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### JORGE LUIS BORGES, EXISTENTIALIST: "THE ALEPH" AND THE RELATIVITY OF HUMAN PERCEPTION

"The Aleph" is a concept story, projecting a main concern of human analysis—the relativity of human perception, the inadequacy of man's reason to explain the enigma of the universe. In this story Borges illustrates the existentialistic assumption that existence has no meaning for a human being except the meaning created by that individual's experience. Basically, the author gives form to four important ideas which are a part of or close to existentialism: (1) it is impossible to know truth; (2) the personality is determined by one's experience and therefore changes constantly; (3) language is expressed and interpreted according to experience and thus is unreliable as a means of communication; (4) men build up masks to conceal reality, and thus render real communication impossible.

The impossibility of knowing truth, first among these four tenets, is the burden of the story, overshadowing and often including the other three. Personality, which constantly changes with new experience; language, which never has exactly the same meaning for the speaker and the hearer; and masks, which are used to hide reality—these factors obscure truth, or, further, may make its existence impossible. Carlos, in the story, thought that he had found truth in the Aleph. A bright spot in his cellar, this phenomenon contained all other points, and in it he saw "all other points in the universe." It was the *multum in parvo*, the embodiment of all that exists. Having viewed the Aleph secretly for some time, Carlos shared his discovery with the narrator of the story, who describes what he saw:

The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America. . . . I saw a woman in Inverness whom I shall never forget; . . . I saw my empty bedroom; . . . I saw the circulation of my own dark blood; . . . and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object . . . which no man has looked upon—the unimaginable universe.

The reader soon notices that the world seen by the narrator was the world of his own experience; it was not *the* universe but a universe of his own. It was a product of his own mind, the only reality perceivable to man—

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relative and never absolute. Thus the Aleph of Carlos and the narrator, this alleged spot of absolute truth, was judged false. A seeming crystal reflecting the whole world, it was merely a figurative mirror reflecting Carlos, the narrator, or whoever looked.

Moreover, the reflection changed, and the more times the viewer looked at the Aleph, the more new things he must have seen. "Our minds are porous and forgetfulness seeps in," the narrator concludes; "I myself am distorting and losing, under the wearing away of the years, the face of Beatriz." Beatriz was dead and was herself unchanging; yet she continued to change as his view of her changed. His image of her, though ostensibly solidified by death, continued to vary as his experiences continued to alter his concept. Thus her personality was solidified only when she was no longer remembered.

If she continued to change in his concept after death, her personality was even less fixed during her life. Photographs described at the beginning of the story reveal her as she changed with new experience: Beatriz at the carnival, at her First Communion, at her wedding, after her divorce, with her lapdog, at the seaside—various poses indicating various changes in her personality. It is with skilled irony that the narrator preceded these descriptions with a statement of his own false feeling of constancy in a changing world: "The universe may change but not me, I thought with a certain sad vanity"—an illusion which disappeared by the end of the story where he observed that his own forgetfulness was seeping in and that he was "distorting and losing, under the wearing away of the years." Thus personality, or the concept of it, is the sum of one's experience and therefore changes with every new experience.

A third idea projected in the story illustrates still another existentialistic view—the idea that the meaning of language also depends on experience. The speaker or writer uses words to which he ascribes meanings determined by his experiences, and the hearer or reader interprets the same words in terms of his own different set of experiences. Thus words may be an inadequate, unreliable medium of communication. Borges's narrator attempted to describe the Aleph and stopped to deplore the limitation of words: "I arrive now at the ineffable core of my story. And here begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass?"

A fourth idea in the story concerns man's masks—a further hindrance to real communication. Borges makes frequent and effective use of the mask concept in his story, revealing lesser masks like that removed by Carlos's cognac and like the narrator's mask of silent endurance to conceal his strong aversion to Carlos's poetry. The most significant mask, though, involves the Aleph. It was for Carlos a microcosm of universal infinity—but it was this only because Carlos made it so. Its meaning to Carlos was the mirror of his own life. The problem of Carlos was that he was mistaking his own limited world for an absolute universe, a sum of all mankind. Thus it is that man can view reality only in the limited sphere of his own experience, yet he

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In the story, Carlos reacted with woe when his ancestral home with his Aleph in the cellar was to be razed. But this Aleph was false; it was his own Aleph masked as absolute. Years later, after the house was destroyed, Carlos became a nationally celebrated poet, and the narrator comments with cogent force that this productive Carlos was "no longer cluttered" by the Aleph. He was free from the shackle of masquerade.

Clearly, then, the thrust of Borges's story involves the subjectivity of interpreting reality, the existential concept that man and things in general exist, but that these things have no meaning except that which man creates for them from his own experience. Thus it is impossible to know absolute truth, even if it exists. Such truth is obscured, perhaps prevented, by deterrent factors emphasized in Borges's story and in the existentialistic view—impediments created by constant change in personality, individual and varied interpretation of language, and ubiquitous masks behind which man hides actuality. These concepts are predominant in "The Aleph."

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## THE ARTFUL MONSTROSITY OF CRANE'S MONSTER

Speaking of justice King Lear observes: "Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar? . . . And the creature run from the cur. There thou mightst behold the great image of authority—a dog's obeyed in office" (IV.6.148-152). With some modification this rather terrifying image is reproduced in Stephen Crane's novella *The Monster*.<sup>1</sup> The citizens of Whilomville are individually and cumulatively characterized as "monstrous." They are seen to have the combined attributes of Lear's "cur": authority, mindlessness, and gratuitous ferocity. These traits account for their amoral and inhumane response to the putative "monster," Henry Johnson, and ultimately Dr. Trescott. Since the disclosure of the town's monstrous behavior is central to the story's meaning, it is necessary to examine Crane's indirect method of conveying this impression. As we shall see, Crane suggestively points to the cruelty of the citizens and their sub-humanity by 1) the repeated use of animal and machine imagery associated with them. He further adds to this impression by 2) having the characters use mechanical language.

Most frequently, the citizens are described as bestial. The first instance occurs as dialogue when one of the men brutally refers to Henry as "the coon that's coming" (p. 195). The designation shocks us, but tells us more about the speaker than about Henry. (Indeed, Henry's face is significantly described as being "like a reflector" [p. 197]. That is, he is a "monster" only in the eyes of the monstrous ones who project him as such.) A moment later

1. Stephen Crane, *The Monster in Great Short Works of Stephen Crane* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). Subsequent references appear in the text.