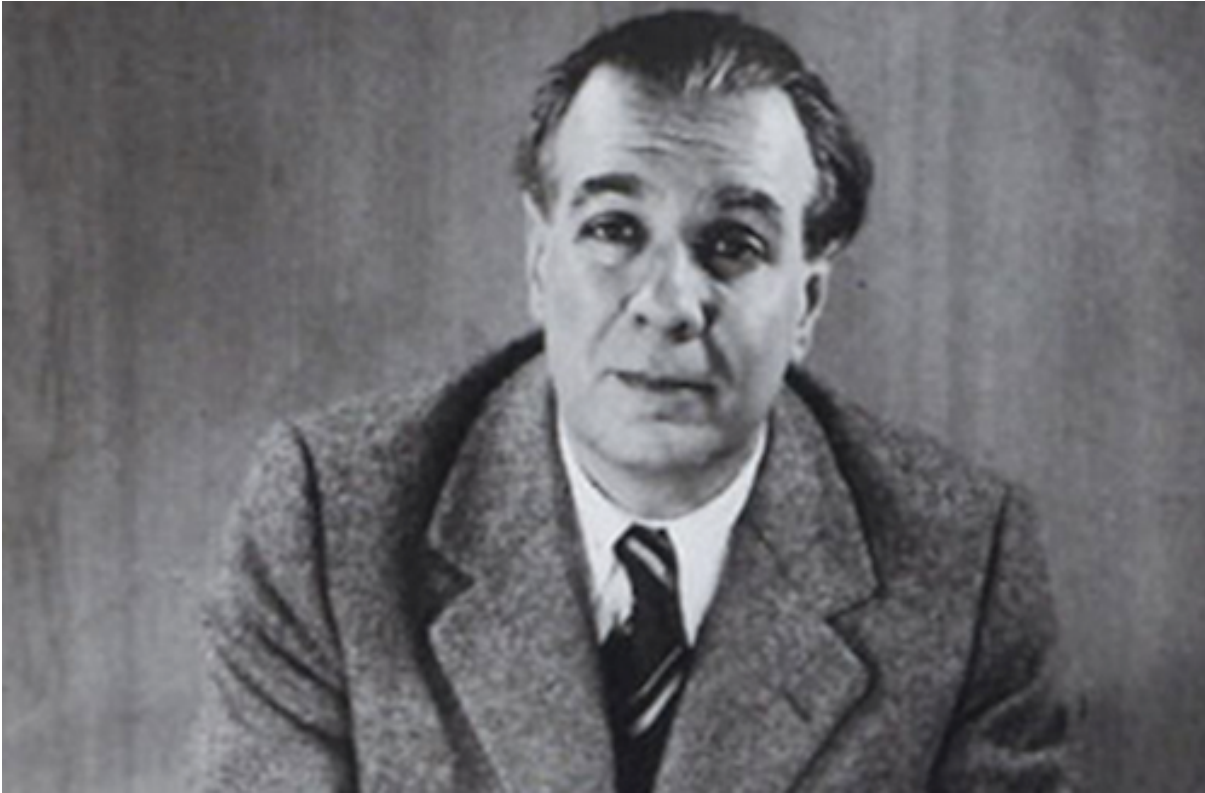


# THE ALEPH

25 May 2020



# Jorge Luis Borges 1899-1986



Considered a philosophical writer, fantasy and/or sci-fi writer, Borges was overwhelmingly concerned with the dreams, labyrinths, philosophy, libraries, mirrors, fictional writers, and mythology.

It was said at his funeral that "Borges was a man who had unceasingly searched for the right word, the term that could sum up the whole, the final meaning of things."

# Selected Bibliography

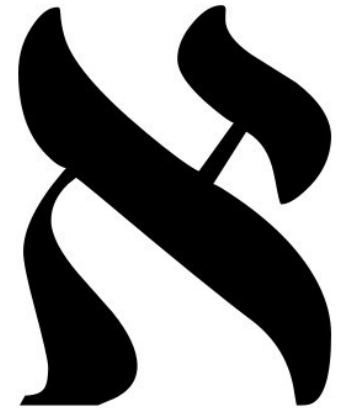
- Best known for his short stories
  - “The Aleph”
  - “The Library of Babel”
  - “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”
  - “The Garden of the Forking Paths”
- Other well-known works
  - “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”
  - “Death and the Compass”
  - “The South”
  - “Funes, The Memorious”
  - “The Circular Ruins”

# “The Aleph” 1945

- In 1938, when Borges was almost 40, he suffered a severe head injury and almost died of sepsis during recovery. Soon afterwards, his writing style completely changed and the short stories he began to write, which were later compiled in the volumes, *El Aleph* and *The Garden of the Forking Path*, would change the trajectory of his writing and his legacy quite suddenly.
  - The stories in *Garden of the Forking Path* were written, largely, between 1938 and 1941
  - The stories in *El Aleph* were written, largely, between 1941 and 1949
- *Ficciones* is a well-known compilation that includes many of Borges most famous stories, written between 1941 and 1956
- Borges wrote “The Aleph” in 1945, when his first book of short stories had been well-received but hadn’t earned any of the awarded predicted for it.
- He began to gain international acclaim and to win prizes such as the *Prix International*, in the 1960s, and has since been called perhaps “the most important figure in Spanish-language literature since Cervantes.”

*The New Media Reader*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, p. 29 (2003)

# “The Aleph” 1945



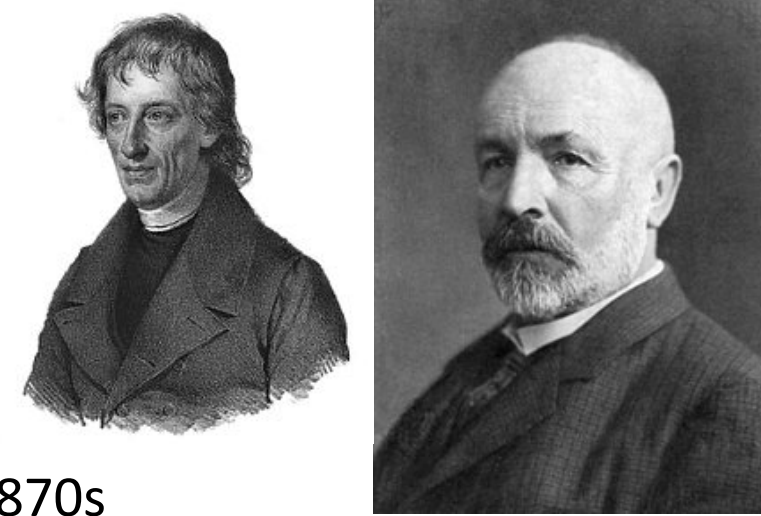
- Aleph (symbol)
  - “In the Kabbala, that letter signifies the En Soph, the pure and unlimited godhead; it has also been said that its shape is that of a man pointing to the sky and the earth, to indicate that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher. For the Mengenlehre [Set Theory], the aleph is the symbol of the transfinite numbers, in which the whole is not greater than any of its parts.”
  - First letter of the Hebrew alphabet
    - א
  - In the Kabbalah it is known as the *En soph*
  - In Set theory it is used as the symbol expressive of transfinity
    - Georg Cantor

# The aleph symbol



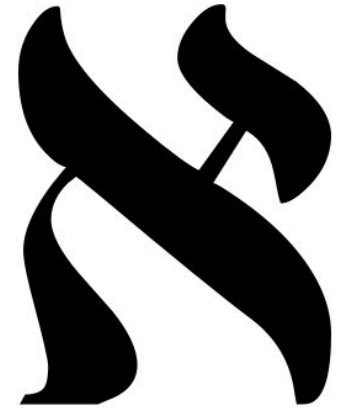
- Kabbalah
  - Jewish Kabbalah is a set of esoteric teachings meant to explain the relationship between God, the unchanging, eternal, and mysterious *En Soph* (אין סוף, "The Infinite"), and the mortal and finite universe (God's creation). It forms the foundation of mystical religious interpretations within Judaism.
  - As expressed in the earliest extant book on Jewish esotericism, *Sefer Yetzirah*, Kabbalistic thought believed that God enacted Creation through the Hebrew language. The book opens:
    - By thirty-two mysterious paths of wisdom Jah has engraved all things [...] having created His world by three derivatives of the Hebrew root-word *se<sup>e</sup>far* : namely, *sefer* (a book), *sefor* (a count) and *sippur* (a story), along with ten calibrations of empty space, twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, of which three are principal letters (i.e. א א כ פ).

# The aleph symbol



- Set Theory
  - A branch of mathematics founded by George Cantor in the 1870s
  - Modern conceptions of infinity were founded with Cantor's 1874 paper
- Based on Bernard Bolzano's earlier work
  - In his *Paradoxes of the Infinite*, published in 1851, Bolzano reworked Aristotle's theory, which had held for 2000 years that there is no actual infinite, but only a potential infinite, in so far as one cannot conceive of an infinity of natural numbers but one can conceive of any given, finite set of natural numbers having a set that is greater than it.
  - Bolzano was the first mathematician to deal explicitly with infinity as actual, as a mathematical object. He determined that 'sets' are abstracted aggregates, which allow for the discussion of infinity via actual infinite sets that can be defined by finite sets.
  - Unlike Aristotle, Bolzano's definition of an infinite set, through extrapolation from a finite set, does not negate the existence of infinity, but, rather, founds it.

# The aleph symbol



- Transfinite numbers
  - The term was coined by Cantor
  - Numbers that are "infinite" in the sense that they are larger than all finite numbers, yet not necessarily absolutely infinite
  - Aleph naught,  $\aleph_0$ , is defined as the first transfinite cardinal number and is the cardinality of the infinite set of the natural numbers
    - A transfinite cardinal number is used to describe the size of an infinitely large set



# The aleph symbol



- Postscript:
- “I want to add two final observations: one, about the nature of the Aleph; the other, on its name. As is well known, the Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Its use for the strange sphere in my story may not have been accidental.” 11

# “The Aleph” and the *Divine Comedy*

- What did you find that was similar to or clearly influenced by the *Divine Comedy*?
- What did you find that surprised you or was divergent from the *Divine Comedy*?

# Unreliability in “The Aleph”

- Why does Borges make his narrator unreliable?
  - And his guide unreliable?
  - And his aleph unreliable?
- What is the effect of all this?

# Interpretative Levels in “The Aleph”

- Is Borges telling a literal story?
- Is Borges telling an allegorical story?
- Is Borges concerned with theology?
- Is Borges concerned with the shape of the cosmos?
- Is Borges concerned with conceptions and expressions of infinity?
- Is Borges concerned with the limits/capacity of poetry/literature?
- What else may he be concerned with?

# Borges and the *Divine Comedy*

- What can we make of the irony in Borges' retelling of the *Divine Comedy*, of the ways in which it seems to be even mocking it, in light of the essay we have read?
- What does Dante's potential 'false God' (p. 19) have to do, if anything at all, with Borges' false Aleph?

# FINAL ESSAY

ESSAY 3: *The Divine Comedy* and “The Aleph”

LENGTH: 5 pages (1500-1600 words) typed, double spaced, 12 pt. font

DUE DATE: 11 June 2020

In the final essay for this course, “World Poetry: The Power and Limits of Sight and Expression, Re-reading *The Divine Comedy* with Jorge Luis Borges”, compare and/or contrast a meaningful aspect of Dante Alighieri’s 14th-century *Divine Comedy* and Jorge Luis Borges’ 1945 “The Aleph”, the latter of which is notably patterned on the prior, though its author denies any conscious awareness of the works’ similarities. The ultimate stakes of your essay should take into account, as a foundational consideration, what is significant about the relationship between the two literary works.

This is not a research paper, though you are not prohibited from doing your own research as you see fit. You are encouraged to include, as secondary sources, any of the in-class readings that may be of use to your analysis. You are also encouraged to schedule office hours or email any questions or concerns you have about your thesis by at least four days before the essay deadline (June 7<sup>th</sup>). Please note that I will not read drafts.

Please underline your thesis statement and each topic sentences.

Turn your essays in via Word Doc in an email attachment to my two email addresses (vanwagen@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn / vancouver@umich.edu) by midnight, Beijing time, Thursday, June 11<sup>th</sup>. Any late essays will be marked down accordingly.