

Numerous Sand

It is part of the natural order of things for sand to get everywhere, whether we wish it or not. Into the literary world of Jorge Luis Borges, however, it enters in a wholly artificial, intentional manner; it is even highlighted and thematised in the titles of at least two of his texts. Moreover, deserts abound in Borges' stories, and there is some evidence that in general Borges was worried, even obsessed, by such open spaces. Estela Canto, in her book, *Borges a contraluz*, implies that his interest in open spaces verged on phobia. In her presence, he apparently dismissed the beach as a "terreno baldío donde la gente se pone en paños menores" — a wasteland where people go about in their underwear (50). One cannot know whether Canto is right in her interpretation of this antipathy (she speculates that Borges' statement reflected the fact that he himself was ill at ease and resented her own enjoyment of the beaches of her native Uruguay), but one can say with confidence that there are plenty of monstrous open spaces in Borges' fictions and that they are quite frequently sandy. However, few critics have stopped to ponder upon the role of "arena" in Borges, or attempted to pin down the meanings associated with sand in the somewhat rarified world of his literature.¹ My purpose in this paper, then, is to explore some of the sandy areas, and in part my justification — a banal one indeed in the ambit of literary criticism — is the assumption that this most elliptical of writers, this follower of Stevenson's dictum that the only true art is one of omission, cannot have been making references to sand in a casual way. On the contrary, like everything else he wrote, these references have a special value in the fictional context;

¹ An exception is Carter Wheelock, in whose scheme of analysis (*The Mythmaker*: 75) sand is counted amongst a set of symbols of darkness associated with the Zahir, the hypostatised reality that stands in contrast to the elusive universalism of the Aleph. But Wheelock does not elaborate on sand so used.

“arena” is part of Borges’ symbolic world, his “orbe de símbolos” (*El hacedor*, OC 2: 157).

In the four major prose collections the words “arena(s)” and “arenal(es)” occur thirtyfour times.² In addition, there are some scattered references in the poetry, on a few of which I shall comment below. Indeed, it is in one such, “Fragmentos de un evangelio apócrifo”, that Borges seems to enjoin the reader to consider sand as fundamental:

Nada se edifica sobre la piedra, todo sobre la arena, pero nuestro deber es edificar como si fuera piedra la arena...” (OC 2: 390)

The model for “Fragmentos...” is the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5; the Borges text is from *Elogio de la sombra*); unlike that Sermon, “Fragmentos...” preaches no clear or coherent message: it refocuses or questions biblical precepts, though for its imagery, its phrasing, and its overall form, it does draw heavily on the biblical model³. Fragment 41, which is the one quoted above, takes its thematic lead from the parable of the wise man and the foolish man, who built houses on rock and on sand, respectively. Borges, whose interest is in constructions that are altogether more abstract, argues that none can have a solid foundation based on truth and immutability. Sand represents a shifting foundation, one whose constituent parts are subject to endless reordering; time passes and perspectives change. The nature of the obligation (“nuestro deber”) to build as if the foundations were solid seems not to be a matter of ethics so much as one of existential and intellectual self-defence: the only way to tolerate the horror of eternal transience is to build mental, fictional, linguistic constructs as if their grounding were solid. It is the sole recourse of the sceptic.

In Borges’ literature, as in general-“Now our sands are almost run,” writes Shakespeare (*Pericles*, V.2.1)- sand connotes both instability and the passing of time. In “El reloj de arena”, a poem published in *El hacedor* and dating from 1960, Borges makes those connexions very explicitly:

² *Ficciones*, *El Aleph*, *El informe de Brodie*, and *El libro de arena*. The words referred to occur 12 times in “El inmortal”, 8 in “La escritura del dios”, 4 in “El libro de arena”, plus single occurrences elsewhere; these figures come from my *Concordance to the Works of Jorge Luis Borges*.

³ One might quote the references to the salt of the earth and to accumulating riches in this world, as well as the formula “Blessed are...”.

Está bien que se mida con la dura Sombra que una columna en el estío Arroja o con el agua de aquel río En que Heráclito vio nuestra locura	Hay un agrado en observar la arcana Arena que resbala y que declina Y, a punto de caer, se arremolina Con una prisa que es del todo humana.
El tiempo, ya que al tiempo y al destino Se parecen los dos: la imponderable Sombra diurna y el curso irrevocable Del agua que prosigue su camino.	La arena de los ciclos es la misma E infinita es la historia de la arena; Así, bajo tus dichas y tu pena, La invulnerable eternidad se abisma.
Está bien, pero el tiempo en los desiertos Otra sustancia halló, suave y pesada, Que parece haber sido imaginada Para medir el tiempo de los muertos.	No se detiene nunca la caída. Yo me desangro, no el cristal. El rito De decantar la arena es infinito Y con la arena se nos va la vida.
Surge así el alegórico instrumento De los grabados de los diccionarios, La pieza que los grises anticuarios Relegarán al mundo ceniciento	En los minutos de la arena creo Sentir el tiempo cósmico: la historia Que encierra en sus espejos la memoria O que ha disuelto el mágico Leteo.
Del alfil desaparejo, de la espada Inerme, del borroso telescopio, Del sándalo mordido por el opio, Del polvo, del azar, de la nada.	El pilar de humo y el pilar de fuego, Cartago y Roma y su apretada guerra, Simón Mago, los siete pies de tierra Que el rey sajón ofrece al rey noruego,
¿Quién no se ha demorado ante el severo Y tétrico instrumento que acompaña En la diestra del dios a la guadaña Y cuyas líneas repitió Dürero?	Todo lo arrastra y pierde este incansable Hilo sutil de arena numerosa. No he de salvarme yo, fortuita cosa De tiempo, que es materia deleznable.
Por el ápice abierto el cono inverso Deja caer la minuciosa arena, Oro gradual que se desprende y llena El cóncavo cristal de su universo.	

There can be no doubt that here Borges has time as his main theme, trumpeted in the delayed "el tiempo" that opens the second stanza. He evokes the images of the hourglass and of Heraclitus' river, asserting that each has a resemblance to fate and the course of time, for which they stand symbolically. It is an open space, however, the desert, that has given us the thread by which to link time with death, the "hilo sutil de arena numerosa" that flows in the hourglass wielded by a personification of Death in Dürer's picture.⁴

⁴ I refer here to one of his best known pictures, "The Knight, Death and the Devil", an allegorical work portraying the strength of Christian faith. It shows the Knight



Albrecht Dürer: *The Knight, Death and the Devil* (1513)

“Hilo” is polysemic: it is both thread and trickle. As for the hourglass itself, in the poem it represents a bounded universe whose particles, the grains of sand, are recycled endlessly in countless arcane patterns, pat-

riding steadfastly onward, a snout-nosed Devil being left behind, and Death looking on sternly, wielding the hourglass. Dürer used the hourglass in other pictures, but I have been unable to find one in which the figure of Death (or Father Time) more closely matches the image evoked in the poem.

terns whose sequences must themselves be repeated during the infinite progression of time. We might, though Borges does not quite suggest this, think of the point of junction of the two symmetrical glass cones as one of juncture, one standing for an axial "now", with the cones themselves representing a past and a future that are endlessly reversible in divine hands. Similarly, the falling of the sand can be said to mark a vertical plane, punctuating the horizontal one suggested by the flow of the river. "El rito de decantar la arena es infinito", say the poet, while sensing human transience: "con la arena se nos va la vida (...) no he de salvarme yo, fortuita cosa de tiempo". At one point in the poem the illusory nature of human purposefulness is projected onto the sand, which is said to be jostling to pass through with an almost human haste. That the sand is said to be arcane derives again from the poet's perspective, if not from the symbolic meaning conveyed in the Dürer image. Sand is essential; it is valued like gold, but it exists in time. The oxymoronic phrase "oro gra-dual" sums up the paradox of so many discrete grains ("minuciosa... numerosa") seen as mass⁵; the static is made dynamic, caught in a count-down of as many discrete moments. Throughout all this, note that poet and reader remain safely at a distance, detached observers of a real world artifact which they vest with intellectual speculation. The hourglass and its contents are highlighted *as* symbolic: their artificiality is foregrounded. Borges actually tells us that this is what is happening: "En los minutos de la arena creo/ Sentir el tiempo cósmico" he explains; this hourglass, like the poem that encompasses it, is an "alegórico instrumento".

Far more troubling, far less coolly conceivable, is the book of sand. The hourglass, a familiar, palpable device, preexists Borges; the "libro de arena", as far as I am aware, is his own idea. The former is quite literally a physical artifact using sand, but the latter turns out to be a speculation. The title of the story alerts the reader: one knows what a book is; one knows that a book cannot be made of sand; *ergo* "sand" must be used symbolically - it is a book of sand only in the sense that "sand" can stand as a metaphor for something other than itself; and so, when Borges-the-narrator opens the book, no sand falls out. The opening quotation from George Herbert ("thy rope of sands") confirms the impression that we are dealing with an illusion, perhaps a utopian one: the "rope of sand" motif is a way of suggesting the impossible, the idea of trying to achieve cohesion, strength, and form with a recalcitrant, unstable substance. The idea of the rope of sand is as irrational as is

⁵ Or colour. Wheelock says (82) that yellow is symbolic of the universal or primordial.

“gradual gold”⁶. But if no-one can weave a rope of sand, perhaps Borges can weave a text.

It is revealing to consider quite how sand acquires its symbolic meaning in the course of the narrative; after the Herbert quotation, and in contrast to the overtly intellectualising style of “El reloj de arena”, Borges does not begin by addressing ideas as such. Instead, he launches into one of his more plausibly realistic narratives. As a bibliophile, a “bibliotecario”, Borges-narrator is aware of editions and formats; when he opens the book of sand for the first time he finds an orderly text in two columns, printed in the manner of a Bible. What is different about the book of sand is the ephemeral nature of its contents, its apparently arbitrary numbering system, and above all the impossibility of identifying its beginning and its end. Only after the narrator has begun to experience the elusive qualities of the book of sand does the Bible-seller reveal to him that it is so named. It is called the book of sand, says the vendor, because “ni el libro ni la arena tienen principio ni fin” (*Libro de Arena*, OC 3: 69). The vendor has acquired the book from an illiterate man of the lowest caste in “los confines de Bikanir” (68), an Indian city previously mentioned by Borges in both *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*, perhaps significantly having a stone gate and set in the middle of a desert.⁷ The exchange of the Gospel for the diabolical book of sand has left the presbyterian conscience clear, and we may surmise that in part this is because the manageable certainties offered “in the confines of” a real book, especially the Bible -a book that is finite, and one that lays some claim to being definitive- offer a reassuring alternative to the infiniteness and arbitrariness of the book of sand. For the narrator, however, there is no such solace: overwhelmed by the monstrousness of the book of sand, he tries to hide it in the anonymity of the shelves of the Biblioteca Nacional.

Unlike the poem about the hourglass, “El libro de arena” plunges the reader who stands at Borges’ shoulder into the world of the “what if”.

⁶ Note that in “Las ruinas circulares” the creative challenge facing the magician, that of dreaming a man into being, is described as being “mucho más arduo que tejer una cuerda de arena” (*Ficciones*, OC 1: 453).

⁷ Bikanir is named more than once in “El inmortal”, one of the stories that makes most frequent reference to sand. However, Borges characteristically makes a tongue-in-cheek joke about it, at his own expense: “En cuanto a la oración que re-coge el nombre de Bikanir, se ve que la ha fabricado un hombre de letras, ganoso (como [Homero] el autor del catálogo de naves) de mostrar vocablos espléndidos” (*Aleph*, OC 1: 543). The city is also mentioned in “El acercamiento a Almotásim”, in reference to its gate of stone (OC 1: 416).

We are invited to conceive of the inconceivable. It is by no means the first time that Borges has explored the overwhelming idea of the total book (“el desmesurado/ Proyecto de cifrar el universo/ En un libro” [*El hacedor*, OC 2: 196]), or the chaotic and endless series. The indigestibility of the book of sand recalls the suffocating effects of Funes’ orderless and countless perceptions (and we should remember that he dies, symbolically, of congestion of the lungs); it recalls the multiple and simultaneous perceptions comprising the Aleph, and the world of Tlön (in which “the metaphysicians...do not seek truth, but astonishment” [Wheelock: 85]).

An insider’s knowledge of Borges allows one to trace many such broad intertextual meanings from within his literary world; in addition there are narrower, lexically-based ones that strike the initiate. We know, for example, that sand connotes desert, that the desert is a feared open space, that Borges has, for example, turned it into a fearsome *nec plus ultra* of labyrinths in “Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos” (*El Aleph*, OC 1: 607). For the semantics of “arena”, however, Borges relies as much on tradition as he does on private meanings. Any dictionary of symbols will refer to the association of the countlessness of grains of sand with the idea of infinity. The Buddha taught that past ages were more numerous than the grains of sand at the mouth of the Ganges; (and Borges in his poem “Las causas” [OC 3:199] refers to the “arenas inúmeras del Ganges”, while in “El inmortal”, under a moon “[que] tenía el mismo color que la infinita arena” the narrator learns of a river that gives immortality and that lies beyond the Ganges [OC 1: 534]). In the *Bible* (*Joshua* 11:4) hosts of people are said to be “even as the sand that is upon the sea shore in multitude”. The association of sand with water is also present in Shinto ceremonies, during which handfuls are scattered, representing rain, while Islam sometimes substitutes sand for water in rituals of ablution. Finally, the metaphor of the sands of time brings us back to the hourglass and reminds us that there it flows like Heraclitus’ river, that man is a “fortuita cosa de tiempo”.

Corre en el sueño, en el desierto, en un sótano.
 El río me arrebata y soy ese río.
 De una materia deleznable fui hecho, de misterioso tiempo.
 (“Heráclito”, OC 2: 357)

The last text I propose to comment on in some detail is “La escritura del dios”. In it, Tzinacán, an Aztec priest imprisoned by the Spaniards, lies in the darkness of his cell “urgido por la fatalidad de hacer algo, de hablar de algún modo el tiempo” (*El Aleph*, OC 1: 596). After years of trying to recall past experiences in all their detail and chronology, he

senses that he is approaching a memory of extreme significance, one that will reveal to him the magical cypher that no-one knows but that promises to avert final ruin. Believing that the secret is to be read in the markings on the skin of the jaguar that occupies the neighbouring cell and that he glimpses only at noon, he sets about decyphering that text. He comes to understand that no human language will give access, that the "word" of the god must be a single all-embracing sign:

Un dios, reflexioné, sólo debe decir una palabra y en esa palabra la plenitud. Ninguna voz articulada por él puede ser inferior al universo o menos que la suma del tiempo. Sombras o simulacros de esa voz que equivale a un lenguaje y a cuanto pueda comprender ese lenguaje son las ambiciosas y pobres voces humanas *todo, mundo, universo*. (598)

It is at the time of this realisation that Tzinacán dreams his first grain of sand, then a second, and more, until "la innumerable arena me sofocaba". At first sight this experience may seem analogous to the congestion brought about by Funes' perceptions. Tzinacán's dream, contained within another, and that within another, and so forth, produces feelings akin to the humiliation and fear experienced by the magus in "Las ruinas circulares", who acknowledges at the end of that story that he "también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo" (OC 1: 455). The reaction of Tzinacán is desperately to reassert his grasp on reality: better to be a prisoner in a jail than lose one's identity, allow oneself to become swamped like another anonymous grain in the sands of time:

Del incansable laberinto de sueños yo regresé como a mi casa a la dura prisión. Bendije su humedad, bendije su tigre, bendije el agujero de luz, bendije mi viejo cuerpo doliente, bendije la tiniebla y *la piedra*. (OC 1: 598. Italics mine).

This is the moment of the union with the divinity, a moment of revelation that recalls the "inefable centro" of "El Aleph", whose protagonist (Borges-narrator again) is also in a dark, subterranean, dantesque location; there, in the face of the Aleph, the narrator expresses "infinita veneración, infinita lástima" (OC 1: 626). Similarly, a piece in *El hacedor* entitled "Infierno, I, 32" tells of a tale about Dante, according to which "supo al fin quién era y qué era y bendijo sus amargas" (OC 2: 185). Or again, consider the relief of the narrator in "El inmortal" on discovering that a thorn has wounded his hand: "Incrédulo, silencioso y feliz, contemplé la formación de una lenta gota de sangre. De nuevo soy mortal, me repetí, de nuevo me parezco a todos los hombres." (OC 1: 542). Tzinacán cannot speak, say many critics, because he is overwhelmed by the consequences of his understanding and he fears loss of

identity; but in another sense he cannot speak because what he might seek to express is unutterable, inexpressible in any human language.

Sosnowski has illustrated the many parallels between Tzinacán's experience and Kabbalistic procedures; he is surely right, however, in asserting that while the Kabbalists strive to understand the mystery of Creation by study of the sacred scripture, for Borges

estos son meros juegos que pueden justificar la presencia de un hombre en la Tierra, ayudarlo cuanto más a "sobre-vivir" en un plano que carece de sentido apriorístico (*Borges y la Cábala* 22).

El secreto, por lo demás, no vale lo que valen los caminos que (...) condujeron a él. Esos caminos, hay que andarlos. (72; a quotation taken from Borges "El etnógrafo").

One reading of the injunction by Borges that I drew attention to earlier, the injunction that we build on sand as if it were stone, is that we should build intellectual constructs despite the knowledge that they have no value beyond themselves. One might reflect here, once again, on "El inmortal", specifically on a comment made by Marcus Flaminius Rufus in reference to his quest: "Ignoro si creí en la Ciudad de los Inmortales: pienso que (...) me bastó la idea de buscarla" (*OC* 1: 534).

I shall conclude in a slightly unconventional, but I hope not inappropriate manner, with a little linguistic speculation. The "arena numerosa" of "El reloj de arena", like the "innumerable arena" we find in "La escritura del dios" (598) has Borges deliberately flying in the face of Spanish grammar. "Arena", just like "sand" in English, is a mass noun and such nouns in normal usage entail certain restrictions on the employment of adjectives: mass nouns are incapable of combining with adjectives implying countability. "Numerosos palacios", "innúmeros conatos", "innumerables bichos" -these are possible since the nouns used are countables and capable of being pluralised. Moreover, the adjectives quoted normally occur only in pluralised form, since plurality is fundamental to their semantics. Formal exceptions are possible, for example when a mass noun strongly implies a plurality of constituents: thus "numeroso pueblo", where "pueblo" is understood as "number of people" or "population". The use of a pluralised mass noun -which is relatively rare, but possible- normally implies a semantic shift: "arroses" implies varieties of rice, for example. I suggest that Borges, never one to use language idly, goes against the grammatical grain for a double effect. Firstly, the linguistic anomaly calls attention to itself, and that raises questions as to his intentions; secondly, the attempt to count the mass, so to speak, points up the paradox involved in the fact that the mass is the sum of countless parts (that is to say that those

parts are countable, but remain uncounted, because the count would be meaningless). Were the parts more or less numerous, the perception of the mass *as* mass would not change. "Arena", as a mass, is always "innumerable", "numerosa". While it is futile to count the grains, by using the adjectives Borges insists on evoking the constituent parts (perhaps I should say "particulars"), implying the fleeting temporality associated with the grains.⁸ It is as if Borges were forcing the reader's attention upon the phrase, and at once encapsulating in it some of the symbolic value attributable to "arena." One can hardly claim that there are great surprises in all this, least of all in the symbolism itself. Borges is retreading old ground, even in the earliest of the texts to which I have referred. It is the old ground of his own literature as well as that of wider cultural traditions. But as artificer there is no doubt that he is consciously building on "sand"; it did not find its way in because the wind happened to be blowing in that direction.⁹

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⁸ The title of Cortázar's story "Todos los fuegos el fuego" may be read, somewhat similarly as "All fires are instances of fire", or more succinctly, "All fires fire". (However the published English translation opts for an awkward "All the Fires the Fire").

⁹ González Vigil, in an article which primarily reviews *El libro de arena*, dubs Borges "el hacedor de arena" (77).