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PRECURSORS AND THEIR BORGES: PREMODERN SCULPTING IN MODERN TIME

Abstract

Borges is boundless: his texts leave no uncrossed boundaries between distant and close, early and late, medieval and modern. However, such boundlessness is by no means a result of his supposedly morally weightless playfulness, which many postmodernists were glad to see as a worthy harbinger. As I intend to show in this essay, Borges's main intellectual, literary, and ethical strategy is what might be called *time condensation*: using his astonishing erudition, Borges shows that our modern and secularized world, where each generation perceives itself as new, unique and unprecedented, is composed of countless strata created by the collective experience of past generations. Borges's enterprise is consistent with the intellectual and artistic projects of modernism (including the works of Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Franz Kafka) as it strives to provide an alternative to the linear, irreversible, and secularised time of the modern world; an alternative constructed as a matter of interpretive choice and at the same time a moral and existential choice: to recognize or deny the ethical dimension of time. Jewish ideas played an important, though not the only, role in shaping Borges's vision of condensed time, as did, more generally, his lifelong sympathetic observation of the unique historical destiny of the Jewish people. Hence, I argue, the formalist tendency in recent scholarship to 'translate' Borges's Jewish theme into a dehistoricized and essentialized language of literary tropes, a sophisticated mind game that bears no relation to actual (Jewish) history, often comes at the cost of turning a blind eye to the ethical dimension of Borges's intellectual project.

Keywords: Jorge Luis Borges, Kabbalah, Jewish studies, poststructuralism, modernism, ethics.

LOS PRECURSORES Y SU BORGES: LA ESCULTURA PREMODERNA EN EL TIEMPO MODERNO

Resumen

Borges no tiene límites: sus textos no dejan fronteras sin cruzar entre lo lejano y lo cercano, lo temprano y lo tardío, lo medieval y lo moderno. Sin embargo, tal inmensidad no es de ninguna manera el resultado de su supuesta alegría moralmente ingrávida, que muchos posmodernistas se alegraron de ver

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como un digno presagio. Como pretendo mostrar en este ensayo, la principal estrategia intelectual, literaria y ética de Borges es lo que podría llamarse condensación del tiempo: utilizando su asombrosa erudición, Borges muestra que nuestro mundo moderno y secularizado, donde cada generación se percibe a sí misma como nueva, única y sin precedentes, se compone de innumerables estratos creados por la experiencia colectiva de generaciones pasadas. La empresa de Borges es consistente con los proyectos intelectuales y artísticos del modernismo –incluidas obras de Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, James Joyce y Franz Kafka– en su esfuerzo por ofrecer una alternativa al tiempo lineal, irreversible y secularizado del mundo moderno; una alternativa construida como una cuestión de elección interpretativa y al mismo tiempo moral y existencial: reconocer o negar la ética del tiempo. Las ideas judías desempeñaron un papel importante, aunque no el único, en la configuración de la visión de Borges del tiempo condensado, al igual que, en términos más generales, su observación comprensiva durante toda su vida del destino histórico único del pueblo judío. Por lo tanto, sostengo, la tendencia formalista en la investigación reciente de «traducir» el tema judío de Borges a un lenguaje deshistorizado y esencializado de tropos literarios, un sofisticado juego mental que no guarda relación con la historia (judía) real, a menudo tiene el costo de convertir hacer la vista gorda ante la dimensión ética del proyecto intelectual de Borges.

Palabras clave: Jorge Luis Borges, Cabalá, estudios judíos, postestructuralismo, modernismo, ética.

> History is, as it were, sacred, because it must be truthful, and where there is truth there is God, because he is truth; and yet in spite of all this, there are those who toss off books as if they were pancakes.
> Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 507.

> Since the events related by the Scripture are true […], we must admit that as men acted out those events they were blindly performing a secret drama determined and premeditated by God. There is not an infinite distance from this thought to the idea that the history of our universe […] has an unconjecturable, symbolic meaning.
> Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, 125.

Much has been written about Borges's Jewish theme, especially about his intimate, albeit not too erudite, interest in Kabbalah **(**Alazraki 1988; Aizenberg 2014, 1984, 1983; Bell-Villada 1999; Deppner 2020; Fishburn 2013, 1998, 1988; Flynn 2009; Johnson 2012; Kristal 2014; Ortega 1999; Pérez 2016; Sosnowski 2020, 1975, 1973; Stavans 2016, 1986; Vigée 2006; Wolfson 2014**).** However, in recent scholarship there has been a dubious tendency to 'convert' Borges's idiosyncratic Jewishness – or what many critics, especially (but not only) those new to Jewish studies, see as idiosyncrasy – into a more conventional language of literary tropes: all things Jewish in Borges are read as vague metaphors for

(no less vague) poststructuralist ideas, and he himself is praised as an ironic and playful precursor of postmodernism.

According to Christopher Butler, quoted by Matei Călinescu in his seminal book *Five Faces of Modernity*, "it is Borges's view of the world as a labyrinth of possibilities, of parallel times, of alternative pasts and futures, all of which have *equal claims* to fictional presentation […] that has become one of the major premises of postmodern narrative experimentalism" (Butler *apud* Călinescu 1987: 300; italics mine). Călinescu himself argues that "Borges's succinct *ficciones* […] function within what I would call a poetics of perplexity" (Călinescu 1987: 300). The epigraph from W. B. Yeats chosen by Paul de Man for his 1964 essay on Borges sums up the author's de-essentialized vision of the blind *maître*: "Empty eyeballs knew / That knowledge increases unreality, that / Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the Show" (de Man 1989: 123). For Silvia Rosman, "[n]either marginal, central nor 'in-between,' in 'El Aleph' (1941) Borges calls for a permanent dislocation of the writer and of writing" (Rosman 2002: 11). In a similar vein, Erin Graff Zivin suggests reading Borges's Jewishness as "a *wandering signifier*, a mobile sign that travels between literary texts and sociohistorical contexts," and describes, for instance, how the "slippery roles of the characters in 'Emma Zunz' serve to undermine fixed notions of 'Jewishness' in the Argentine cultural imaginary of the 1940s." (Graff Zivin 2008: 2, 88)

The theoretical framework underlying this tendency, which Sarah Hammerschlag wittily calls the "troping of the Jew," can already be found in Jean-François Lyotard's *Heidegger et «les juifs»* (1988) and in other works that are now commonly classified as 'critical theory':

> [O]ver the years […] there emerged a number of critical articles […] arguing more broadly that French post-modern philosophy – a term meant to apply to thinkers such as Lyotard, Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida – was guilty of reducing 'the Jew' to a dehistoricized and essentialized trope for 'the Other.' (Hammerschlag 2005: 371)

Following the Midrashic dictum, favoured by Borges himself, that "there are seventy modes [lit. "seventy faces" – M. M.] of expounding the Torah," (*Numbers Rabbah* 13.16 [Freedman & Maurice 1939: 534]) it would not be worth trying to refute these attempts as entirely baseless or futile: after all, there is something in Borges's writing that invites such reading, too. Guillermo Martínez, for instance, shows that in Borges, "mathematical insights […] are transformed into literary tropes or 'stylistic procedures'" (Martínez *apud* Kristal 2020: 247). At the same time, as I intend to show in this essay, such endemic metaphorization often comes at the cost of turning a blind eye to the ethical dimension of Borges's work (cf. Shaw 2012: 59-66). If we choose to view his fascination

with Jewish and/or Kabbalistic ideas as a mere metaphor, a sophisticated mind game that bears no relation to actual (Jewish) history and historiography, we increase our chances of missing a crucial aspect of Borges's intellectual project: his ethics of time.

Why ethics? Perhaps because, as Edna Aizenberg reminds us, "Borges, despite his canonization in the metropolis as the banisher par excellence of the *être referentiel* (Baudrillard), was a man from the margins, who […] worked towards an inscription of reality within an awareness of referential slippage." (Aizenberg 1997: 149) Aizenberg's own (quite fascinating) idea to investigate the Holocaust in Borges leads her to the conclusion that "[r]ead through the Holocaust, Borges can be understood as an early practitioner of what David Hirsch has called 'post-Auschwitz,' rather than 'postmodern,' writing." (Aizenberg 1997: 149)

> The first term […] is more historically-grounded. It names the terrors of the era and unmasks the link between those terrors and certain tendencies of 'posthistorical' relativism and deconstructive indeterminacy. If I may gloss on Hirsch, I would say that post-Auschwitz literature, as in Borges, often shares postmodernism's doubts about the possibilities of knowledge, and frequently employs 'postmodern' textual strategies […] And yet. Like other discourses of suffering – postcolonial fiction or minority narrative – post-Auschwitz literature refuses to become unmoored from a destiny frightful not because it is unreal, but because it is irreversible and ironclad. The crematories were, unfortunately, real… (Aizenberg 1997: 149)

Borges's notion of time is perhaps best captured in a phrase from "The Doctrine of Cycles" (1936), where Borges speaks in Nietzsche's voice: "If my human flesh," says Borges, explaining Nietzsche's omission of early adherents of the theory of eternal recurrence, "can assimilate the brute flesh of a sheep, who can prevent the human mind from assimilating human mental states?" (1999: 115) It is this idea of the nonlinearity of time, of *im*personal personal memory, whose phenomenology Borges would so subtly describe half a century later in *Shakespeare's Memory* (1983), that he also finds among the Kabbalists: "[T]the Kabbalah teaches the doctrine that the Greeks called *apokatastasis*: that all creatures […] will return, at the end of great transmigrations, to be mingled again with the Divinity from which they once emerged." (Borges 1984: 84) As George Steiner argues, "Borges advances the occult belief that the structure of ordinary time and space interpenetrates with alternative cosmologies, with consistent, manifold realities born of our speech and of the fathomless free energies of thought. The logic of his fables turns on a refusal of normal causality." (Steiner 1975: 70-71)

But the idea that time repeats itself in cycles – an idea that runs counter to the deceptive novelty and uniqueness of individual experience – is not a scientific fact: on the contrary, modern science denies its very possibility (as Borges shows in a 1936 essay

discussing Cantor's set theory). It is therefore a matter of choice – an interpretive and at the same time moral and existential choice: to recognize or deny that our reality (including ourselves, our innermost thoughts, feelings, and insights) is composed, like the 'onion layers' of medieval cosmology, of countless strata of collective experience of past generations. A Sisyphean choice, since it never promises or gives confidence that there is something beyond the threshold of physical death: "Our destiny […] is not terrifying because it is unreal; it is terrifying because it is irreversible and iron-bound. Time is the substance of which I am made." (Borges 1999: 332) But a choice nonetheless, in which Borges's main intellectual, literary, and ethical strategy originates, which can be called *time condensation*: using his astonishing erudition, Borges shows again and again that in our modern and secularised world, where each generation perceives itself as new, unique and unprecedented, "what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again" (Ecclesiastes 1:9 NIV).

The ethics of the (fore)fathers: fictional facts and factual fictions

"Who has not at one time or another, played with thoughts of his ancestors, with the prehistory of his flesh and blood? I have done so many times, and many times it has not displeased me to think of myself as Jewish." (Borges 1999: 110) In a short and elegant essay "I, a Jew", written in 1934 against Argentine ultranationalists, Borges's supposed Jewish origins – both those he hoped to find and those his opponents hastened to attribute to him – are at the crossroads of history and literature, of fact and fiction. The fictitious Jewish ancestry, a figment of Borges's personal imagination, turns on the pages of *Crisol* into a pseudo-historical fact that has become part of another, collective fictional (hi)story: the story of a 'true' Argentina, purified of Jews and everything Jewish. Unlike his opportunistic opponents – perhaps the true precursors of postmodernism – who deliberately confuse reality and fiction, Borges advocates the rule of the law of facts:

> Two hundred years and I can't find the Israelite; two hundred years and my ancestor still eludes me. I am grateful for the stimulus provided by *Crisol*, but hope is dimming that I will ever be able to discover my link to the Table of the Breads and the Sea of Bronze; to Heine, Gleizer, and the ten *Sefiroth*; to Ecclesiastes and Chaplin. (Borges 1999: 111)

At the same time, another important fact should be addressed: "The nights of Alexandria, of Babylon, of Carthage, of Memphis, never succeeded in engendering a single grandfather; it was only to the tribes of the bituminous Dead Sea that this gift was granted." (Borges 1999: 111) The fact is that, despite their opposing ethical and political

positions, Borges and his opponents have something in common: they both recognize the unique historical condition of the Jewish people – those "tribes of the bituminous Dead Sea" who, contrary to their cognomen, are as prolific as ever in producing the most sought after (fictional) grandfathers of modern times. Nationalists respond to this historical uniqueness with envious hostility, an obsessive desire to isolate themselves and, if possible, eradicate the Jew along with Jewish non-belonging and otherness. Borges, in turn, responds to it with merciful hospitality: a sincere desire to understand and belong, and at the same time a calm acceptance of his non-belonging and otherness to the Jew. He's again closer to facts: to the fact of the historical uniqueness of the Jewish people and the fact of his otherness to the Jewish people.

But if the main characteristic of the Jewish people, according to both Borges and his opponents, is its historical uniqueness, its specific form of otherness, then does not Borges's recognition of his own otherness bring him closer – at least in a certain sense – to being a Jew? Then the title of the note ("I, a Jew"), usually read in an ironic vein, can be read quite literally: Borges *is* a Jew – not by origin, but by choice; his Jewishness, a fiction at the level of genetic facts, becomes a fact in its own right at the level of moral, political, and existential choice. Like Franz Kafka, about whom Borges would write almost twenty years later that "[t]he fact is that each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future," (1999: 365) Borges does the same: he modifies the past to create his – factual, albeit not in the scientific sense of factuality – Jewish precursors.

Borges's notion of the Jewish people as a concrete historical form of otherness – having little in common with the formal, dehistoricized Otherness of poststructuralism – is repeated in one of his most famous essays, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" (1951). Interestingly, this essay can serve as a *mise en abyme* of Borges's vision of non-chronological time: it creates its own precursors as it is included in the second edition of *Discusión* (1957), a collection of essays first published in 1932 (cf. Hernaiz 2019: 81-98). "What is Argentine tradition?" asks Borges towards the end of the essay and replies at once: "I believe that our tradition is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have." (1999: 425-426) Echoing Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur*, Borges strengthens it with the paradoxical logic of revolutionary creativity, according to which the peripheral outsider has not equal, but greater rights to master the canon than its creator. For Borges, a striking example of such revolutionary logic is European Jewry.

> Here I remember an essay by Thorstein Veblen, the North American sociologist, on the intellectual preeminence of Jews in Western culture. He wonders if this preeminence authorises us to posit an innate Jewish superiority and answers that it does not; he says

> that Jews are promi-nent in Western culture because they act within that culture and at the same time do not feel bound to it by any special devotion; therefore, he says, it will always be easier for a Jew than for a non-Jew to make innovations in Western culture. (1999: 426)

Following Veblen's argument, the revolutionary superiority of otherness is not the preserve of Jews alone: "We can say the same," Borges continues, "of the Irish in English culture. […] [T]he fact of feeling themselves to be Irish, to be different, was enough to enable them to make innovations in English culture." (1999: 426) However, as Borges himself notes elsewhere – e.g. "Israel," a short essay published in 1958 in the magazine *Sur* (Borges 1958: 1-2) – while the Irish-English cultural struggle is one of many instances of otherness dependent on specific historical power relations, Jewish otherness is very much embedded in the foundations of Jewish existence down to the present day.

In the poem "Israel", published two years after the State of Israel's victory in the Six-Day War (1969), Borges describes a Jew as "[a] man incarcerated and bewitched, […] / a man condemned to be Shylock, / a man wandering through the globe, / knowing he had been in Paradise, […] / a face condemned to be a mask, […] / a man condemned to ridicule and abomination." (Borges *apud* Stavans 2008) Borges admires the miraculous victory of the young Jewish state – a victory not so much over its numerous adversaries as over itself, over the draining load of its centuries-old diasporic past: he ends the poem with praise for "an obstinate man who is immortal and now has returned to battle, to the violent light of victory, beautiful like a lion at noon." (Borges *apud* Stavans 2008) In "Israel, 1969", another poem from the same period, Borges repeats his praises:

> I was wrong. The oldest of nations
> is also the youngest. […]
> Israel has announced, without words:
> you shall forget who you are,
> you shall leave behind your previous self.
> You shall forget who you were in those lands
> that gave you their afternoons and mornings
> and which you shall no longer cherish.
> You shall forget your parents' tongue
> and learn the tongue of Paradise.
> You shall be an Israeli. You shall be a soldier. (Borges *apud* Stavans 2008)

And yet *shall* ("you shall forget, shall leave, shall be") does not equal *is*: the very fact that Borges, as is his custom, condenses time and inscribes Israel's victory into the deep history of the Jewish people indicates that for him Zionism was not a radical rejection of diasporic otherness – in favour of abstract *normality*, to be, as Israel's Declaration of Independence says, "a nation like any other nation" – but rather its equally

radical continuation and culmination. After all, does not Israel's wordless claim (as reported by Borges) to forget the past echo God's ancient promise to Abraham: "The Lord had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation…" (Genesis 12:1-2 NIV). To be a Jew, according to Borges, means to constantly choose to be a Jew, to constantly choose one's (Jewish) otherness. Otherness is not an inherited privilege as is a matter of personal choice in specific historical circumstances: for the diasporic Jew, otherness meant achieving excellence in *remaining*, in mastering the culture into which one was born; for the new Jew, as Zionism envisioned him (in Borges's reading), otherness means achieving excellence in *leaving*, in forgetting the culture into which one was born – including one's own liturgical tradition.

For Silvia Rosman, the main argument of "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" is not the "right to the acquisition of the Western tradition by a marginal Argentinian writer that is at stake for Borges but, rather, the permanent destabilisation of what is understood to be the property of the proper name, whether this name be Europe, Ireland, France or Argentina" (Rosman 2002: 16). As I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, such a reading – quite in the spirit of the dehistoricization and de-essentialization of Borges that is common today – is not entirely unfounded. However, as I have hoped to show thus far, to understand the ethical dimension of Borges's intellectual project, it is necessary to refrain from the endemic metaphorization of his words. Following his poems, Borges's notion of Jewish uniqueness can perhaps be summarised as historical hermeneutics of otherness: reading world history as an open book, Jews always find new ways of being different depending on the specific historical circumstances they find themselves in.

Time condensed, or the ethical calculus of history

It is in this nexus between history, otherness, and interpretation that Borges's interest in Kabbalah is rooted. The Kabbalists, according to Borges, "thought that a work dictated by the Holy Spirit [the Scripture – M. M.] was an absolute text: a text where the collaboration of chance is calculable at zero." (1975: 128) In the same vein, Borges cites Thomas Carlyle's idea that "history is a text which we are destined continually to read, […] to write, and in which […] we ourselves are inscribed; in other words, we are signs of divine orthography." (1979b) Combining these two ideas, we can come to the conclusion that the Kabbalistic method of interpretation is not only applicable to history – a thought that Borges elsewhere attributes to Léon Bloy ("On the Cult of Books"; Bloy *apud* Borges 1999: 362) – but also that Kabbalah itself is, in its essence, a historiography in disguise. Scripture, then, is not just an "absolute text" dictated by the Holy Spirit: it is an absolute historical outline, a *code* in which the program of world history is written and in

which, indeed, the "collaboration of chance is calculable at zero." (1975: 128) From this point of view, Kabbalah can be seen as an attempt to create a rigorous science of historical hermeneutics.

> The notion that the Sacred Scripture possesses (in addition to its literal meaning) a symbolic one is not irrational and is ancient: it is found in Philo of Alexandria, in the cabalists, in Swedenborg. Since the events related by the Scripture are true (God is Truth, the Truth cannot lie, et cetera), we must admit that as men acted out those events they were blindly performing a secret drama determined and premeditated by God. There is not an infinite distance from this thought to the idea that the history of our universe – and our lives and the most trifling detail of our lives – has an unconjecturable, symbolic meaning. (1975: 125)

Borges himself, to my knowledge, never directly equates Kabbalah with historiography. However, as this quote from "The Mirror of the Enigmas" (1940) shows, his interest in an "unconjecturable, symbolic meaning" of a text – that which the Kabbalists, among others, sought to uncover – is far from being a mere intellectual entertainment. Borges equates the desire to uncover the hidden meaning of a text with the desire to uncover the hidden meaning of history: both come from the same source – from a predisposition, which then becomes a conscious attitude, an existential and moral choice, to believe that there is more to this world than meets the eye. From this point of view, history itself becomes "a book impervious to contingencies, a mechanism of infinite purposes, of infallible variations, of revelations lying in wait, of superimpositions of light…" (1999: 86): a book whose structure determines "not only all the events of this replete world but also those that would take place if even the most evanescent – or impossible – of them should change." (Borges 1999: 85) In turn, the act of reading – both fiction and fact, literature and history – becomes a contemplative soliloquy in the spirit of Dostoevsky, an introspective investigation into the true causes and effects of human behaviour: thus, the mathematical precision of the Kabbalists can be seen, through Borges's reading, as a surprising precursor to the psychological surgery of the modern novel. And, of course, of particular interest to the reader of the Book of History is everything unique, outstanding, and exceptional: everything that redefines and revolutionises the hidden structure of historical time. One such uniqueness for Borges is the Jewish people; another is Shakespeare:

> Es curioso […] que los países hayan elegido individuos que no se parecen demasiado a ellos. Uno piensa, por ejemplo, que Inglaterra hubiera elegido al Dr. Johnson como representante; pero no, Inglaterra ha elegido a Shakespeare, y Shakespeare es –digámoslo así– el menos inglés de los escritores ingleses. […] En cambio, Shakespeare tendía a la

> hipérbole en la metáfora, y no nos sorprendería nada que Shakespeare hubiera sido italiano o judio, por ejemplo. (1979a: 19-20)

But what does what I just called the "hidden structure of historical time" consist of, according to Borges? Let's look at the following passage from "The Writing of the God" (1949), a short story included in *The Aleph.*

> I will not tell of the difficulties of my labour. More than once I cried out to the vault above that it was impossible to decipher that text. […] What sort of sentence, I asked myself, would be constructed by an absolute mind? I reflected that even in the language of humans there is no proposition that does not imply the entire universe; to say "the jaguar" is to say all the jaguars that engendered it, the deer and turtles it has devoured, the grass that fed the deer, the earth that was mother to the grass, the sky that gave light to the earth. I reflected that in the language of a god every word would speak the infinite concatenation of events, and not implicitly but explicitly, and not linearly but instantaneously. (Borges 1998: 252)

Captured and brutally tortured by the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado, Tzinacán, a Mayan priest of the Pyramid of Qaholom, has lost all hope of liberation and now awaits his death in a prison cell, filling time by trying to remember everything he once knew. These attempts lead him to a particularly "precise recollection" (Borges 1998: 251): Tzinacán remembers the ancient legend that on the first day of creation, the god, foreseeing the misfortunes of this world, had written a magical phrase that could prevent all misfortunes. Tzinacán painfully tries to find out where to look for these mysterious writings of the god, and at the moment of revelation he realises that these are dark spots on the skin of a jaguar (one of which turns out to be his cellmate). Tzinacán zealously devotes himself to studying animal patterns until one day he comes to the conclusion that not a single word of the divine language "could be less than the universe, or briefer than the sum of time" (Borges 1998: 252): therefore, trying to unravel any specific message on an animal skin would be, at the very least, ridiculous. It is this conclusion that marks the beginning of Tzinacán's understanding of the divine writings, since to understand them means to recognize, at any given moment, an "infinite concatenation of events, and not implicitly but explicitly, and not linearly but instantaneously." (Borges 1998: 252) Divine writings do not contain new content, but new optics, a new estranged view of familiar things: they teach Tzinacán to recognize countless coexisting layers in his seemingly one-dimensional reality. And indeed, a little more time passes before Tzinacán reaches the final epiphany: a vision of both the instantaneous infinity of the universe (foreshadowing "The Aleph") and the concrete uniqueness of one's own destiny.

> Little by little, a man comes to resemble the shape of his destiny; a man is, in the long run, his circumstances. More than a decipherer or an avenger, more than a priest of the god, I was a prisoner. Emerging from that indefati-gable labyrinth of dreams, I returned to my hard prison as though I were a man returning home. And at that, something occurred which I cannot forget and yet cannot communicate – there occurred union with the deity, union with the uni-verse […] I saw a Wheel of enormous height […] It was made of all things that shall be, that are, and that have been, all intertwined, and I was one of the strands within that all-encompassing fab-ric, and Pedro de Alvarado, who had tortured me, was another. In it were the causes and the effects, and the mere sight of that Wheel enabled me to understand all things, without end. O joy of understanding, greater than the joy of imagining, greater than the joy of feeling! (Borges 1998: 253)

The twofold structure of the universe revealed to Tzinacán – the concrete uniqueness of one's destiny as a component of the great sum of all things – leads him to the final, ethical and existential decision: Tzinacán must refrain from trying to change his fate for the better. It is important for Borges to emphasise that Tzinacán's decision is not identical to the divine message encoded in the jaguar patterns (at least in his own eyes): "understanding all," says the narrator, "I also came to under-stand the writing on the tiger. It is a formula of fourteen random (apparently random) words, and all I would have to do to become omnipotent is speak it aloud." (Borges 1998: 253) The magic formula exists, it gives omnipotence, and Tzinacán knows it: whether to use it or not is a matter of choice. And Tzinacán makes his choice: "But I know," he continues, "that I shall never speak those words, because I no longer remember Tzinacán." (Borges 1998: 253) Paradoxically, it is knowledge of the true nature of things, the true structure of time – which, from the divine point of view, does not exist – that teaches Tzinacán to appreciate the concrete uniqueness of the present moment.

> Let the mystery writ upon the jaguars die with me. He who has glimpsed the universe, he who has glimpsed the burning designs of the universe, can have no thought for a man, for a man's trivial joys or calamities, though he himself be that man. He was that man, who no longer matters to him. What does he care about the fate of that other man, what does he care about the other man's nation, when now he is no one? That is why I do not speak the formula, that is why, lying in darkness, I allow the days to forget me. (Borges 1998: 253-254)

Concrete uniqueness: seeing the whole through the part's eyes

In what remains, I intend to show that the various threads of Borges's intellectual project that we have touched on so far are intertwined in perhaps his two most famous

stories: "The Aleph" and "The Book of Sand". "The Aleph" is considered one of Borges's most Dantean stories: the beginning of the story ("That same sweltering morning that Beatriz Viterbo died…"; Borges 1998: 274) is reminiscent of Dante's *The New Life*, and the narrator's journey from the mournful recollection of his beloved's features to the final vision of the sum of all things repeats Dante's spiritual pilgrimage in *The Divine Comedy*. Besides her telling name, Beatriz Viterbo also seems to have a telling surname. First, in Piazza Dante in the medieval Italian town of Viterbo, Lazio, there is a fountain built in 1268 on which are carved the first words of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God." (John 1:1 NIV) Although the original Hebrew word for "in the beginning," *bereşit*, begins with the letter *beth* and not *aleph*, it is quite clear that Borges's story explores the problem of beginnings. Second, medieval Viterbo has several times become the temporary residence of the Holy See, which was forced for one reason or another to leave the Eternal City of Rome, as was the case between the years 1257 and 1281. November 29, 1268 Pope Clement IV died in the Palace of the Popes in Viterbo: due to political disagreements among the members of the Roman Curia, the Holy See remained *sede vacante* for almost three years. In late 1269, by order of the city prefect, the cardinals were locked in the palace and placed on limited rations until a new pope, Gregory X, was elected. It is also reported that one of the halls of the palace, the Conclave Hall, has had its roof removed. The name of this hall refers to the incident: in this hall the cardinals literally met *con clave*, "with the key," while being locked up inside. "The Viterbese supposedly acted on the humorous comment of the English cardinal present that the roof should be removed to give free access to the Holy Spirit." (Baumgartner 2003: 37)

Likewise, the narrator of "The Aleph" finds himself locked in a basement of Carlos Argentino Daneri, a third-rate poetic imitator of Dante, on Calle Juan de Garay, named after the Spanish conquistador who founded Buenos Aires in the second time in 1580 (again, the problem of beginnings):[2] "By this time the estuary was known as the Río de la Plata, the 'River of Silver' […] thus called because the Spaniards believed that deposits of silver could be found on its shores. No silver was discovered, however, and for the next

[2] In fact, Juan de Garay reestablished the settlement founded by Pedro de Mendoza in 1536. I am grateful to Ksenija Vraneš, the editor of this issue, for this clarification and for the inspiring suggestion to connect it with the letter *beth*: indeed, being interested in Kabbalah, Borges could not have been unaware of the extensive hermeneutic acrobatics surrounding the fact that the Torah begins with the letter *beth*, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet – a fact elegantly reflected in the second card of the Rider-Waite Tarot Major Arcana, the High Priestess. While the Magician, the character of the first card, is portrayed in a pose reminiscent of the letter *aleph*, the High Priestess is seated between the two pillars of Solomon's Temple, Jachin and Boaz (*beth* is Hebrew for "house, building"), and holds the scroll of the Torah in her hands. Perhaps the Calle Garay Aleph is false because it strives to be *aleph*, the first letter of *Ein Sof*, instead of being *beth*.

two hundred years, Buenos Aires was to languish as an outpost of empire in a forgotten corner of the Americas." (Williamson 2004: 4) However, as the epigraph taken from *Hamlet* says, "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a King of infinite space" (Borges 1998: 274): it is in the locked basement that he manages to discover an essence of universal meaning and value: the Aleph.

"Viterbo is the name of an Italian city in Lazio," notes Humberto Núñez-Faraco, "Dante alludes to it twice in *Inferno*, both times with negative connotations. […] Like the mythical figure of Pandora, Beatriz embodies a paradoxical nature […] For him [Borges – M. M.], the lover incarnates both heaven (Beatrice) and hell (Viterbo)." (Núñez-Faraco 1997: 615-616) Thus, Beatriz's surname brings out a paradoxical idea that the path to heaven is only through hell – just as the suspension of political conflicts on a continental scale and the election of a new pope in medieval Viterbo became possible only behind forcibly closed doors. A similar idea can be found in the *Book of Splendor* (*Zohar*), the 13th-century fundamental Kabbalistic commentary on the Pentateuch.

> The wheel of the clock whirled back at midnight, and Rabbi Abba and Rabbi Jacob arose. They listened to their host coming up from the lower part of the house where he was sitting with two sons, and saying: It is written, "Midnight I will rise to give thanks unto Thee for Thy righteous judgments." (Psalms 119:62) […] [M]idnight is the hour when He appears with his retinue, and goes into the Garden of Eden to converse with the righteous. […] At this, the young son of the innkeeper […] said: […] Truly, night is the time of strict judgement, a judgement which reaches out impartially everywhere. But midnight draws from two sides, from judgement and from mercy […] Upon this, Rabbi Abba stood up and put his hands on the boy's head and blessed him, and said: I had thought that wisdom dwells only in a few privileged pious men. But I perceive that even children are gifted with heavenly wisdom… (*Zohar* I, 92b [Scholem 1949: 20-23])

The narrator's vision in "The Aleph" follows the same syntactic structure as Tzinacán's vision in "The Writing of the God": "I saw a Wheel of enormous height," testifies the Mayan priest Tzinacán, echoing the Jewish priest Ezekiel, "I saw the universe and saw its secret designs. I saw […] I saw […] I saw…" (Borges 1998: 253). As noted by Daniel Balderston (2012: 68), Tzinacán is echoed by our narrator, Borges: "I saw the Aleph […] I saw 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 […] saw […] saw…" (Borges 1998: 282-283). Both characters have similar near-mystical experiences that uncover the twofold structure of the universe: the concrete uniqueness of each moment, each entity that exists in time and space, and the great sum of all things they make up together. Moreover, in both cases – and in "The Aleph" it is even more clear – not only the objects of contemplation, but also the visionary experiences themselves are extremely

concretized: Tzinacán's revelation is yet another moment in time, no matter how infinitely significant and timeless it may seem and feel; the Calle Garay Aleph is another point in infinite space "at which all other points converge." (Borges 1998: 285) These are fictionalised forms of the same idea of concrete uniqueness we saw above: an idea that Borges discovers in the history of the Jewish people and wishes to apply to the Argentine literary and cultural tradition. The Calle Garay Aleph, unless we suspect (as does the narrator) it is a false Aleph, can be read as a metaphor for the Argentine tradition: a marginal, peripheral space – an ordinary basement of an ordinary house on the street named after the founder of a peripheral capital city – contains the sum of all things.

Perhaps the narrator considers this Aleph to be false because, having seen it, the third-rate poet Daneri could not produce anything better than his ridiculously pompous poem "The Earth", which "centred on a description of our own terraqueous orb and was graced, of course, with picturesque digression and elegant apostrophe." (Borges 1998: 276) Borges's idea of the Argentine writer can be seen as a true "revolutionary periphery" (Ungureanu 2020: 58-60): a marginal, peripheral writer who turns his modest origins from a disadvantage into a virtue, an effective weapon – not in order to displace the 'old' hierarchies and replace them with 'new' ones, but in order to carry the good news of the universal, existential, and moral value of any great cultural achievement. The good news, that is, of a universal hierarchy of artistic merit. Daneri may serve as a distorted reflection of this idea: for him, the world he sees in the Aleph is not a way of renouncing oneself, but, on the contrary, a way of self-aggrandisement (hence his concern for prizes and publications). His world-vision lacks any depth, any faith, any talent, any worldliness: although Daneri is endowed with the gift of seeing *something*, he is not able to understand what exactly he sees – and most importantly, why it was shown to him. He is portrayed as a typical provincial intellectual, as if straight out of the pages of Flaubert: good-natured in appearance, particularly nimble and self-absorbed, but secretly envious and embittered, never ceasing to cover up his wounded peripheral pride with abstract and boastful arguments about the fate of the world.

> On April 30, 1941, I took the liberty of enriching my sweet offering with a bottle of domestic brandy. Carlos Argentino tasted it, pronounced it "interesting," and, after a few snifters, launched into an *apologia* for mod-ern man. "I picture him," he said with an animation that was rather unaccountable, "in his study, as though in the watchtower of a great city, surrounded by telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, the latest in radio-telephone and motion-picture and magic-lantern equipment, and glossaries and calendars and timetables and bulletins…" He observed that for a man so equipped, the act of travelling was super-erogatory; this twentieth century of ours had upended the fable of Muham-mad and the mountain – mountains nowadays did in fact come to the modern Muhammad. (Borges 1998: 275-276)

Drinking local Argentine brandy and preaching abstinence from travel, Daneri's behaviour serves as a *mise en abyme* to his poem, which in its own way takes over the entire Western tradition, from Homer and Hesiod to Carlo Goldoni and Xavier de Maistre: "I have seen, as did the Greek, man's cities and his fame, / The works, the days of various light, the hunger; / I prettify no fact, I falsify no name, / For the voyage I narrate is… *autour de ma chambre*." (Borges 1998: 275-276)

The narrator, on the other hand, admits "a writer's hopelessness" (Borges 1998: 282) in the face of the Aleph, and when the vision disappears, he is left with "a sense of infinite veneration, infinite pity," (Borges 1998: 284) like Dante, who faints from pity for Paolo and Francesca. His near-mystical experience confronts him with the impossibility of writing, the impossibility of language itself: "How can one transmit to others the infinite Aleph, which my timorous memory can scarcely contain? […] What my eyes saw was *simultaneous*; what I shall write is *successive*, because language is successive. Something of it, though, I will capture." (Borges 1998: 282-283) What forces the narrator to continue writing is perhaps the weakness of personal memory: "Fortunately, after a few unsleeping nights, forgetfulness began to work in me again" (Borges 1998: 284); "Our minds are permeable to forgetfulness; I myself am distorting and losing, through the tragic erosion of the years, the features of Beatriz." (Borges 1998: 286) Like Tzinacán in "The Writing of the God", the narrator refuses to succumb to the invincible totality of the Aleph lest he no longer remember himself: his writing is a living document of struggle against the totalizing power of time, whose deep structure consists of countless layers of collective experience. His short, fragmentary prose, which avoids large form and therefore incomparable with Daneri's "Argentine Pieces," (Borges 1998: 284) is a form of temporal individuation, a testimony of concrete existence, of his unrequited love to Beatriz.

Therefore, the narrator holds it that the Calle Garay Aleph – the one that lead Daneri to create his endless, grandiose *chef d'oeuvre* – is false: the true Aleph, if it exists, can be found in the Amr Mosque in Cairo, where every faithful "know[s] very well that the universe lies inside one of the stone columns that surround the central courtyard… No one, of course, can see it, but those who put their ear to the surface claim to hear, within a short time, the bustling rumour of it…" (Borges 1998: 285) The columns for the construction of the courtyard were taken from "other, pre-Islamic, temples, for as ibn-Khaldun has written: In the republics founded by nomads, the attendance of foreigners is essential for all those things that bear upon masonry." (Borges 1998: 285-286)

Is Borges here contrasting false vision with true hearing, and Greco-Roman visual culture with Judeo-Christian auditory culture? Also, what are these "other, pre-Islamic, temples": are they the pagan temples of Roman Egypt, or is it the Temple of Solomon, the

central image in the Masonic tradition? Finally, why is the Calle Garay Aleph false, while the Amr Mosque Aleph is true: what exactly makes an Aleph false or true?

I do not think there is much need (or possibility) in trying to find a definitive answer to these questions. What seems most important is that the very fact of the existence of another Aleph indicates that Aleph as such is not the centre of the world, the "navel of the earth," greater than any other point in time and space: "For the *Mengenlehre*, the aleph is the symbol of the transfinite numbers, in which the whole is not greater than any of its parts." (Borges 1998: 285) The Aleph, then – like the Jews, like Shakespeare, like the Argentine writer conceived by Borges – is the embodiment of the idea of concrete uniqueness, not subject to either false, abstract universalization or metaphorization. There may be many alephs, but each of them reflects "that secret, hypothetical object whose name has been usurped by men but which no man has ever truly looked upon: the inconceivable universe." (Borges 1998: 284)

"If space is infinite, we are anywhere, at any point in space. If time is infinite, we are at any point in time," (Borges 1998: 482) says the anonymous travelling bookseller, which greatly irritates his interlocutor, the narrator of "The Book of Sand". When the narrator realises that his newly acquired book is driving him crazy, he visits the National Library of Argentina "to hide the Book of Sand on one of the library's damp shelves; I tried not to notice how high up, or how far from the door." (Borges 1998: 483) Previously, every time he opened this endless book containing the sum of all things, he could only see one specific page, which then disappeared: attempts to identify a certain pattern in the appearance of pages yielded almost no results.

Echoing the idea of concrete uniqueness, the Book of Sand, concrete and unique both as a whole and in each of its infinite pages, can also be considered a metaphor for the intellectual and artistic project of Borges. Avoiding long forms, Borges's *oeuvre* creates a Book of Sand, where each page (like a grain of sand) is unique in itself, and all of them together – striving for infinity, albeit not achieving it due to natural limitations – make a concrete, unique, and conspicuous appearance in the literature of the 20th century. Casting around his name a magical aura of uniqueness and pristine originality, which did not always correspond to the reality of his actual poetic precursors, Borges carefully studied other cases of creative uniqueness – other Alephs, other Tzinacáns, other Books of Sand. Perhaps he knew all too well that asserting one's own uniqueness has a chance of success only if we remember that time always repeats itself and "what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again" (Ecclesiastes 1:9 NIV). That is, if we remember that there is, there has always been, and always will be a clear distinction between fact (repetition) and fiction (novelty): a distinction that the secularised modernity, revelling in its enormous success, seems to have forgotten.

Conclusion: fact, fiction, truth

It is only on the solid ground of reality that the illusionist, transformative magic of great art can intervene, showing that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. "A philo-sophical doctrine," as Borges writes in *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* (1939), "is at first, a plausible description of the universe; the years go by, and it is a mere chapter – if not a paragraph or proper noun – in the history of philosophy." (Borges 1998: 94) Vaporised down to its very essence, *Don Quixote* becomes a single sentence rewritten by Pierre Menard: "truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor." (Borges 1998: 94) For Borges (as for the Jewish culture), there is no difference between fact and fiction, between history and literature: "Menard […] defines history not as a *delving into* reality but as the very *fount* of reality. Historical truth, for Menard, is not 'what hap-pened'; it is what we *believe* happened." (Borges 1998: 94)

However, this does not make Borges a postmodernist. As heterogeneous and avoiding classification as its authors and texts may be, postmodernism holds that the very word *fiction* is dismissive: following the loss of faith in grand narratives after the atrocities of World War II, reality was dismissed as 'mere fiction' that can be easily manipulated by various powerholders. For Borges, on the contrary, fiction is the sacred *truth* of reality. For him, the covenant between reality and fiction could best be expressed by the words of Don Quixote, which I have chosen as the epigraph to this essay: "History is, as it were, sacred, because it must be truthful, and where there is truth there is God, because he is truth; and yet in spite of all this, there are those who toss off books as if they were pancakes." (Cervantes Saavedra 2000: 507) Borges, this Don Quixote of the 20th century, was perhaps one of the last to defend not so much the rights of fiction over fact and art over reality, but rather the right of art to tell the truth.

This is where the ethical responsibility comes in: when we choose to treat everything that is usually considered just a game – literature, fiction, art – as real and therefore truthful; as God's creation, in Don Quixote's words. Conversely, to dismiss all history, all reality as 'mere fiction' – at best a mind game, intellectual entertainment, and at worst a sophisticated manipulation designed to enslave the weak to the passions, desires, and interests of the strong – is to dismiss any ethical responsibility. In this, Borges was not the first and had many precursors, among whom the Jews, especially Jewish Kabbalists with their idea of non-linear time, occupy a leading position. "Why the Quixote?" asks the narrator of *Pierre Menard*: "That choice […] it no doubt is [incomprehensible – M. M.] when made by a *Symboliste* from Nîmes, a devotee essentially of Poe – who begat Baude-laire, who begat Mallarmé, who begat Valéry, who begat M. Edmond Teste." (Borges 1998: 92) The Spanish original reads as "que engendró a

Baude-laire, que engendró a Mallarmé, que engendró a Valéry, que engendró a Edmond Teste," (Borges 1939: 12) which is modelled stylistically and conceptually on the descending line of fathers and sons as it phrased in the Spanish translation of *The Book of Genesis*: "Y vivió Adam ciento y treinta años, y engendró un hijo […] y llamó su nombre Seth. […] Y vivió Seth ciento y cinco años, y engendró á Enós. […] Y vivió Enós noventa años, y engendró á Cainán." (Genesis 5:3-9 RVR 1960) Although both genealogies – from Adam onwards and from Poe onwards – are in chronological order, Pierre Menard himself rejects chronology (in the spirit of *Kafka and His Precursors*): "Menard has […] enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique […] of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution. That technique […] encourages us to read the *Odyssey* as though it came after the *Aeneid*…" (Borges 1998: 95)

If the categories through which Borges describes reality are deprived of their historical uniqueness, this would cut the ground from under his vision of the truthfulness of great art, including his own art. The postmodern world is an entirely artistic world where facts are turned into fiction, where everything is art and therefore nothing is art. As I hoped to show in this essay, Borges is the last of the modernists rather than the first of the postmodernists.

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