



PARTIAL GLIMPSES OF THE INFINITE: BORGES
AND THE SIMULACRUM

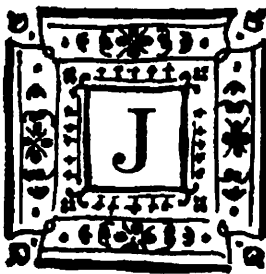
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The face that is gazed on as it gazes
- Borges, "Mirrors"

When the real is no longer what is used to
be nostalgia assumes its full meaning
- Baudrillard, *Simulations*

We have become simulacra
- Deleuze *The Logic of Sense*

I



JEAN Baudrillard begins *Simulations* with a quotation from *Ecclesiastes*: "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (1). This quotation, itself a simulacrum of the original *Ecclesiastes* (it turns out that Baudrillard's quotation does not appear in the Biblical text), sets the tone for the well-known discussion of simulation that follows. The first paragraph of this seminal work, however, is given over to a brief analysis of Jorge Luis Borges' short text "Del rigor en la ciencia" (*El hacedor*), a "story" of a map being drawn to fit exactly—and thus replace—the terrain and territory it depicts: the story is about how the Real is displaced by its representation. (In

fact Borges' story itself is a kind of simulacrum being as it is a translation—or “transcription,” the word is crucial for Borges—of a portion of J.A. Suárez Miranda's 1658 *Viajes de varones prudentes*: part of the effect of Borges' writing is to call into question the very nature of origins, of “originality.”) Despite its complexity, Borges' tale of the simulacrum of the territory is figured by Baudrillard as “having nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra” (1), by which he means that Borges' depiction of the simulacrum is of a primitive sort, merely that of the “map, the double, the mirror of the concept” (1).¹ The second order of simulacra, according to Baudrillard's own taxonomy (which details four orders), merely “masks and perverts a basic reality” (11) and does not, like the fourth order simulacrum which destroys “all of metaphysics” (4), threaten the basic ontology of the universe or, more precisely, our experience of the universe. The fourth order of simulacra “substitutes signs of the real for the real itself” (4) and problematizes any discussion of truth, falsity, appearance, and the Real.

Although the argument of *Simulations* is well known, it may do to reproduce Baudrillard's classification of what he calls the “successive phases of the image” (11) as it progresses to the phase of simulation. His purpose is to demonstrate the distinction between representation and simulation, suggesting that representation still participates in the metaphysics of presence:

Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulation

This would be the successive phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of a basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the *absence* of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (11)

Baudrillard's analysis of the simulacrum is intended to demonstrate that the simulacrum ultimately confuses the distinction between the

¹ Baudrillard never acknowledges that Borges' tale is in fact a transcription of Miranda's work, Baudrillard's dismissal, as I will explore below, is blind to Borges' very careful layering of simulacra

real and its illusion, its representation. *Simulations* thus ultimately becomes a touchstone of postmodern theory offering as it does the idea that ontological confusion is the norm in an historical period that no longer is able to maintain the distinction between the Real and its representation, between the original and its copy, between the metaphysical and the physical. Baudrillard's use of Borges in *Simulations*, especially his idea that Borges' work operates within the second-order of the simulacrum, suggests that Borges' explorations of the simulacrum, the double, the mirror, and the "abysmal" nature of language, are still articulated by a metaphysical apprehension of the world, that underlying his endless textual and verbal abysms is a recourse to a grounding belief in an original and originating system that gives some order to experience.

Although Baudrillard is infrequently cited in Borges criticism, analyses of the metaphysical underpinnings of Borges' work abound. These analyses, one of the most recent being Stephen Soud's "Borges the Golem-Maker," place themselves in opposition to more radical readings which prefer to see in Borges a wholesale articulation of the deconstructionist and postmodernist projects. The deconstructionist readings, whose affiliations can be traced back to Paul de Man's early article "A Modern Master," draw their authority from the philosophical implications of Borges' own texts. Steven Connor, Linda Hutcheon and Sylvia Molloy all figure Borges as a postmodern master who celebrates endless textuality, endless deferral (of meaning) and who figures the textual act as a totalizing *mis-en-abyme* reflective of nothing but (or only) its own narrative structure: in this manner Borges' work becomes its own simulacrum, its own "operational double," to borrow another phrase from Baudrillard.² The present essay attempts to articulate a middle ground between these

² See Connor's *Postmodernist Culture*, Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative*, and Molloy's *Signs of Borges*. Important essays exploring Borges' postmodern and post-structuralist affiliations can also be found in *Borges and his Successors* (Ed. Edna Aizenburg), see especially Emu Rodríguez Monegal's "Borges and Derida. Apotheosis" and Herman Rapaport's "Borges, De Man, and the Deconstruction of Reading." Floyd Merrill's intertextual reading of Borges in *Unthinking Thinking*—a reading he acknowledges to be taken from a "postmodern perspective" (xv)—places Borges in dialogue with major tendencies in twentieth century philosophy of science: it is an important work that suggests that postmodern intertextuality encompasses more than the literary.

two philosophical extremes. My suggestion here, through an analysis of the trope of the simulacrum, is that Borges' vision of the world is one that attempts dialectically (and perhaps aporetically) to create a textual bridge between the infinity of a totalizing linguistic structure of the universe and its particular real-world expression. The simulacrum of the infinite linguistic—the Borges text, the language within the text, as well as particular images of the simulacrum—represents an attempt on the part of a writer who is conscious of the limitations of language to express, to transcribe, the infinite. This conflict is of course explored in any number of Borges' writings. I will here discuss a number of texts and focus especially on "El Aleph," a story which thematizes these issues of totality, falseness, and the limits and boundaries of knowledge. In "El Aleph" Borges/"Borges" writes:¹ "¿[C]ómo transmitir a los otros el infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca? . . . Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es" (624–25). My reading of "El Aleph" figures the text as the site of a struggle between forms of knowledge, between knowledge of total revelation and a desire, predicated on the anxiety created by total revelation, to maintain a self-preserving ignorance. The Aleph itself thus becomes a locus of what I will call, borrowing from Fredric Jameson, "obscene" or "pornographic" knowledge, insofar as it reveals *en abyme* the *total* workings of the world. "Borges'" struggle in this text—a struggle that leads him ultimately to reject the Aleph as "false"—is, with the implications of attempting to register and adapt to a totalized knowledge, a knowledge that can only subsume a mind habituated to partial glimpses into the Real.

II

The mirror as reflection and simulacrum-maker fascinates and repulses Borges. The sentiment expressed in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" that "los espejos y la cópula son abominables, porque multiplican el número de los hombres" (431) is an echo of Borges' own

¹ "El Aleph" is a crucial exploration of the process of the simulacrum and one of the "signs" of this process is the fact that Borges is a character in his own text (hence my use of the inverted commas above). I argue in fact that Borges, as he will do in a short text like "Borges y yo" makes a simulacrum of himself.

sense of fear of the mirror.¹ Borges is said to have felt a horror at the sight of his own reflection:

I was always afraid of mirrors. I had three large mirrors in my room when I was a boy and I felt very acutely afraid of them, because I saw myself in the dim light—I saw myself three over, and I was very afraid of the thought that perhaps the three shapes would begin moving by themselves. I have always been afraid . . . of mahogany, of crystals, even of limpid water. (15)²

In his poem "Los espejos," Borges expresses these thoughts again, giving a more metaphysical, one might also say Platonic, explanation of the anxiety produced by the simulacrum:

Espejos de metal, enmascarado
 Espejos de caoba que en la bruma
 De su rojo crepusculo disfuma
 Ese rostro que mira y es mirado.
 Infinitos los veo, elementales
 Ejecutores de un antiguo pacto,
 Multiplicar el mundo como el acto
 Generativo, insomnes y fatales
 Prolongan este vano mundo incierto
 En su vertiginosa telaraña (101)

It is of course too simple to read biography into art, but Borges' anxiety does find repeated expression in his work: the reflection, the simulacrum (as distortion or not) produces anxiety because of its curious ontology, an ontology itself reflective of a world already spurious ("incierto"). The simulacrum becomes a site in which a mere reflection can possibly assert itself, can begin to move freely. It is crucial to note, moreover, that it is the "thought" of the reflections coming into being that terrifies the young Borges in "Los espejos," not the reality; that is, there is here an anxiety over the power of the imagination to simulate the prolongation of a suspect ontology.³

¹ We see a similar sentiment expressed in "El tintero enmascarado Hakim de Merz": "La tierra que habitamos es un error: una incompetente parodia. Los espejos y la paternidad son abominables, porque la multiplican y afirman" (327).

² Quoted in James Woodall's *The Man in the Mirror of the Book*.

³ In some ways thus the question becomes one of exploring a link between the power of the imagination and its relation to the simulacrum: does not the act of imagination reproduce—simulate—the Real? Borges' work extends some of the cru-

Gilles Deleuze discusses the simulacrum in related terms in *The Logic of Sense*: the simulacrum, he posits, eludes the idea of copy and model and because it thereby stands to confound categorical thinking it “imply[s] an essential perversion” (256). The simulacrum relates neither to the Platonic notion of copy or of the image and it thus becomes a space of pure “becoming” (2) insofar as it “eludes the action of the Idea [the Platonic Idea as Essence] as it contests both model and copy at once” (2). The reflection, the simulacrum, is an uncanny spot of the neutral. It is neither a self-contained or self-containing ontology nor merely a reflection of an a priori ontology; it is neutral, neither one thing nor another: the simulacrum is a liminal space of process and becoming.⁷ In some crucial ways the simulacrum dismantles (metaphysical) logic as it dismantles the viability of oppositional thinking. If the subject or object can be simulated to the point where the simulation is more real than the original, what happens to the ontological viability of the idea or origin, originality, totality or infinitude? Borges’ poem suggests that the mirror begins to reflect the ontological instability of a metaphysical world. The simulacrum serves to erase any ideal differences between the finite and the infinite, between the copy and its original. And in so doing the simulacrum serves to subsume the very notions of totality or the infinite.

If this poem does raise serious ontological questions, questions that indeed seem to place Borges’ thinking firmly within Baudrillard’s fourth phase of the simulacra, we need to note that elsewhere Borges will figure the mirror as the location for the potential totalizing reflection of the infinite, and thus as participating in the infinite. In “La biblioteca de Babel” the narrator mentions the mirror in the Library “que fielmente duplica las apariencias” (465): “Los hombres suelen inferir de ese espejo que la Biblioteca no es infinita (si lo fuera realmente ¿a qué esa duplicación ilusoria?): yo prefiero soñar que las

cial thought of the English Romantics, especially their obsessive trackings of the power of the imagination. Borges’ work continually recalls Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, especially chapter thirteen where the “primary” Imagination is seen as participating creatively in the Infinite: “The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living power and prime Agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” (304)

⁷ I am looking at the etymology of the word “neutral” here: it derives from the Latin *ne*, meaning not, and *uter*, meaning either.

superficies bruñidas figuran y prometen el infinito" (465). In both instances of "Tlon" and "La biblioteca de Babel" there is no suggestion that the mirror gives "false" reflections of the world (the word "ilusoria" is used in a specific sense of replication: it contains no predicate notion of false versus true). Indeed the mirror in Borges seems largely a site for the enlarging of the world: the simulacrum, as Baudrillard would put it, is true. Yet despite, or because of the simulacrum's relation to reality, an endless abyss opens up. The Library, as it contains everything written and said—and everything written and said becomes a simulacrum of the original language—is a monstrous *mis-en-abyme* endlessly provoking and frustrating what Derrida in "Structure, Sign, and Play" calls the "nostalgia for origins" (292):

También se esperó entonces la aclaración de los misterios básicos de la humanidad: el origen de la Biblioteca y del tiempo. Es verosímil que esos graves misterios puedan explicarse en palabras. si no basta el lenguaje de los filósofos, la multiforme Biblioteca habrá producido el idioma maldito que se requiere y los vocabularios y gramáticas de ese idioma. Hace ya cuatro siglos que los hombres fatigan los hexágonos... la Biblioteca es tan enorme que toda reducción de origen humano resulta infinitesimal. (468–69)

Human language, as simulacrum of the originating *Logos*, thus attempts to imitate its obscure original or does in fact "speak" that language: "Nadie puede articular una sílaba que no esté llena de temuras y de temores; que no sea en alguno de esos lenguajes el nombre poderoso de un dios. *Hablar es incurrir en tautologías*" (470: emphasis mine). This linguistic situation, as George Steiner puts it in *After Babel*, is articulated by the "notion of an absolute idiom or cosmic letter—alpha and aleph—which underlies the rent fabric of human tongues" (67). The simulacrum of language is thereby fully charged with a metaphysic: it is essentially ontologically (tautologically) related to an originating *Logos* for which it pines even as it corresponds to it. Borges' theory of language, at least as represented in "La biblioteca de Babel," suggests that the *Logos*-simulacrum relationship needs at least to be re-thought. If language is ontologically related to its origin, the notion of the simulacrum as false reflection is no longer viable: the simulacrum contains or represents its own truth. Or, to put it more paradoxically, language is both "true" and a simulacrum of this truth, simultaneously.

And this figuration of the simultaneous does problematize Baudrillard's categorization of Borges' "Del rigor en la ciencia" as belonging to the second-order of simulacra. Borges posits that the double of the original "contains" aspects of the original and thus, in Baudrillard's own terms, is a perfect simulation of (or nostalgic return to) the origin. The preceding argument shows clearly that Borges' figuration of the simulacrum is more complex than Baudrillard's discussion of Borges in *Simulations* would suggest. Borges' figuration of the simulacrum indicates that it participates in all four of Baudrillard's phases of the image, as it at once—simultaneously—reflects an originary ontology, masks that ontology, masks the absence of that ontology (or attempts to), and, as pure modernist text, is its own simulated ontology: the text's "real" reality (if this awkward phrase be permitted) is itself. Moreover, Borges collapses Baudrillard's classification in such a way as to highlight that taxonomy's historical bias (not to mention its potential misreading of the history of images). Texts like "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" and especially "El Aleph," precisely as they interrogate the stream of history and its representation of the simultaneity of the image within history, make problematical the notion of historical *telos* on which Baudrillard's analysis depends. The Aleph stands as an emblem of history's denial: as it presents time and space simultaneously, the *telos* aspect of history (history as narrative, history as progression from one time to another) is denied.

And this notion brings us to Borges' most celebrated analysis of the simulacrum, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote." It is Paul de Man who notes Borges' fascination with "mirror-effects" (54) and who points to "Menard" as exploring the subtle transformative power of translation.⁵ What Menard aims at producing in his re-writing of the *Quijote* is something akin to a "true" simulacrum, "sino *el Quijote*":

Inútil agregar que no encaró nunca una transcripción mecánica del original, no se proponía copiarlo. Su admirable ambición era producir unas páginas que coincidieran—palabra por palabra y línea por línea—con las de Miguel de Cervantes. (446)

⁵ In *After Babel*, George Steiner refers to "Menard" as the "most acute, most concentrated commentary anyone has offered on the business of translation" (70).

What Menard produces is the *Qui.vote* itself, more precisely fragments of the *Qui.vote*, that finally are exactly what Cervantes wrote but subtly different, “infinitamente más rico” (449). Borges’ clearly satiric analysis of the doubled fragment, “la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir” (449), demonstrates how readings alter with the alterations of time, how fundamentally the “real” *Qui.vote* is read retrospectively through the intervening years and through the ideas produced within these intervening years. After describing Cervantes’ fragment as “un mero elogio retórico de la historia” (449), the narrator reproduces the identical quotation and then comments:

La historia, *madre* de la verdad; la idea es asombrosa. Menard, contemporáneo de William James, no define la historia como una indagación de la realidad sino como su origen. La verdad histórica, para él, no es lo que sucedo, es lo que juzgamos que sucedió. Las cláusulas finales—*ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir*—son descaradamente pragmáticas. (449)

Borges’ analysis accords with—or is perhaps a nice parody of—T.S. Eliot’s very modern notion about how the masterpieces of the past are altered by the introduction of the new art. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” Eliot writes of the “ideal order” produced by the lineage of poetry: “The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them” (2171). Can we see Borges’ “Menard” as a subtle satire on Eliot, with the suggestion that “the really new” is always already a simulacrum of the something previous?¹¹

But surely Borges is not only or merely parodying Eliot’s idea because he draws attention to the fact that Cervantes’ *Qui.vote* (itself “really new” in its time) perhaps does not exist in this mysterious

¹¹This idea is given support in the final paragraph of “Menard”

Menard (acaso sin quererlo) ha enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas. Esa técnica de aplicación infinita nos insta a reconocer la *Odisea* como si fuera posterior a la *Eneida* y el libro *Le jardin de Centaure* de Madame Henri Bachelier como si fuera de Madame Henri Bachelier. (450)

ontology of the ideal order. Menard makes it clear that it is possible to write the *Quijote* because it is not necessary to the ideal order; it is not an "inevitable" (448) text:

No puedo imaginar el universo sin la interjección de Poe. Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanged¹ o sin el *Bateau ivre* o el *Ancient Manner*, pero me sé capaz de imaginarlo sin el Quijote. El Quijote es un libro contingente, el Quijote es innecesario. Puedo premeditar su escritura, puedo escribirlo, sin incurrir en una tautología. (448)

Menard's use of the word "tautología" should recall immediately "La biblioteca de Babel" and the suggestion that all language is essentially tautological because it is a simulacrum of the infinite *Logos*. Menard's suggestion is that the *Quijote* is not essential (it is "innecesario"): it is contingent and to write it is not to fall into tautology or repeat the essential word. This observation therefore calls into question our reading of Menard's re-writing as simulacrum. What, the question becomes, is the nature of a simulation of the not entire? the unnecessary? the contingent? Menard's analysis of the ontology of Cervantes' book reflects back (or forwards) onto his own fragmentary rewriting. Perhaps the suggestion is that his re-writing is essentially different because the original text is (in)differently essential. Ultimately, Borges' exploration of the simulacrum, the mirror, is not a univocal one: the mirror creates change both in the reflection and the source. Moreover, the difference in Borges' treatment of the ontology of the repetition (or simulation) between "La Biblioteca" and "Pierre Menard" demonstrates quite clearly that there is more than one ontology of the simulacrum: in fact, the ontology of the simulacrum itself functions as a simulacrum in Deleuze's sense of "becoming." Because Menard's simulacrum defies notions of copy, it defies any attempt to understand the text in *relation* to any notion of an original; as Deleuze and Guattari put it: "A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification" (237).¹⁰ The ontology of the simulacrum is never fixed, final, beginning or ending: as a site

¹⁰ *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Floyd Merrill's suggestion that in "Menard" we see that "no meaning, interpretation, or hypothesis has remained eternally constituted in any given way" (195) is another way of figuring the fluidity of the simulacrum event.

of becoming it defies notion of *arche* and *telos* precisely, in fact, as it denies notions of narrative progression; one of the largest ironies of Borges' story—an irony shared by a number of his texts—is that it is a narrative “about” something that cannot be narrated: the *experience* of the simulacrum.

“Menard” demonstrates clearly Borges' interest in the relation between the simulacrum (as repetition) and the experience of temporality. There cannot be, on the finite level of the human, a repetition without the interference, the interval, of time.¹¹ And time, as Samuel Beckett would put it in his essay on Proust, is always a “deformer”: it deforms us and deforms the simulacrum.¹² Temporality in some fashion makes the (re)presentation of the “true” simulacrum impossible for the simple reason that the simulacrum occupies a different location in time (and space, or time/space): in other words the simulacrum and its origin still always are articulated by a subject-object/origin-reflection relationship. And the oppositional nature of these binaries, as Derrida takes pains to remind us, is the basis, the grounds (*arche*), of a metaphysical understanding of the world. “Menard” thus seems to participate in a polysemous exploration of the logic of the simulacrum: it suggests that the simulacrum, as a site of “becoming,” resists the logic of beginning and end, of *arche* and *telos*; but at the same time the temporality of the simulacrum, its position clearly at a point in time after the original, inscribes the very binary, metaphysical, logic that the text will resist.

Borges' “El Aleph” is, I argue, an extended exploration of the collision (collusion?) between the infinite and the finite, between a metaphysics and its desperate resistance. The text is ultimately an exploration of the possibility of collapsing time/space into its own simulation to make it intelligible at the level of the human, a task that will perhaps inevitably have recourse to the logic of *telos* and narrative. “El Aleph” clearly thematizes the issue of the possible efficacy

¹¹ In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze comments directly on “Menard” suggesting that the text demonstrates that “the most exact, the most strict repetition has as its correlate the maximum of difference” (5)

¹² In *Proust* Beckett writes “There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us” (2) Further he writes: “At the best, all that is realized in Time can only be possessed successively, by a series of partial annexations—and never integrally and at once” (7) an idea that encapsulates “Borges” anxiety of inscribing the experience of the Aleph perfectly

of the representation of the simulacrum in the finite temporality of the human. the problem becomes one, as the narrator notes, of how to “transcribe” (“transcribiré”) the simultaneous in a language that is only and always sequential. The simultaneous, the “Aleph,” is that which is beyond language as such because it dismantles the logic of time as a linear category or definitional threshold. “The Aleph” explores the collision of the infinite simulacrum—the Aleph representing the entirety of the world *en-abyme*—and a finite metaphysical, that is teleological-chronological, logocentric, system. This paradoxical task—the aporia in the desire to present (write) the infinite in a limited and limiting language—is one that Deleuze encapsulates perfectly in *The Logic of Sense*: “But it is the task of language both to establish limits and go beyond them” (8). “El Aleph,” in its exploration of the simultaneity of the simulacrum, in its attempt self-consciously to transcribe that simultaneity and recognize the paradox, thus becomes an exploration of the paradox of limits and transgression, of the essentially dialectical relation between the limits of knowledge and what I call its “obscene” or “pornographic” transgression.

“El Aleph” thematizes—and parodies—various attempts to encompass the totality of experience in a single representative form. In some ways the Aleph discovered by Carlos Argentino Daneri is the culmination, the end point, of a series of simulacra. The reference to *Hamlet* in the epigram recalls that drama’s strategic and abysmal play-within-the-play (a simulacrum of the larger action of the drama); the numerous portraits of Beatriz in her home function to emphasize that her “reality” is at least plural (a central issue of this text); “Borges” repeated visits to this household become simulacra of each other.¹³ But it is Carlos’ poem that functions as the main *mis-en-abyme* of the ultimately abysmal Aleph. Carlos’ patently absurd poetic attempt to write the earth (in his poem *La Tierra*) corresponds to the “real” Aleph (that may itself be false) on the nineteenth floor of his basement steps.¹⁴ Clearly the tone of this story treats Carlos lightly and certainly his literary project should be seen as

¹³ “Borges” refers to these yearly visits as “vanamente eróticos” (618).

¹⁴ It is by now a commonplace—thanks to A.J. Carlos’ important essay “Dante y el Aleph de Borges”—to view Daneri as a parody of Dante

absurd, not simply because of the quality of the poetry but the absurdity of the attempt to represent the entire earth (and to what extent are we to look forward to "Del rigor en la ciencia"?). *La Tierra* represents an absurdity in its attempt to represent a totality; it represents an absurdity also insofar as its form (and ontology) cannot correspond to the presented thing: Carlos' poem thus can never succeed as a third or fourth order simulacrum.

What then of the Aleph? Surely the effect of prefacing the discovery of the Aleph with a prolonged analysis of Carlos' poetry is to suggest a correspondence between the two things; and surely the supposition is that Carlos' poem is an effect of his encounter with the Aleph. Certainly there is the suggestion that Carlos' poem is a representation not of the earth per se, but of the earth as represented by the Aleph (the earth thus at a third remove, as it were). The poem thus becomes a (poor) simulacrum of a (possibly false) simulacrum. The Aleph, a microcosm, a point in space containing all points (623) is a reflection *en abyme* of the totality of things, or more precisely the totality of geographical/spatial things. The Aleph shows its viewer the physical/geographical universe simultaneously: all things occur at the same point "sin superposicion y sin transparencia" (625). The narrator—who calls himself "Borges," who is thus a simulacrum of the "real" Borges writing the story—describes his difficulty as writer as one of transcribing the infinite in a finite language: "Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es" (625). There follows an impressive list of things seen in the Aleph, from "una plateada telaraña en el centro de una negra pirámide" (625) to "cartas obscenas, increíbles, precisas, que Beatriz había dirigido a Carlos Argentino" (626), to "el engranaje del amor y la modificación de la muerte" (626): in short, he views "el inconcebible universo" (626).

The effect of viewing the Aleph is (briefly) to plunge "Borges" into a radical state of nostalgia, understood in its etymological sense as a "return":

En la calle, en las escaleras de Constitucion, en el subterráneo me parecieron familiares todas las caras. Temí que no quedara una sola cosa capaz de sorprenderme, temí que no me abandonara jamás la impresión de volver. Felizmente, al cabo de unas noches de insomnio, me trabajó otra vez el olvido. (626)

Borges' interest in the relation between knowledge and nostalgia, or remembrance, is well known. As the epigram for his story "El inmortal," Borges quotes Bacon (quoting Salomon and Plato): "Salomon saith, There is no new thing upon the earth. So that Plato had an imagination, that all knowledge was but remembrance; so Salomon giveth his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion" (105). Borges' achievement in "El Aleph" is to parody by exaggeration the Platonic notion of the "origins" of knowledge. Knowledge can only be remembered if it is already known and is predicated on its forgetting. All is familiar after viewing its simulacrum because "Borges" is at the point of having been shown the origin, the "primal scene," of his knowledge. The Aleph in some ways, and this is for me a crucial point, is an obscenity precisely because it does "show" the totality of things, the infinite, the "inconceivable" (I will return to this idea). For a brief moment the inconceivable—what perhaps should remain the inconceivable, or at least that which can only be apprehended through the half-truth of the simulacrum—is made partially conceivable insofar as language and successive epistemologies can grasp. "Borges" in "El Aleph" is granted a concrete manifestation of knowledge as remembrance (or oblivion) in a radicalized and impossible to sustain form. Having seen the infinite, the mind returns itself to its original state of oblivion: "me trabajó otra vez el olvido."

And it is at this point of anxious nostalgia and oblivion that "Borges" begins to conceive that this Aleph is "un falso Aleph" (627). (Perhaps also the fact that Carlos' poem-as Aleph-as-simulacrum was published and received second Prize of the national Prize for Literature (626) also casts suspicion on the provenance of Carlos' Aleph!). "Borges" suspicion of the Aleph begins with the idea that Carlos had chosen the name of the Aleph not truly but as a result of encountering books revealed to him by the Aleph. In the postscript, "Borges" writes:

Dos observaciones quiero agregar una, sobre la naturaleza del Aleph; otra, sobre su nombre. Éste, como es sabido, es el de la primera letra del alfabeto de la lengua sagrada. Su aplicación al disco de mi historia no parece casual. Para la Cábala, esa letra significa el En Soph, la ilimitada y pura divinidad; también se dijo que tiene la forma de un hombre que señala el cielo y la tierra, para indicar que el mundo inferior es el espejo y es el mapa del superior. Yo quería saber, ¿Elegió Carlos Argentino ese nombre, o lo leyó, aplicado a otro punto donde convergen todos los puntos, en alguno de los textos innumerables que el Aleph de su casa le

reveló? Por increíble que parezca, yo creo que hay (o que hubo) otro Aleph, yo creo que el Aleph de la calle Garay era un falso Aleph. (627)

Despite the fact that "Borges'" analysis of the word "Aleph" reveals its applicability, especially the notion that the Hebrew letter \aleph indicates "que el mundo inferior es el espejo y es el mapa del superior" (627), and despite the suggestion that this world itself participates in the metaphysical, "Borges'" anxiety leads him to reject the Aleph and see it in fact as a simulation of a real Aleph, real because unseen.¹⁵ In the penultimate paragraph of this story, "Borges" offers his reasons as to why he rejects Carlos' Aleph; he cites "un manuscrito" (627) written by the explorer Burton in which Burton suggests that "el universo está en el interior de una de las columnas de piedras que rodean el patio central" (627-8) of the Amr mosque in Cairo. "Borges" seems to accept this narrative as true only because the Aleph is unseen. The presence of the false Aleph in Carlos' home thus serves ultimately to indicate the "absence," the invisibility, of the true Aleph. Read in this way the false Aleph becomes the axis on which the liminality of the metaphysical and physical worlds hinges: it reveals the space between. "Borges" concludes:

¿Existe ese Aleph en lo íntimo de una piedra? ¿Lo he visto cuando vi todas las cosas y lo he olvidado? Nuestra mente es porosa para el olvido; yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo, bajo la trágica erosión de los años, los rasgos de Beatriz (628)

"Borges'" narrative thus makes clear the idea of the simulacrum's relation to issues of knowledge. Encountering the Aleph in part is visually to encounter a radical form of complete (thus inconceivable) knowledge. I previously categorized the Aleph as an obscenity because it reveals too much (or all): the Aleph, more precisely, is

¹⁵ My reading of the Aleph thus harmonizes with traditional Jewish readings of the *Sefiroth*. I quote from Jaime Alazaki's *Borges and the Kabbalah* who in turn quotes from Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*

The theory of the *Sefiroth* postulates that there are two worlds and that both represent God. First a primary world, the most deeply hidden of all which remains insensible and unintelligible to all but God, the world of the *En-Sof* (infinite) and secondly, one joined into the first which makes it possible to know God: the world of attributes. (17)

pornographic precisely in its total revelation. I have here in mind Frederic Jameson's opening line of *Signatures of the Visible*: "The visual is *essentially* pornographic" (1). For Jameson, the pornographic has "its end in rapt, mindless fascination," (1), and he suggests that the act of contemplating the pornographic makes the mind an "adjunct" to that fascination with the visual, a state not unlike that experienced by "Borges" after viewing the Aleph. While certainly these ideas are behind "Borges" apprehension of his Aleph, it also seems likely that there is an ethic at work here that suggests that there are forms of knowledge—I will call them pornographic or transgressive forms of knowledge—that are not meant for human eyes precisely as they place too much burden on the limited faculties of the human.

But "Borges" anxiety is not merely that produced by him viewing the Aleph. It is the anxiety of being seen, of becoming an "adjunct"—to borrow again from Jameson—to that pornographic knowledge. As Borges (the real Borges?) puts it in "Los espejos" the fact remains that to gaze into the mirror is in turn to be perceived: "rostro que mira y es mirado" (20). To gaze into the mirror, or the mirror that is the Aleph, is not merely to perceive oneself as a "mere vanity" ["vanidad"] (51–2) but is to perceive one's own being. As "Borges" looks into the Aleph he sees "mi cara y mis vísceras" (626): all, external and internal, is revealed. More frighteningly, "Borges" sees "interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo" (625). The Aleph functions as an obscene demonstration of Berkeley's *esse est percipi*—in this case the self perceiving the self being perceived—and a perfect emblem of Nietzsche's maxim: "Whoever fights monsters should see to it in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you" (89).¹⁶

While Jameson's notion perfectly captures the visual element of the pornographic, it does not necessarily account for what may be called the full epistemological implications of the obscene, the implications, that is, of total revelation (and what is pornography if not total revelation of the body, the visual?). "Borges'" ultimate denial of this Aleph is a response to this inconceivable pornography, a retreat in the face of what Kristeva calls the "transfinite truth" (23) of the

¹⁶ *Beyond Good and Evil*, IV 116

Aleph.¹⁷ And although I make use of the notion of the pornographic here as a metaphor for total revelation, we need to notice that "El Aleph" is as much a story about sexual longing as it is about radical knowledge. "Beatriz" is the last word in the story, just as she is named in the first sentence and thus it is clear that "Borges" is under the sway of a particularly strong form of desire. By conjoining the erotic impulse for Beatriz with the pornography of the Aleph, the experience of which is a result of "Borges'" relation with Beatriz and her family, the story explores the link between erotic desire and pornographic anxiety (the anxiety of too much knowledge).¹⁸ Certainly "Borges'" discovery of Beatriz' "obscene" letters to Carlos while gazing into the pornographic Aleph makes clear this conjunction. "Borges'" erotic desire leads to his epistemological anxiety that begins with the discovery of the obscene reality of Beatriz. And thus the story also thematizes the expression and sublimation of the very process of desire. I link desire and the erotic (Beatriz) with that which is unattainable: desire is defined as such because the object is out of reach. So too with the erotic object that is Beatriz: she is dead and available only in simulacra (photographs, memories) or in the totalizing simulacrum that is the Aleph. It is no accident that after Beatriz' true erotic knowledge of Beatriz with Carlos is revealed to "Borges" he, after a few days, begins to forget what he saw in the Aleph. "Borges" achieves a kind of proximal erotic knowledge of Beatriz that immediately must be sublimated in the process of oblivion (a process, however, that is the beginning of real knowledge). Eroticism gives way to a pornography that must, because difficult to bear, be forgotten. The Aleph is rejected precisely as it facilitates and becomes an emblem of transgressive knowledge, knowledge that threatens to collapse the distinction between the seen and the un-

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. In *Borges' Narrative Strategy*, Donald L. Shaw writes "none of the critics who have discussed 'El Aleph' has explained convincingly why Borges at the end makes his narrator change his stance about the authenticity of his discovery" (159). My essay in part is an attempt to explore the reasons for "Borges'" retreat.

¹⁸ Borges' "Funes el memorioso" is another analysis of the agony of memory. Unable to forget anything he hears or sees, Funes lives in a sustained moment that collapses the distinction between past and present, between points in space. "Era el solitario y lucido espectador de un mundo multiforme, instantáneo y casi intolerablemente preciso" (190). In some ways Funes is an analogue to the Aleph, that point in space containing all points.

seen, between what can be known and what should not be known (or named).

"Borges' " rejection of the seen Aleph and his belief in the existence of an unseen Aleph resonates in a complex way: it stands as a rejection of sure, though transgressive, knowledge in favour of imaginary knowledge; as it is read along the axis of obscenity, the observed Aleph stands as an emblem of pornographic anxiety just as the unseen stands in some ways as an emblem of the erotic, the unseen, the unknowable. "Borges' " rejection of the pornographic abyss that is the Aleph perhaps also stands as an attempt at rehabilitating the memory—soon to be lost (628)—of Beatriz: the possibility of Beatriz "existing" as an alternate reflection, a "true" simulacrum in a different ontology (one in which, perhaps, she does not "betray" "Borges") thus becomes real.¹⁹ This rejection of the seen Aleph (the pornographic) for the unseen Aleph (the erotic) thus is consistent with "Borges' " Platonism, a Platonism that argues that the seen is always already an inferior copy of the real, that the simulacrum is always transgressive insofar as it corrupts the Real: the Aleph, as simulacrum of the "real" world itself a simulacrum, thus is, like art for Plato, to be distrusted. The simulacrum, to return to Deleuze, implies an essential perversion or deviation because it confounds categorical thinking. Thus "Borges' " anxiety of the Aleph is the anxiety of encountering the site of the radically neutral, the neither, the site that threatens in turn to neutralize experience. The site of pure becoming—as pure revelation or apocalypse—cannot be understood as such. "Borges" thus rejects this site of becoming but not the Idea (the Essence) of the "real" Aleph, real because unseen.

III

To place Borges in "dialogue" with Baudrillard and Deleuze in relation to the thematic of the simulacrum is productive of a number

¹⁹ This moment of rehabilitation corresponds to Deleuze and Guattari's reading of desire in *Anti-Oedipus*. Arguing that desire does not in fact originate in the experience of lack (*manque*), they suggest that desire is a kind of excessive or—in Derridian terms, *supplementary* response to the object of desire. The subject, like "Borges," creates an imaginary object "desire intrinsically produces an imaginary object that functions as a double of reality, as though there were a 'dreamed of object behind every real object,' or a mental production behind all real productions" (25–6). This reading of desire suggests that it too participates in the production of simulacra.

of things. Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum in *Simulations* is one of the important touchstones of postmodern thought and in some ways to read Borges through Baudrillard is at least to suggest the possibility of a postmodern filiation in Borges' work. As I have suggested above, however, Borges' manipulation of the logic of the simulacrum is more complex than Baudrillard's rather perfunctory reading would suggest in that we can see evidence in Borges' simulacrum of all four stages of Baudrillard's "history" of simulation. Ultimately Baudrillard wants to suggest that the fourth phase—what Jameson would call the phase of late capitalism—corresponds to the postmodern world, the world that sees the absolute destruction of the logic of representation, the logic of the Real, the very possibility, that is, of metaphysics. Part of Borges' implicit—one should say anticipatory—critique of the logic of Baudrillard's thought is that the simulacrum ultimately becomes a site of a radical polysemy "El Aleph's" rejection of the seen Aleph for the unseen suggests a critique of the logic of the simulacrum insofar as "Borges'" position here is finally a very Platonic rejection of the physical in favour of the metaphysical.

Yet the simulacrum—the false Aleph—becomes a "sign" of a possible totality or totalizing structure implicit in the physical world. The Aleph, as I argue, is rejected but still inaugurates an awareness of correspondent truths, this world is reflected by the mirror of the simulacrum "into" the infinite. It is this semiotic of the "possible" totality that threatens any reading of Borges that would characterize him as only a postmodern master (just as his Platonism makes it difficult to see him embracing postmodernity's rejection of the metaphysical). If one of the guiding principles of postmodernism is Lyotard's notion of the rejection of master or grand narratives, Borges' recourse to the possibility of the infinite—the master narrative—at least makes problematical his inclusion in Lyotard's universe.²⁰ Moreover, as Connor and Hutcheon attempt to suggest, Borges' postmodernism is evidenced by his self-conscious manipulation of narrative form, narrative that becomes densely intertextual and self-referential and calls into question the very logic of narrative. While this characterization of the form of Borges' work corresponds to the tenor of some postmodern writing, it does not successfully take into

²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*

consideration the final effect(s) of his narrative and philosophical strategies. Borges is not simply self-consciously manipulating form (in the tradition of Fowles, Barth, Barthelme, or Winterson). His texts, especially "Menard," demonstrate an awareness of the very suspect nature of even this kind of self-conscious manipulation: that is, Borges' "Menard" forces us to step away from parody into an awareness of meta-parody: a text written about the parody of parody, a text about the philosophical implications of parodying parody (Cervantes' *Qui.rote* itself being a parody, in fact). There is a qualitative difference between, say, Fowles' infamous chapter thirteen of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—that defining moment of postmodernity where the author-function confronts the reader with his god-like impotence—and the Borges text in that Borges inscribes a position of dispassionate objectivity from which to read his texts: it is this objectivity that separates Borges from the postmodern narrative that celebrates—excessively—the playful randomness of experience. One might argue that Borges' objectivity—the position that allows the reader to see clearly, to theorize, the texts' logic of critique (of the simulacrum, of parody, of the *logos*)—inscribes a very modern desire to totalize the hermeneutic experience, or at least make possible the grounds of reading. If the postmodern celebrates the loss of master narratives—and in fact the loss of the ability to master narrative, as writer and reader—we must acknowledge Borges' boundless faith in narrative possibly to communicate: if the universe is a Library, that universe is logically predicated—grounded-in and on the possibility of reading, indeed on the necessity of reading.

This, therefore, is the final dialectic: total text presented totally objectively and thus the question of Borges' position as poststructuralist/postmodernist must remain also endlessly dialectical. I suggested at the outset of this analysis that I would attempt to find a middle ground between the vision of Borges as metaphysician, with his grounding belief in systems of order, and the vision of Borges as postmodern master celebrating textuality in excess of any ground. My solution to the problem is the idea that Borges' figuration of the simulacrum celebrates and critiques simultaneously both positions: "la ambigüedad es una riqueza" (449), as he reminds us in "Menard." This position is not one assumed for reasons of a relativized vision of things. Borges' suggestion is that human language (and intellect) can only approximate the infinite through a process of dialectics, a

process that offers a partial glimpse of totality undermined by an awareness of the partiality of that glimpse. The complexity of Borges' vision lies precisely in its awareness of its partiality, a partiality that dictates that both positions—the vision of totality and its undermining—must be maintained in a rigorous system of dialectical complementarity. The temptation to read this complementary polysemy as sure evidence of Borges' postmodernity must finally ignore that a simultaneous plurality of theoretical positions makes impossible, but gloriously so, any fundamental theoretical categorization of the effects of his stories: a plurality of simultaneous positions, like an Aleph—simulated or not—is at once totalizing and relative, is radically but rigorously dialectical.

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