CHAPTER 4

READING THE SHORT STORIES: INFINITY AND ONE

There have been many attempts to speak not just of the literary qualities of Borges' stories but also of their intellectual substance. From the beginning, Borges has been read as a writer who addresses a whole range of issues from the history of philosophy, to which he gives fictional expression. For example, the story 'Emma Zunz' is about the integrity of the human personality, 'The Writing of the God' is about the relationship of language to reality and 'The Other Death' is about the effect of time upon memory. More than this, specific philosophers and philosophical systems are either directly or indirectly referenced throughout Borges' work. We might think of the twelfth-century Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd, who is a character in 'Averröes' Search', the Kabbalistic text *Sefer Yetsirah* or *Book of Creation* that is featured in 'The Secret Miracle' and the twentieth-century Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, who writes the book that is at the centre of 'The Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden'. As well, Borges read and reviewed voluminously across several languages, not just stories and novels, but books on theology, sociology, mathematics and philosophy. He wrote a prologue for William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* and reviewed James George Frazer's *The Fear of the Dead in Primitive Religion*. He wrote a capsule biography of Oswald Spengler and a prologue to Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. He wrote an essay based on Georg Cantor's theory of transfinite numbers and a review of Edward Kasner and James Newman's *Mathematics and the Imagination*. He wrote a prologue to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and a review of Alfred North Whitehead's *Modes of Thought*.

As a result, when critics come to Borges' fiction they have almost *too many* philosophical references available to them. Not only do Borges' stories reference a vast array of philosophical

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sources that are not always consistent with each other, but it must furthermore be decided which of these references are essential and which are there only to form part of the background detail. Certainly, in the literature there is a wide divergence of opinion as to which philosophers or philosophical systems are truly influential on Borges' way of thinking. We might just offer here a brief overview of the way Borges has been taken up within philosophy, along with the names of the chief critics associated with the various interpretive viewpoints. Undoubtedly, the dominant reading of Borges has been as a philosophical idealist.[1] This is seen as committing him to a belief not only in the fundamental unreality of the world but also in the corresponding reality of mental or imagined objects. This is, of course, an entirely suitable doctrine for a novelist, whose business it is to create fictional universes that others can share; but Borges is also seen to be thoroughly aware of the philosophical tradition idealism comes out of: Plato, Berkeley, Kant, Schopenhauer. In a number of readings of Borges, the unreality of this earthly world is contrasted to the reality of a higher, spiritual one, which serves as its origin or explanation. Critics in this regard have read Borges variously in terms of his relationship to the Jewish Kabbalah, Eastern Buddhism or Western varieties of Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism and pantheism.[2] This spiritual reading of Borges has been widened to understand him in terms of a more general 'esoteric' tradition, which is the notion that behind appearances there is some hidden truth to the world that is available only to initiates through the reading of certain mystical texts.[3] This in turn leads to an emphasis on the role of language in Borges, either in terms of the ability language has to mirror or reflect a higher reality, as in the Jewish practice of 'midrash', or in terms of the capacity of language to separate us from reality, as in the sceptical argument that humans can never know the truth of the world.[4] Finally, something of this alternative can be seen in the long-running philosophical debate that takes place in Borges' work between realism and nominalism.[5] Realism, associated with such thinkers as Plato, argues for the actual existence of those categories like 'bed' and 'whiteness' that allow us to group together otherwise disparate objects. Nominalism, associated with such thinkers as John Stuart Mill, argues that these categories are mere heuristic devices, with no external or objective

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reality but only projections of the human mind in its desire to make meaning of the world.

Is it possible to generalize here and find some element in common to all of those linguistic, religious and philosophical systems that seem to be at stake in Borges' work? In fact, we would argue that idealism is *not* the conceptual centre of Borges' universe. As Borges often insists in interviews, his idealism is not to be taken straight, but operates instead as a point of departure for his fictions.[6] In that kind of argument against oneself that we have already seen, if Borges puts idealism forward in his work it is only ultimately to point towards its opposite, to show that it would not be possible without its corresponding materialism. This is Borges' difference from those traditions of Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism and the Kabbalah with which he is often associated. He denies even the possibility of us ever contacting this higher principle. His idealism is never to be seen as such, but only in the always material forms it takes in our world. If we read Borges' well-known essay 'Coleridge's Flower' (*TL*, 240–242) carefully, for example, we can see that, if this flower does embody the whole world, coming at the end of an infinite series of causes and effects, it can also only be grasped *within* the world, played out in another infinite series of causes and effects. It is this that in turn can lead to a criticism that places emphasis on the themes of scepticism and the failure of enlightenment in Borges' work, as though any aspiration to a higher principle were merely an illusion. But here again Borges is not simply to be identified with materialism. If we are never actually able to look behind appearances, these appearances themselves would not be possible without something else. It is this inseparability of idealism and materialism, realism and nominalism, let us say, the one and the infinite, that is the real logic behind Borges' work. We seek to trace this paradoxical identity of opposites through a close reading of three of Borges' stories here: 'The Zahir', 'The Aleph' and 'Funes, His Memory'.

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'THE ALEPH'

'The Aleph' is widely regarded by critics as the greatest of all Borges' stories. Originally appearing in *Sur* in September 1945, it was subsequently included as the final piece in the collection *El Aleph*, which appeared in 1949. Despite this, Borges has wondered in the notes he published for the English-language translation of 'The Aleph' in 1970 whether the story was too 'ambitious' (*A*, 170). It is a judgement that critics have by and large rejected, praising the story instead for its richly detailed setting, its deftly sketched characters, the balance it achieves between earthy humour and sublime vision and the wide variety of writerly tones it seamlessly incorporates. The story, like 'The Zahir', is in many ways a lament for a lost or impossible love. Biographers differ as to whether its subject is Norah Lange, Borges' great passion of the 1920s, or Estela Canto, whom Borges was still seeing at the time but of whose affection he could never be sure. Regardless of the true subject of the story, Borges gives this biographical fact brilliant resonance by naming his heroine after the character Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, an allusion that both gives the story a universal grandeur and opens up a satirical, mock-heroic distance on to its subject matter. Borges also offers us in the figure of the buffoonish poet Carlos Argentino Daneri at once a witty portrait of the pretension and provincialism of Argentine literature at the time and an unsparing self-assessment of his creative achievement to that point. The story shares many features in common with 'The Zahir'; but 'The Aleph' is invariably judged to be the more successful of the two stories, and critics have even opposed them in terms of their respective attitudes towards the possibility of an underlying principle to the world.[9] ('The Zahir' is understood to be realist and 'The Aleph' nominalist.) We might not disagree with this literary judgement, but we would argue that the two stories are essentially the same in their logical structure and what they have to tell us about the relationship between realism and nominalism and the one and the many.

'The Aleph' begins, like 'The Zahir', with the narrator, also called Borges, recalling the death of a woman, Beatriz Viterbo, with whom he had once been in love. Remembering that it was her birthday, he decides as a way of keeping her memory alive to

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visit her parents' house and pay his respects. He takes a melancholy pleasure in reacquainting himself, as he waits in the parlour, with the many photographs of Beatriz, taken from different angles and recording the various episodes in her life. Thereafter Borges – who is depicted in the story as a lonely and at best semi-successful writer – takes the opportunity to visit each anniversary of Beatriz's birthday, with the convention slowly developing that he would be invited to stay for dinner. Over the years, he gradually makes the acquaintance of Beatriz's first cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, who also lives at the house. Daneri, a handsome, dandyish man – who works, like Borges did, in a small library on the southern outskirts of Buenos Aires – takes the opportunity to confide in him his literary ambitions, and even reads out to him a section of a long-winded, lugubrious epic poem entitled *The Earth*, which proposes no less than to set the entire surface of the globe to verse. What Daneri reads to Borges is at once pretentious, Victorian in style and seemingly never-ending, and is inevitably accompanied by Daneri's own self-justifying and self-congratulatory commentary. Nevertheless, as Borges admits, by 1941 Daneri had

> already dispatched several hectares of the state of Queensland, more than a kilometre of the course of the Ob, a gasworks north of Veracruz, the leading commercial establishments in the parish of Concepción, Mariana Cambaceres de Alvear's villa on Calle Once de Setiembre in Belgrano, and a Turkish bath not far from the famed Brighton Aquarium. (*CF*, 277)

Matters come to a head when Daneri, after having previously asked Borges' help in securing an 'attention-getting recommendation' (*CF*, 279) for the forthcoming publication of the first part of his epic, rings him up in a panic to tell him that the landlords of his cousin's house are about to demolish it, along with its 'Aleph', the object he had been using to help him write his poem. When Borges asks him what an 'Aleph' is, Daneri replies simply: 'One of the points in space that contains all points' (*CF*, 280). Borges' curiosity piqued – and half wanting to prove Daneri mad or an imposter – he agrees to come over and see this 'Aleph' Daneri is talking about. Arriving at the house, in a parodic inversion of the topography of Dante's *Divine Comedy*,

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in which enlightenment is to be gained by ascending, Borges following Daneri's instructions descends into the cellar beneath the house. Daneri's instructions to Borges are very precise. It seems that the Aleph can be seen only from one particular point of view. It is necessary to lie on the floor of the cellar with one's head supported by a burlap bag and focus on the nineteenth step up. Humorously – it serves to lighten the mood of what follows – Borges, as he lies there in the dark trying to focus on a point he cannot yet see, suddenly realizes that he is at the mercy of a madman. He is locked in a dark cellar, with someone whose poetic ambitions he has snubbed and who will soon be exposed as a fraud when his 'Aleph' fails to appear. Then, as Borges' eyes gradually adjust to the dark, he sees it.

What then follows is a long, rapturous description of what Borges sees in the Aleph. It is one flowing, unbroken sentence that draws on, as Borges has acknowledged, the long-breathed parataxis of Walt Whitman, one of Borges' favourite poets in his youth. The passage has also, as critics have pointed out, something of the visionary or apocalyptic qualities of the Biblical *Book of Revelation*. It is one of the most cited and celebrated passages in all of Borges' writing, although it is oddly untypical of his style:

> Under the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brightness. At first I thought it was spinning; then I realized that the movement was an illusion produced by the dizzying spectacles inside it. The Aleph was probably two or three centimetres in diameter, but universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror, let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos. I saw the populous sea, saw dawn and dusk, saw the multitudes of the Americas, saw a silvery spider-web at the centre of a black pyramid, saw a broken labyrinth (it was London), saw endless eyes, all very close, studying themselves in me as though in a mirror, saw all the mirrors on the planet (none of them reflecting me) . . . saw in a study in Alkmaar a globe of the terraqueous world placed between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly . . . saw a Persian astrolabe, saw in a desk drawer (and the handwriting made

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> me tremble) obscene, incredible, detailed letters that Beatriz had sent Carlos Argentino . . . saw the circulation of my dark blood, saw the coils and springs of love and the alterations of death, saw the Aleph from everywhere at once, saw the earth in the Aleph, and the Aleph once more in the earth and the earth in the Aleph. (*CF*, 283–284)

After this ecstatic and overwhelming vision Borges wreaks his revenge on Daneri by not letting on that he has seen anything. He then concludes his tale – and this should remind us of 'The Zahir' – by saying that after a few sleepless nights, he was eventually able to forget the Aleph. In a postscript, he adds that the house in which the Aleph was located was eventually demolished. He wonders how Daneri came up with the name for the Aleph, which in the Kabbalah is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and in mathematics is used to represent the number of elements in an infinite set, and speculates that he may have read it in one of the innumerable texts that the Aleph itself revealed to him. He then goes on to make the following surprising allegation. He proposes that the Aleph under Daneri's stairs was a *false* Aleph. His evidence – and we might recall that series of objects throughout history that have been a Zahir in 'The Zahir' – is a manuscript by the British consul to Brazil in the mid-1800s, Sir Richard Burton, in which he records the variety of objects that throughout history have been thought to reflect or contain the world. Burton begins his account by recording several literary examples, such as the mirror attributed to Alexander the Great, a goblet of the Kai Khosru, a mirror in *1001 Nights*, a reflective spear attributed to Jupiter in *Satyricon* and the mirror of the magician Merlin in Spencer's *Faerie Queen*. But Burton lists these examples only to conclude that the true Aleph is to be found inside one of the stone columns of a mosque in Cairo. As he writes: 'No one, of course, can see it. But those who put their ear to the surface of it claim to hear, within a short time, the bustling rumour of it' (*CF*, 285). Borges then concludes his tale with the melancholy thought that he can no longer recall whether he did in fact see the Aleph, just as he can no longer remember the features of his beloved Beatriz's face.

So what exactly, we might ask at the end of all of this, *is* the Aleph? We might say that, before all else, the Aleph is a way of

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seeing the world, is nothing else but the necessity of a certain perspective on to the earth. This is brought out by the way that, in the story, Daneri is so particular about where Borges has to lie in order to see the Aleph; that there seems to be just one place from which to view it correctly. Looking at the Aleph is like looking through a peephole or looking at something from a particular point of view. Indeed, lying in the dark and looking at its screen might remind us of the cinema (and we know that Borges was a keen cinema-goer and reviewed films throughout the 1930s). Or the Aleph might remind us of a kaleidoscope (and we know that Borges at the time he was writing the story was very much taken with a kaleidoscope, which he nicknamed his Aleph). And yet, insofar as we are able to see the Aleph, insofar as we are able to look through the Aleph, the Aleph itself must also be *inside* the world. As Daneri explains, it is 'one of the points *in space* that contains all points'. In other words, exactly insofar as we come to see the Aleph, that from which all else is seen, there needs to be another Aleph outside of that, which looks upon both the Aleph and the world it sees, and so on. This is why Borges, writing with his customary rigour even at the height of that long rhapsodic passage, concludes with: 'I saw the earth in the Aleph, and the Aleph once more in the earth and the earth in the Aleph', in a reversal or circularity that could go on forever.[10]

What is opened up here – as we have seen throughout Borges – is a form of logical regress or recursion. As soon as we see the Aleph, or see the world through the Aleph, there is implied another point of view that would allow us to see *that*. In a sense, like the catalogue in 'The Library of Babel', every Aleph is divided into the Aleph that sees the world and the Aleph that is seen in the world. Hence Borges' suspicion that the Aleph Borges sees in Daneri's cellar is a *false* Aleph, insofar as it would have to be seen from another 'true' one. What is suggested here, of course, is an endless series of such Alephs, each making visible the one before. It is for this reason that the final, apparently 'real' Aleph on Burton's list must not only must remain invisible but also is constitutively split, existing only as a representation or rumour of *itself*. And, most brilliantly when we actually go back to the list of objects seen in Daneri's cellar, each of these also has the quality of being at once what allows us to see and

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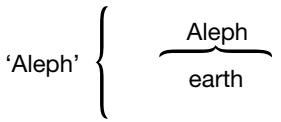
what is seen, what stands outside of the world and what exists only within it: eyes, mirror, globe, astrolabe. Indeed, more than this, each already reflects upon itself and reflects upon itself through *an other*: eyes studying themselves in Borges; mirrors reflecting themselves across a globe between them; the book Daneri has read speaking about Alephs . . . Each object in the Aleph is already an Aleph, as any Aleph exists only within another Aleph. And it is *this*, finally, that allows us to think how the Aleph is 'infinite', as it is described as being several times in the story. The 'Aleph' is neither simply an object in this world (for this object would not exist without some outside point of view upon it) nor an Aleph (for the Aleph as this point of view can be seen only in the form of an object), but the very *relationship between* them. We might attempt to represent this diagrammatically:



As we can see, at each turn in the relationship between the Aleph and the earth a new Aleph is required in order to see the previous relationship. As each successive Aleph is produced, it is in a sense the 'same' Aleph seen differently. It is this that explains the subtle theme of perspectivism that runs throughout the story. At the beginning of 'The Aleph', when Borges is standing in the hallway of Beatriz's old house, Beatriz in those old photos of her is seen in 'profile', in 'full-front' and in 'three-quarters' view (*CF*, 274–275). Similarly, when Borges is attempting to evoke the experience of the Aleph, he speaks of how it is like an angel 'facing east and west, north and south at once' (*CF*, 282). Later, when he is describing the Aleph itself, he speaks of the way that 'each thing was different things because I could see it clearly from every point in the cosmos' – and this includes the Aleph itself, which he sees from 'everywhere at once'. It is a perspectivism that is not so much of different views on to some object outside of them, as in Leibniz, as of different views on to an object that does not exist outside of these views, or that arises as a kind of self-division within them, the fact that they can

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never entirely be equal to themselves. It is a splitting within the Aleph, the fact that there always needs to be another in order to see the equivalence between it and the world, that produces the endless variety of things in the world. In a paradoxical way, what comes together in the Aleph is precisely the highest, that for which everything stands in, and the lowest, the endless list of objects in the universe. And it is this, to conclude, that explains Borges' disregard of Daneri and his poetry, beyond any jealousy he might feel for Daneri's closeness to Beatriz. In some ways, of course, their poetic ambitions are similar: Daneri's quest to versify the entire planet in a poem called *The Earth* is not altogether different from the ecstatic list Borges produces trying to evoke the experience of the Aleph. But what Borges realizes, which Daneri does not, is that the world and thus the poem recording it can never be literally infinite. Rather, the world and the Aleph are infinite only because of something outside of them. It is neither the Aleph nor the world that is infinite but only the *relationship between* them. And it is this relationship that Borges' description of the Aleph, unlike Daneri's, seeks to capture. What he describes is not so much the Aleph or the world the Aleph allows us to see as us seeing the world through the Aleph. What 'The Aleph' wants to make us perceive is perception itself, just as 'The Zahir' tried to represent representation. The Aleph is infinite because it represents the world, but the world is infinite only because it is represented by an Aleph.

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