurrently, he acknowledged that he had encountered two enigmatic states in his lifetime.,

In my life I only had two mystical experiences and I can't tell them because what happened is not to be put in words, since words, after all, stand for a shared experience. And if you have not had the experience, you can't share it — as if you were to talk about the taste of coffee and had never tried coffee. Twice in my life I had a feeling, a feeling rather agreeable than otherwise. It was astonishing, astounding. I was overwhelmed, taken aback. I had the feeling of living not in time but outside time. It may have been a minute or so, it may have been longer. [...] Somehow the feeling came over me that I was living beyond time, and I did my best to capture it, but it came and went. I wrote poems about it, but they are normal poems and do not tell the experience. I cannot tell it to you, since I cannot retell it to myself, but I had that experience, and I had it twice over, and maybe it will be granted me to have it one more time before I die.<sup>14</sup>

When contemplating his two enduring moments, he drew a comparison between himself and his enigmatic comrade, stating, “My comrade, a mystic, is overflowing with ecstatic experiences. In contrast, I have only encountered two instances of timeless time throughout my eight decades of existence.”<sup>15</sup>

Considering his previous dialogues, it is highly likely that he is referring to Xul Solar in this specific remark. Estela Canto reminisced about

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<sup>13</sup> Burgin, Richard. *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*. London: Souvenir Press, 1973: 79.

<sup>14</sup> Barnstone, Willis, editor. *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*. Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 1982: 10–11.

<sup>15</sup> Barnstone, Willis. *With Borges on an Ordinary Evening in Buenos Aires: A Memoir*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000: 73.

Borges' mystical nature, although she did not classify him as a mystic, she did discern a propensity towards embracing mysticism within him:

Quando se publicó *El Aleph*, yo lo comenté en una revista (*Sur*). Allí me refería yo a un estado de ánimo místico; a él le gustó el comentario. El agnóstico Borges no era un místico, por supuesto, pero sí una persona capaz de momentos místicos<sup>16</sup>.

(“When *The Aleph* was published, I wrote about it in the literary journal *Sur*, referring to a state of mystical rapture. He liked my comment. The agnostic Borges was no mystic, clearly, but he was someone capable of mystical moments”) (transl. by Yasser Sedrati).

### **Reality and the Infinite Representation**

Borges, as a syncretic and transcultural author, delves into peripheral realms within his works, exploring a variety of cultures and creating hybrid phenomena that question established ideas of purity and cultural authenticity. This reflects the complexities of a Post-modern world that challenges traditional Modern frameworks. Borges created a literary microcosm of his — but also our — contemporary Argentine (and Greek) macrocosm, which is situated at the crossroads of a remarkably wide range of traditions and civilizations. His fantasy, irony, and his genre are the three formative elements in the construction of Borges' syncretist aesthetics which, each one in its own way, undermine Reason and its limited and limiting disposition in order to give space to multiple co-existing realities. This is because ironic language can simultaneously be both the witting and unwitting instrument of truth, depriving the reader (and writer) of a secure final interpretation. Within the realm of ambiguity, meaning exists in a state of uncertainty, oscillating between affirmation and negation. This delicate position on the precipice of opposing forces is where irony thrives. Irony serves as a catalyst for deferral, acknowledging the negation of a definitive and fixed meaning within a text. By constantly surpassing its own boundaries, the text is able to sustain the conflicts that arise from syncretist processes:

The Borgesian notion of syncretism is closely associated with the concept of the world as a mental universe. Borges, who forms his philosophical

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<sup>16</sup> Canto, Estela. *Borges a Contraluz*. Barcelona: Espasa Calpe, 1999: 13.

edifice by drawing on several trends of idealism as envisioned by Plato, Berkeley, Hume and mainly Schopenhauer as well as on Eastern philosophy, is fundamentally a sceptic regarding the existence of a supernatural, metaphysical power or, in Lyotard's terms, the myth of the "grand récit" that religion in general offers as a Gospel of redemption. For Borges, the idealism of Plato, Berkeley and Schopenhauer, in John Sturrock's terms, is "pure mentalism" [...] In other words, the Borgesian syncretist machine can be irreverent toward traditions, ideologies and all sorts of narratives for the simple reason that, in essence, they are all fictional [Kefala 2007: 82].

Quite essentially is what Borges alluded to when he judged his own veracity of telling the story of Averroes. In his well-known story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" Borges introduces a compelling hypothesis concerning the philosophical conundrum of knowledge pertaining to the external world. He suggests that the world we perceive as concrete is essentially a mental fabrication of the human mind, endeavouring to imbue the world with significance while the actual world itself remains chaotic and devoid of inherent meaning. For Borges, the phenomenal world of ours is, like Tlön, a fantastic construction out of chaos: "Es un cosmos y las íntimas leyes que lo rigen han sido formuladas, siquiera en modo provisional"<sup>17</sup> ("It is a cosmos and [...] the intimate laws which govern it have been formulated, at least provisionally."<sup>18</sup>)

Cosmos originally means both "order" and "ornament". For the Ancient Greeks, on the one hand, the world was an ornament precisely because it was put into order by the supernatural. For the Western logocentric philosophy, which presumably begins with Plato and Aristotle, the world is perfectly set into order and it can be perfectly perceived by the signifying systems of Reason available to the human mind. Borges, on the other hand, believes that our world, like Tlön, is a "cosmos" (an "ornament", an "order") out of chaos, but it is also conventional and arbitrary. Borges nonetheless does not deny Reason or the mental constructions of the human mind. His scepticism is in no way reduced to nihilism. On the contrary, for Borges mental constructions are sine-qua-non conditions for mankind to survive in the chaotic labyrinth of the real world. What he (and subsequently Piglia,

<sup>17</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas I-IV* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1996–1997), vol. 1: 435.

<sup>18</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*: 32.



Kalokyris and Kyriakidis) does do, however, is to deny the authenticity of any of these formations as well as the infallibility of our cognitive systems. Borges reminds us that the rules, the norms we attribute to the world, are “provisional”. These norms, after all, are as fantastic (or real) in relation to the real world of chaos as Tlön [Kefala 2007: 83].

Irony, fantasy, and the short story are, hence, the aesthetic schema which Borges exacerbated to achieve and handle “irreverently” this form of chaos that characterize the phenomenal world. Fantasy and irony, each in its own way, undermine Reason and its limited and limiting disposition in order to give space to multiple (visible and invisible) coexisting realities that breed and challenge each other. Borges’ syncretist approach to literature, culture, and ideology by definition necessitates a different kind of Reason that can sustain conflicts and inherent contradictions in every aspect of human life and civilization. Besides, the genre of the short story becomes in the hands of Borges a literary form that is highly effective in sustaining multiple and heteroclitic versions of reality within the textual limits of fiction. For Borges, fiction is an outcome of magic, and this magic is nothing but the alchemy of fantasy and irony:

The Borgesian fantastic nurtures itself roughly from five different sources: (i) philosophical idealism, (ii) Oriental mysticism, (iii) Western fantastic literature, (iv) the folkloric fantastic of Argentina and (v) the fantastic fiction of the River Plate area. Borges, the alchemist, works with multiple trends in fantastic literature as well as other genres. His fiction is the site of various intersections, the space where diverse influxes and traditions (ranging from “civilised” Europe to the “savage” Pampa and from élitist naratives to folklore) converge and coexist in tension. Borges chooses fantasy over realism because fantasy eliminates the rational dogmatisms of reason and places the world and the self within an infinite proliferation of meanings and interpretations where certainties diminish and conflicts bifurcate. Fantastic fiction “offers hypothetical worlds based on the powers of an imagination unfettered by the constraints imposed by representative aesthetics” [Sarlo 1993: 52].

Therefore one understands Borges’ fiction within magical causality that blurs the divide between fiction and essay; so that any representative aesthetics will be undermined on a postmodern ground. In his 1932 essay, “El arte narrativo y la magia”, Borges speaks of two processes of causal-

ity, the natural causality of realist aesthetics and the magical causality of fantasy:

I have described two causal procedures: the natural or incessant result of endless, uncontrollable causes and effects; and magic, in which every lucid and determined detail is a prophecy. In the novel, I think that the only possible integrity lies in the latter. Let the former be left to psychological simulations [qtd. in: Sarlo 1993: 82].

Borges chooses for literature the magical causality of fantasy over the natural causality of realism, not because reason is abolished in the first case, but because reason is enriched; it is open to multiple possibilities,

I think, however, [...] that magic is the crown or nightmare of the law of cause and effect, not its contradiction. Miracles are no less strange in this universe than in that of the astronomers. It is ruled by all of the laws of nature as well as those of imagination [qtd. in: Sarlo 1993: 80].

Henceforth, magic assumes the role of a mediator, bridging the gap between the realms of nature and imagination. Its causal influence can be likened to a melting pot, harmoniously merging the laws governing the natural world with the limitless potential of human creativity. The latter amalgam is a Borgesian topos which guarantee infinite spheres that are non-linear and unconventional in comparison with standard ethos exemplified in the traditional binary oppositions and the freezing frames of inflexible rational schemes. In addition, within a heterogeneous world, fantasy offers the only secure knowledge of this world for simply it does not claim to offer any objective or absolute representation of reality. In its extremity, the fantastic reveals the condition of culture: infinite provisional interpretations of “reality”, always subject to permutation. Therefore:

We saw that the Borgesian fantastic creates heterotopias whose incompatible and deviating elements constantly dislocate and dislodge the reader as they subvert signification. Fantasy provides the Borgesian text with an intentional fragmentation that constantly fights against the fixity of any final meaning. Borges in reality proposes fantasy as the textual stratagem for what Roland Barthes years later would call “le degré zéro de l’écriture” and, we should add, of meaning. According to Barthes, at the bottom of the meaning of any given text we encounter a zero degree, a point where

we can go no further as the text generates no more meanings. At this zero degree, the text has no fundamental, underlying meaning for signification retreats and is suspended.<sup>19</sup>

The absence of final meaning unavoidably opens the text to infinite meanings and interpretations inasmuch as the “Word” becomes, according to Barthes, “encyclopaedic” [...]; in other words, it encompasses all potential past and future significations [Kefala 2007: 89].

Within his essay “The Postulation of Reality” Borges outlines three methods of literary representation. The first method involves a basic presentation of crucial facts, while the second method explores the creation of a more complex reality and its consequences. The third method, which Borges considers the most challenging and impactful, revolves around the fabrication of circumstances. Despite its difficulty, this method is deemed less purely literary due to its broader application, particularly when compared to the second method. The circumstantial is precisely what is excluded in the process of perception and representation. It is, in Derrida’s terms, *la différance* — crudely, what is different and deferred from the conventional meaning of a term.<sup>20</sup>

Borges utilizes the second approach of envisioning a reality that is more intricate than the one presented to the reader. It blurs the dividing line between what is termed in Realism ‘conceptualism’, ‘abstraction’, and ‘circumstantiality’, ‘artificiality’ in Romanticism. He stratifies the abstract with the circumstantial in his narrative, as a realist would do, and exposes the artificial and circumstantial nature of his abstractions, as a romanticist would do. We can refine this argument about the Borgesian fantastic by examining Borges’ reworking of Aristotelian poetics. In the *Poetics* Aristotle argues:

It is the function of a poet to relate not things that have happened, but things that may happen, i.e. that are in accordance with probability or necessity. For the historian and the poet do not differ according to whether they write in verse or without verse. [...] The difference is that the former relates things that have happened, the latter things that may happen.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Dreamtigers*. London: Souvenir Press, 1973: 11.

<sup>20</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Other Inquisitions: 1937–1952*, transl. by Ruth L.C. Simms. London: Souvenir Press, 1973: 1–29.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*, transl. by Richard Janko. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987: 36.

The central idea here revolves around the term (probable). Aristotle did not view the art of fiction and aesthetic representation as a mere replication of reality, as the common translation of mimesis as “imitation” might suggest. According to him, representing reality does not entail mimicking it, but rather inventing a new reality. While historians replicate reality by narrating what “has happened,” poets, on the other hand, create their own reality by portraying what “may happen.” Primarily, he is a creator of narratives: “It is clear [...] that a poet must be a composer of plots.”<sup>22</sup>

The poet is a creator derived from the action of “making”, specifically crafting “plausible” narratives; in other words, stories that may never occur in actuality but are still conceivable. Aristotle even suggests that it is preferable to present “amazing”, “astonishing” events that appear probable rather than actual occurrences that appear implausible. Eventually, Aristotle’s concept of the “probable” becomes even broader when he affirms that “it is probable that many things will happen even against probability.”<sup>23</sup>

What Borges actually does in reading Aristotle is to expand the latter’s concept of the “probable”. If what we perceive as “real”, Borges seems to suggest, is just a fiction then representing the “real” equates to representing fictions (ficciones). The Borgesian equation of the universe with the vast “Biblioteca de Babel” or the infinite “Libro de arena” practically resolves the long-standing debate on mimesis — this is what seems to happen in the case of Piglia’s “isla de Finnegans”, Kalokyris’ “bbbook” and Kyriakidis’ “Screenpolis” as well. In these cases, literature becomes as probable as reality itself since reality is nothing but infinite fictional narratives — a Book. Borges, in the end, is a” (an hacedor of ficciones) who suggests that the most probable (believable) reality in our world of simulacra is that of fantasy (ficciones). This is because fantasy does not ask us to believe it; on the contrary, it continuously exposes its fictitious nature. Paradoxically enough fantasy then becomes the space of realism par excellence. Like the metaphysicians of the fantastic planet of Tlön, Borges looks for Aristotelian “astonishment” [Kefala 2007: 93].

The mutuality of fiction with reality is what characterize Borges’ narratives. The probable makes the creation and the creation infinitely representative and coercive of the real and the abstract. In the same vain, the blend of fantasy with irony into fiction and reality sews an interwoven fabric that espouses subjective narrative of deceit with objective narrative

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.: 27.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: 2–11, 24.

of truth. In other words, the objectivity of the scholarly discourse of the essay is undermined by a series of textual stratagems: oxymoron, antonyms, hyperbole, allusions, fragments in narrative continuity, enjambment, enumeration of disparate units, unexpected correlations and so on. This scientific discourse is in fact thoroughly perforated in so far as it is deprived of its underlying features: precision and accuracy. Ellipsis then becomes its essence. In “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”, Borges notes: “Omitir siempre una palabra, recurrir a metáforas ineptas y a perífrasis evidentes, es quizá el modo más enfático de indicarla”<sup>24</sup> (“To omit a word always, to resort to inept metaphors and obvious periphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic way of stressing it”).<sup>25</sup>

Ellipsis is undoubtedly one of the constitutive elements of Borges’ “reinado del silencio” where reality is acknowledged but not depicted. Grojnowski says about ellipsis:

L’ellipse l’oblige [au lecteur] à suppléer aux carences du récit. Tout en mentionnant un épisode, le narrateur invite le lecteur à l’imaginer, à le composer par hypothèse: manière d’aménager un certain flou, une indétermination suggestive [Grojnowski 2000: 154].

Ellipsis burden the reader to weigh, unconsciously, his subjective perception on the represented prospects, and hence, they leave the meaning dangling in sustainment and omit any probable judgmental finality.

In Borgesian fiction, a multitude of paths unfurl, resembling a labyrinth that spans across time and space. These paths encompass the intricate realms of meanings, identities, ideologies, and cultures, constantly diverging and multiplying without end. In his well-known story “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”, Borges compares the literary text and its potentially infinite variations and interpretations with a garden of forking paths:

Almost instantly I understood: The garden of forking paths was the chaotic novel; [...] in all fictional work, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts’ui Pên, he chooses — simultaneously — all of them. He creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which also themselves proliferate and fork. Here, then, is the explanation of the novel’s contradiction.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas I-IV*, vol. 1: 479.

<sup>25</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*: 32.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 51.

The wanderer in those forking paths is expected to trace every line that leads to certain direction in a way that does not overlook the fact of intersected realities. Each reality presupposes different narratological alignments that are designed to stratify layers of different meanings. And in the same vain, the latter is founded to oscillate between subjective and objective proclaimed truths. Therefore, the identity, hence, will diffuse in un-predetermined time, and space, and conditions the Subject to immense infinity.

### Conclusion

In “El otro” (“The Other”) (El libro de arena), the old Borges meets his young self on a bench “que está en dos tiempos y en dos sitios.”<sup>27</sup> The old Borges is sitting on a bench facing the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts in February 1969, while the young Borges is in Geneva in 1918, on a bench facing the river Rhone. Here the Argentine, à la Foucault, undermines taxonomy and breaks down order.

Borges infiltrates the very core of certainties and finalities which govern the literary discourse and its homogenous cultural, political, and ideological discourses. He creates heterotopias wherein he breaks down the system of institutional (may it be social, political, religious etc) signification, and establishes unconventional topos that distrust any homogeneous representation.

The juxtaposition of disparate and incompatible realms is accomplished through the manipulation of time and the movement of arbitrary characters. Borges' renowned tale, “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” exemplifies the effective use of this narrative technique. Within this brief narrative, the imagined setting of Bioy Casares and the narrator's location in “a country house on Gaona Street in Ramos Mejia”<sup>28</sup> is contrasted with distant locales such as “Khorasan, Armenia, Erzerum” and “the lowlands of Tsai Khaldun and the Axa Delta”<sup>29</sup> thereby constructing a non-linear narrative framework.

The interpolation of unfamiliar spaces within well-known environments introduces a multifaceted layering of various cultural realms and imagined homelands. The transmigration of historically significant figures, including Leibniz, Hume, Berkeley, Spinoza, Gunnar Erfjord, Hinton, Mar-

<sup>27</sup> “which exists in two times and in two places.” (Borges, Jorge Luis. *Book of Sand*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977: 10.)

<sup>28</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*: 78.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*: 21.

tinez Estrada, Mohamed, and Jesus Christ, among others, becomes credible through analogous mechanisms. This approach not only expands the limits of both spatial and temporal dimensions, but also contributes to the formation of a quasi-carnival topos, a distinctive element of Postmodernist fiction. The non-linear frameworks present in Borges' short stories exhibit cyclical and often reversible qualities, resembling labyrinths where "Time forks perpetually toward innumerable futures" until reaching infinity.

The infinite space that Borges created in his artistic and philosophical world recycled and fused a myriad of civilizational components in a subjective mold that allows its interpreter to perceive it accordingly. And hence, the reader of the many Borges' is obliged to fragment and decompose his self to many selves to fathom and comprehend the already many Borges found in the books.

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Дата поступления в редакцию: 30.07.2024  
Дата одобрения рецензентами: 08.10.2024  
Дата публикации: 25.12.2024

© 2024 Yasser Sedrati, Walid Djari  
Received: 30 Jul. 2024  
Approved after reviewing: 08 Oct. 2024  
Date of publication: 25 Dec. 2024