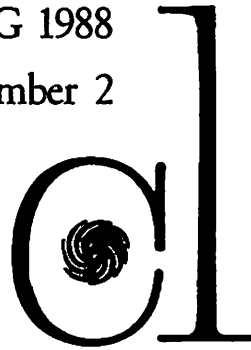


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Borges, Dante, and the Poetics of Total Vision

READERS AND CRITICS of Borges's "The Aleph" ("El Aleph," 1945) have long recognized the Dante allusions, some subtle, some obvious, woven into the text of this intricate, famous tale. In various unmistakable ways Borges alludes to Dante Alighieri, to Beatrice, and to elements of the *Commedia*. Even so, he never refers directly to Dante or the *Commedia*, in spite of the fact that in "The Aleph" he cites numerous "precursors."¹ Furthermore, in his 1970 "Aleph" commentary Borges virtually denied that the allusions to Dante were intentional:

Critics . . . have detected Beatrice Portinari in Beatriz Viterbo, Dante in Daneri, and the descent into hell in the descent into the cellar. I am, of course, duly grateful for these unlooked-for gifts. (*The Aleph and Other Stories* 264)

Although a number of critics have glossed the major Dante allusions in "The Aleph," few have tried to explain Borges's reluctance to recognize Dante as his precursor in this instance.² Yet an awareness of Borges's curious method of appropriating Dante, one of his favorite poets, seriously affects how we read the story. It also reveals a puzzling moment in which Borges's practice as a writer seems to conflict with his own pronouncements on literary influence.

¹ My use of the term "allusion," especially as a covert reference in contrast to a direct one, is indebted to Bloom, *A Map* 126, Christ 33-41, and Meyer 7. Throughout this essay my debt to Christ's classic study of the poetics of allusion in Borges will be apparent. The term "precursor" in Borges not only means "forerunner," but may also be read as a euphemism for "literary source."

² Monegal, too, has noted Borges's 1970 disavowal of an intentional Dante parody (416). And Carlos, puzzling over Borges's mentioning the Cabala as a source of the Aleph, but not Dante, concludes that Borges wanted not to call attention to the metaphysical dimension of Dante's vision, but rather to stress exclusively the immensity of the universe (48). Other critics who have examined or glossed Dante's influence in "The Aleph" include Ayala, Bell-Villada 223, Devoto, McMurray 229-230, Paoli 11-27, 44-45, and Stefanini.

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Such pronouncements, in defying critical platitudes about literary indebtedness, originality, and the autonomy of the author, have attracted the attention of contemporary writers and theorists, such as John Barth, Alain Robbe-Grillet (10), Gérard Genette, and Harold Bloom. Increasingly, Borges's ideas have become an obligatory touchstone for critics doubtful about more traditional ways of studying literary relations. The well-known 1951 essay "Kafka y sus precursores" offers a convenient summary of Borges's thinking in this respect. Here Borges would "purify" the term "precursor" of all of its polemical associations (148). Echoing T. S. Eliot, he claims that "each writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past just as it will modify the future. In this interdependency the identity or plurality of men does not matter at all," "cada escritor *crea* a sus precursores. Su labor *modifica* nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro. En esta correlación nada importa la identidad o la pluralidad de los hombres" (148). So, having read Kafka, for example, we will re-read Browning and Kierkegaard differently, more appreciatively than before. In the precursor we discover Kafkaesque features that we would have missed had Kafka not written. One suspects that Borges has inverted the usual order of poetic obligation: now the precursor owes a debt to the epigone, for the latter has caused the former to be read anew. In the end, literary debts between precursors and epigone cancel each other out. Elsewhere, Borges toys with the idea that all authors are ultimately avatars of one Universal Author, so that influence, plagiarism, priority—literary relations in general—are, strictly speaking, illusory.³ Indeed, Borges's delight in revealing his own precursors suggests that he suffers little from the anxieties of influence. Nor is it surprising that among the avant-garde critics who have taken Borges's ideas on influence seriously, the most critical has been Harold Bloom, who, though agreeing with Borges that writers create their own precursors, rejects Borges's "aesthetic idealism" in which the relation of poet to precursor is seen as "clean" rather than malign (*Yeats* 4). Bloom holds that the new poet fashions his own precursors by misinterpreting them, a process that "malforms" the new poet. Poetic influence is a kind of disease that makes strong poets suffer an "anxiety of influence" (*Yeats* 5 and *Anxiety* passim). Precisely the plurality, the agonizing individuality, of poets is what matters most.

From a Bloomian perspective interesting questions emerge concern-

³ Borges's story "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" affirms not only the superiority of the epigone (53-55), but also the basality of literary history based on the autonomy of the individual author (56-57). The doings of the Universal Author occur, or are discussed, in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (27), "La flor de Cole-ridge" (19, 22-23), and "El inmortal" (passim). See Genette's defense of Borges on this issue (123-131), and the essays of Wahl and Lefebvre.

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ing Borges's ideas and poetic practice. Is Borges's metaphysical rejection of literary relations itself a defense mechanism, a revisionary ratio in Bloom's terms, made to evade the psychological perils of influence? In "The Aleph" Borges neglects to cite Dante in spite of conclusive evidence that the story owes much to Dante. Would not Bloom's concept of poetic anxiety better account for Borges's omission in "The Aleph" than Borges's own notion of influence?

We know that Borges has worked a great deal with Dante. Like other twentieth-century writers—one thinks of Joyce, Mann, Eliot, Pound, Beckett, Flannery O'Connor, and Solzhenitsyn—Borges has shown an extensive, often penetrating, knowledge of the Italian poet (see the "Estudio preliminar"). He claims to have read through English or Italian versions of the *Commedia* at least ten times; the first time he read Dante in the original was probably in the late 1930s, long before he wrote "The Aleph" (*The Aleph* 217, 242; Barnstone 151). His writings attest to an intense interest in Dante: the parable "Inferno, I, 23" (1955); his introduction to a Spanish translation of the *Commedia* which includes short essays on Ulysses, Ugolino, and Beatrice in the earthly paradise ("Estudio preliminar," 1949); several occasional essays published between 1948 and 1962, never reprinted (e.g. "El noble castillo" and "El verdugo piadoso"); and numerous references and allusions scattered not only through the stories collected in *El Aleph*, but also throughout his whole opus.⁴ Nor does Borges profess to hold any writer in higher esteem than Dante. As early as 1943, in "Sobre el 'Vathek' de William Beckford," he wrote that "*La Divina Comedia* is the most justifiable and the most solid book of all literature," "*La Divina Comedia* es el libro más justificable y más firme de todas las literaturas" (190-191). And over thirty years later: "Had I to name a single work as being at the top of all literature, I should choose the *Divina Commedia* by Dante" (Barnstone 93). A Bloomian might well argue thus: if for Borges the *Commedia* is the paradigmatic poem, then it is possible that he would regard its shadow in "The Aleph" as an "intolerable presence," one he could not acknowledge (*A Map* 71).⁵

⁴ In *El Aleph* alone, the following stories contain Dante allusions or references: "Historia del Guerrero y de la cautiva," "La otra muerte," "El Zahir," "La escritura del Dios," "Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto" and "La espera."

⁵ Borges's interest in Dante, as measured by his essays and allusions to Dante, needs to be set off against his reticence about Dante in other contexts. Barnstone, for instance, noticed that Borges talked much more about Milton than Dante, whom Borges prefers (93). This accords with what Monegal calls Borges's "conscious resistance to acknowledging anything but his English and American sources" (315) and those often peripheral at that. Puzzling over why Borges has not kept his series of Dante essays in print, Monegal offers a number of reasons: copyright problems, Borges's being too busy, Borges's forgetfulness (422). Here indeed is matter for a Bloomian interpretation.

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This does seem plausible since "The Aleph" is one of Borges's most ambitious stories. As the title story of one of Borges's two main collections it retains a strategic place in his oeuvre. Like the *Commedia*, it tries to elicit a total vision of the cosmos. The Aleph of the title, a bright sphere about an inch in diameter, is a magical microcosm, a point that contains all other points in the cosmos. The Aleph makes all things visible without diminishing them or making them overlap (160, 161, 164). As the epigraph from Hobbes suggests, the Aleph is to space what eternity is to time. The heart of the story is a partial listing of what the narrator saw in the Aleph. This listing, the description of the Aleph, and an inventory of various precursors of the Aleph constitute about a third of the account. The rest of the story sets down how Borges, the narrator, is gradually drawn into the confidences of the Aleph's owner, the poet Carlos Argentino Daneri, in whose surname many readers have recognized an abbreviation of Dante Alighieri. Borges knows Daneri through the latter's cousin, Beatriz Viterbo, who was Borges's great, unrequited love, long deceased at the time of the main events of the story. After her death in 1929, Borges, on her birthday, would pay a nostalgic visit to her old house in Buenos Aires, still occupied by Daneri. In 1941 Daneri, now an intimate of Borges, reads to him sections of his topographic-encyclopedic epic *The Earth, La Tierra*, which, when finished, will include a complete inventory of every natural and artificial feature of the planet. About a third of the story involves a critical assessment of Daneri and his encyclopedic epic. Shortly after this reading a distraught Daneri notifies Borges that Beatriz's house is to be demolished and with it the Aleph, which is in the cellar and which Daneri has used to gather the vast materials for *The Earth*. Daneri leads Borges to the cellar where the latter experiences a total vision through the agency of the Aleph. But on returning, Borges spitefully refuses to recognize the existence of the Aleph and even implies that Daneri is deluded.⁶ In the postscript, where the narrator lists numerous earlier references to Alephs, we learn that Daneri's Aleph has been destroyed, that *The Earth* has received the Second National Prize for Literature, and that the narrator's own entry failed to get a single vote.

Of the numerous parallels between Dante's work and "The Aleph" the most significant for an interpretation of the poetics of Borges's story relate to the *Paradiso*. These in particular have been convincingly established in separate studies by Alberto Carlos, Roberto Paoli (44-45) and Ruggiero Stefanini. Foremost is the striking similarity be-

⁶ A refusal that curiously echoes the author's refusal, in the 1970 commentary, to acknowledge his intentional use of Dante in the story. Is the reader also deluded?

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tween Dante's God in the *Paradiso* and the Aleph, Borges's total point. Borges the narrator sees the Aleph as "a tiny, iridescent sphere of almost intolerable brilliance," "una pequeña esfera tornasolada, de casi intolerable fulgor" (164).⁷ Similarly, Dante the pilgrim sees God as a mere point of light which nevertheless makes the eye want to close because of its piercing brilliance (28.13-21). Just as Beatrice describes God as "that place where every *ubi* and every *quando* is centered in a point." "là 've s'appunta ogne *ubi* e ogne *quando*" (29.12), so too the Aleph is "one of the points in space that contains all the [other] points," "uno de los puntos del espacio que contienen todos los puntos" (160).⁸ The pilgrim in his final vision of the divine point of light sees confined in its depths "all that lies scattered in pages throughout the universe," "ciò che per l'universo si squaderna" (33.87). Likewise Borges sees in the Aleph the whole "unimaginable universe," "el inconcebible universo" (166). More important still, each work presents a spatial paradox that also involves a perceptual anomaly: not just a point that is all points, but a point in which all other points remain discernible to the human eye ("El Aleph" 161, 164; *Paradiso* 30.118-123, 31.19-24). Each work, in short, concerns itself with the nature and scope of total vision.

Other parallels suggest that Borges uses the *Paradiso* to set up a poetics of total vision, in other words a study of the principles and limits of expressing a total vision by means of verbal art. The first canto of the *Paradiso* states the well-known problem: "through words it is not possible to signify transhuman matters," "Transhumanar significar *per verba* / non si poria" (70-71). Throughout the *Paradiso* Dante regrets his inability to remember or put into language his visionary experiences. These regrets reach a crescendo in the last canto where he repeatedly laments that the ultimate vision he has received exceeds a human's verbal and mnemonic capacities to set it forth (55-57, 82-84, 94-96, 106-108, 133-136), and he likens the evanescence of his vision to the "unsealing" of snow by the sun and to the scattering by the wind of the

⁷ References to "El Aleph" (1945) are to the 1949 version reprinted in *El Aleph* (1965); the translations are my own. Though I have consulted the canonical Borges/Di Giovanni translation, I have not used it since it seems to have been based on a slightly different text from that of 1949.

⁸ All Dante quotations, unless otherwise noted, derive from Singleton's edition; the translations are mine. In this instance Singleton translates "there where every *ubi* and every *quando* is centered" (29.12); but here especially one ought not to miss the point in "s'appunta." A subtler echo involves Dante's circumlocution for God as "Alpha e O" (i.e. Omega; 26.17). Borges's Aleph alludes not only to Dante's God but also, as Alazraki (75-80) and Borges himself have indicated, to the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which students of the Cabala viewed as standing for the whole alphabet and ultimately the whole cosmos (Alazraki 75-76). It is satisfying and appropriate that the Aleph should be as overdetermined in its literary origins as it is in its physical properties.

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light leaves of the Sibyl so that the "meaning," "sentenza," of her oracle is lost (64-66). His difficulty lies not only in the magnitude or totality of the vision, but also in its remarkable concentration, for, as he says, he sees "confined, / bound by love into a single volume, / all that lies scattered in pages throughout the universe," "s'interna, / legato con amore in un volume, / ciò che per l'universo si squaderna" (85-87).⁹ Thus, though the pilgrim sees all-in-one, the poet cannot describe all-in-one by human means, except scatter-fashion, as a sort of sequence in which the all ceases to be all, and the one becomes several, presented in succession. Similarly, we learn from Beatrice that the spirits the pilgrim meets distributed among the planets are there only as appearances or signs ("per far segno," 4.38), put there as a concession to the pilgrim's human faculties, which at this point can only apprehend transpatial things in a spatial, sequential order. In fact these spirits reside in the first circle of the Empyrean, their seeming dispersal among the planets a kind of illusion engineered for the pilgrim's gradual introduction into the metaphysics of total vision (4.37-48). The reader nearly forgets, here, that it is the poet who has devised this spectacle for the reader, not the angels for the pilgrim, and that Dante's problem relates as much to poetics as to celestial metaphysics.

Like Dante, Borges the narrator shows a keen awareness of the limits that language and human cognition impose on the re-presentation of a total vision. Before he begins the "ineffable center," "inefable centro" of his story, that is, the catalog of what he saw in the Aleph, he speaks of his "desperation as a writer," "desesperación de escritor," and of the problem of how to "convey to others the infinite Aleph, which my timorous memory can scarcely comprehend," "transmitir a los otros el infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca" (163). Writing must also fail to re-present the alephic vision because what he sees is simultaneous but its "transcription [is] sequential, for such is the nature of language," "transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es" (164). Just as Dante in the last tercets of the *Commedia* refers to his incapacity to grasp his vision for long, so too Borges gives the last sentences of his story to the failure of his memory to confirm that he even saw the Aleph or had a total vision (169). One might, of course, see in this correspondence merely the recurrence of a stock motif: the ineffability and evanescence of total vision. Yet the positioning of the motif in Borges and his use of it in conjunction with the Aleph, which almost certainly owes its main features to the God of the *Paradiso*, argue powerfully that this is a case of direct influence.

Generally, the Dante parallels in "The Aleph" are explained as in-

⁹ The translation and interpretation of lines 64-66 and 85-87 are indebted to Ahern's essay.

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stances of Borgesian parody, an indisputable finding, which, however, does not take us very far. In my view these parallels only begin to take on significance when the reader concentrates on Borges's "sin of omission," namely, his not acknowledging Dante as his precursor.

Many of Borges's readers will have noticed the Dante allusions, and of these, some—Borges's ideal readers?—will have noticed the omissions: that the narrator does not cite Dante, that the author does not admit Dante's influence. How does the reader experience these omissions? How, that is, does the meaning of the story relate to the reader's double recognition of the presence of Dante parallels and the absence of Dante citations? To answer such questions requires sorting out the tangled relations between author, narrator, and audience in the story. To do this I will draw on Peter Rabinowitz's model of implied reader response, which is especially helpful in clarifying ambiguities arising out of narrative voice.

Rabinowitz is less concerned with the actual or real audience of a work than with the reader's participation in the two implied audiences of a fiction, the authorial audience and the narrative audience. The distinction between the two implied audiences comes from the insight that competent readers experience a fiction as simultaneously true and untrue. Hence the competent reader participates in both an authorial audience, which experiences the story as the author does, as a fiction, and in a narrative audience, which takes the narrator at his or her word and receives the story as a truthful account. Each implied audience is defined, or elicited, by the assumptions made about readers by, respectively, author and narrator ("Truth in Fiction" *passim*). When author and narrator hold certain incompatible assumptions about their audiences and thus put them at odds with each other, the reader may not know with which audience to identify. This dilemma often seems to beckon the reader to work through a puzzle whose solution will open up new dimensions of a work. Just so, in "The Aleph" authorial and narrative audiences receive contradictory signals about the Dante allusions.¹⁰

As in many of Borges's stories, the complexity and allusiveness of the text indicate that the authorial audience is "fit though few." Borges's authorial practice in "The Aleph" presupposes readers who are not only well-educated, but who also read with the penetration of critics and the acuity of metaphysicians. The subtler Dante allusions suggest that the author assumes his audience will have read the *Paradiso*. It is a learned audience which delights in displays of learning. Thoroughly aware of

¹⁰ Rabinowitz himself wonders at one point: "what connection is there between the use of quotation and the aggressive anti-naturalism in the works of Barth, Borges, and Nabokov?" ("What's Hecuba" 263).

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the Dante parallels, the authorial audience receives them as fictional structures devised by the author.

As for the narrative audience, Rabinowitz himself admits the difficulties in finding out what a narrator's audience knows (" 'What's Hecuba' " 252). Does it, for example, register the vanity and spitefulness of the narrator, as the authorial audience does? Perhaps one should begin by assuming that it accepts as true both the story and the existence of a supernatural object, the Aleph.¹¹ At once more credulous and less erudite than the authorial audience, it would probably miss the *Paradiso* echoes. But would the narrative audience miss the less subtle Dante parallels, such as Beatriz/Beatrice and the descent into the cellar/hell? If not, what does it make of them? Rabinowitz offers two alternative ways in which the narrative audience might respond: it might see them as a structuring device used by the narrator to order the materials of his story, still accepted as true; or it might see them as fate, as a preternatural pattern or coincidence of which even the narrator may not be aware (" 'What's Hecuba' " 253-54). The first alternative seems at first less likely since the narrator, having cited so many other parallels to his story, nowhere acknowledges the Dante one. Such an omission would make the narrator seem ignorant or devious, yet other cues make such charges hard to accept. With the second alternative, the narrative audience, having accepted the wonder of the Aleph, does not reject an additional wonder: that the narrator's story reenacts parts of the *Commedia*. Fate has made it so. But how would the narrative audience then regard the narrator, who, though an intellectual exhibitionist, has either missed this parallel or chosen, uncharacteristically, not to exhibit it? With either alternative some doubts could arise in the narrative audience about the narrator's candor or perspicacity. This mild distancing of the narrative audience from the narrator brings it closer to the viewpoint of the authorial audience. More significantly,

¹¹ One difficulty that Rabinowitz's otherwise useful model does not address fully enough is the problem of split consciousness in the reader, which is similar to the epistemological conundrum of self-deception. How, that is, can the reader, identifying with both audiences, both know and not know something at the same time? Why doesn't the authorial audience's knowledge affect and contaminate the view of the narrative audience? These unanswered questions have made the argument of this paragraph exceptionally tentative. One might argue, for instance, that the narrative audience views the narrator's account as unreliable and seriously doubts that he saw an Aleph. The narrator himself calls into question the authenticity of his account (169): if the narrative audience believes the narrator, must it not also mistrust him? Roberto Paoli goes so far as to argue that the narrator was drugged and that his vision of the Aleph was hallucinogenic (37-42), which shows the lengths to which moderns can go in order to reduce transcendental experiences to a materialistic psychology. On the other hand, the narrative audience might regard the narrator's doubts about his experience as an authentication of his sound judgment, and thus of his testimony.

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it strengthens the reader's identification with the authorial audience, which sees the story as a fiction.

How the two audiences interact is a thorny problem, which one might approach by examining the relations of author and narrator, who, after all, define these audiences. But here another complication arises: narrator and author share the same name—Borges—which strongly suggests the identity and equivalence of the two audiences. Further, the narrator reinforces this deceptive equivalence through the device of a postscript, "posdata," which gives an update on the main story. This device suggests that the narrator really exists and is in fact, not just in name, identical to the author. Still more decisive for mixing himself up with his narrator and thereby confounding the two audiences is the author's 1970 commentary wherein he appears to share the myopia of the narrator. Here Borges, in denying that the Dante parallels in "The Aleph" were planned, is at one with the narrator who neglected to cite Dante in the story. To take the author seriously at this point, the authorial audience finds itself having to adopt the credulity of the narrative audience.

By thus blurring the distinction between the two audiences, the author puts the reader into a quandary, which, in turn, calls attention to the necessity of this distinction. Without it the reader must deny his or her experience of the story as a Dante parody. Yet as a member of the authorial audience the reader cannot deny that the use of the *Paradiso* is a fictional ploy devised by the author. Faced with such an impasse the reader can find a way out by distancing himself or herself not only from the narrative audience but also from the authorial audience, which now seems spurious. The reader will then treat the author defined by the 1970 commentary as a pseudo-author or crypto-narrator, as another unreliable persona of the still elusive author. In this way the Dante problem forces the reader to reinterpret the story, to redefine both author and authorial audience, a process through which the reader becomes increasingly conscious of the poetic structure of the story.

Becoming more aware of this the reader begins to see that the tale itself focusses on poetics. The reader sees that both narrator and pseudo-author, though obsessed by the problem of all-inclusiveness in literary art, commit "sins of omission" concerning their own most significant precursor. Finally, the reader realizes that somewhere there is an author who has created this ironic structure and that the reader's task is to become part of that author's audience.

This assumed, the reader can now recognize that from the viewpoint of the authentic (as opposed to the pseudo) authorial audience the narrator's non-reference to Dante is a conspicuous or apophatic omission, one that calls attention to what is omitted. Likewise, the pseudo-author's

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denial of intentional allusions to Dante is apophatic. What makes the absence of Dante's name so striking to the authorial audience is the narrator's painstaking, encyclopedic enumeration of other literary parallels to the Aleph. Beginning with the epigraphs—Hamlet's "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a King of infinite space" and Hobbes's scornful mention of a "*Hic-stans . . . an Infinite greatnesse of Place*"—the story accumulates numerous parallels and analogies to the Aleph. We learn from Daneri that the Aleph is the microcosm of the alchemists and Cabalists (162) and from the narrator that it resembles the infinite divinity of the mystics who use paradoxical metaphors to express God's incomprehensible relation to space (163-164). As examples Borges mentions a Persian, Alanus de Insulis, and Ezekiel, all of whose metaphors, like the Aleph itself, incorporate spatial paradoxes. In Alanus, for instance, God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Here especially the absence of Dante is striking, for in the *Paradiso* Alanus's metaphor becomes the cosmological expression of Dante's theology. In one of the most celebrated spatial paradoxes in mystical literature, Dante makes God both center and circumference of the universe.¹² Yet Dante's name is conspicuously absent from the narrator's list. Nor does it appear in the postscript where the Cabalistic analogy is advanced—the Hebrew character aleph stands for God—and where we learn that in Cantor's mathematics the aleph symbol represents the transfinite numbers "in which the whole is not greater than any of the parts," "en los que el todo no es mayor que alguna de las partes" (168). Also in the postscript, we learn that the Aleph can be likened to the mirror of Iskandar mentioned by Burton, and we learn about parallels to this parallel in *The Thousand and One Nights*, Lucian's *True History*, Capella's *Satyricon* and *The Faerie Queene* (168). We learn next of the legend of an Aleph hidden in a stone in the mosque of Amr in Cairo (169). As if this exhibition of parallels in the story did not suffice, Borges uses the epilogue to *El Aleph* (1949) to admit the influence of H. G. Wells's "The Crystal Egg," which treats of an object that only superficially resembles Borges's Aleph.

At first, Borges's reader might feel that this listing of farflung, and often farfetched, sources and analogies would better suit a learned

¹² See *Paradiso* 28.22-139. In the sensible order of the cosmos, God is at the circumference (in the Empyrean), but in the intelligible order He is at the center of the cosmos. Borges devoted a famous essay to Alanus's paradoxical metaphor, "Pascal's Sphere," "La esfera de Pascal": here Dante is mentioned, though not directly as a user of the paradox. For the similarity between Alanus's paradox and Dante's cosmology, see Boyde 199-201. For a modern, scientific analysis of Dante's paradoxical cosmos (in which Dante appears as the inventor of four-dimensional geometry), see "Dante's Dimensions," *Scientific American*.

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article than a short story. For the authorial reader, however, it has several important functions, besides making the lack of Dante references conspicuous by their absence. First, the lengthy list is antic as well as being pedantic. Through it the smiling author asks: why should readers think that my narrator, or my pseudo-author, owes anything to Dante's *Paradiso* when so many other "precursors" exist? Secondly, the miniature encyclopedia of the Aleph, which threads through the story and spreads out into the postscript, the epilogue (1949), and the commentary (1970), exemplifies two aspects of the poetics of total vision: the inclusionary obsession and its alleviation through a total enumeration.

Total enumeration by means of a comprehensive catalog or encyclopedia is, of course, a long-standing method for re-presenting a total vision. In fact it is Daneri's method in his encyclopedic epic *The Earth*, the poetics of which Borges takes such pains to discredit. The method does not work well because total inclusiveness in the arts, if not elsewhere, remains a chimera. Even if it were not, there would always remain a serious disjunction between a total enumeration and a total vision, for the former is sequential and encyclopedic whereas the latter is simultaneous and unified. Hence that ineffability of total vision which is the despair of mystical poets from Dante to Borges, and a central theme of "The Aleph." The narrator himself makes this point when he complains that his alephic vision was instantaneous but that his means of expression is sequential (164). And in 1970 the author explained that his "chief problem in writing the story" was in "the setting down of a *limited* catalog of *endless* things" (*The Aleph* 264, my emphasis). Here, however, the discrepancy between total enumeration and total vision reflects the dichotomy limited/endless, that is, the inevitable incompleteness of a "total enumeration" rather than its sequential nature. Thus the narrator's omission of Dante references in an inventory of precursors illustrates a specific defect of total enumeration. Moreover, this "sin of omission" is ironic, for the defect in the telling of the story reflects the story's subject: the inadequacy of total enumeration.

Throughout his oeuvre Borges associates the encyclopedic inventory with futility, with the pathos of unintentional omission. Encyclopedias and total inventories become the main expressive means for those Borgesian figures who suffer from the inclusionary obsession. Here are some characteristic instances of this mania. In "On Rigor in Science," "Del rigor en la ciencia," the imperial cartographers make a map of the empire coextensive with the empire itself: points on the map overlay their actual geographical references (*El hacedor* 103). In the epilogue of the volume where this appears, Borges compares himself to a man who, Daneri-like, tries to "depict the world," "dibujar el mundo." Over

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the years "he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people," "puebla un espacio con imágenes de provincias, de reinos, de montañas, de bahías, de naves, de peces, de habitaciones, de instrumentos, de astros, de caballos y de personas" (109). Other examples include Funes the Memorious in "Funes el memorioso" who gains total memory after an accident (*Ficciones*); Hermes Trismegistus, who "dictated a variable number of books . . . in whose pages all things are written," "había dictado un número variable de libros . . . en cuyas páginas estaban escritas todas las cosas" ("La Esfera de Pascal" 14); and the poet in the poem "The Moon," "La Luna," who dreamed up the "arrogant project of summarizing the universe in a single book," "desmesurado / Proyecto de cifrar el universo / En un libro" (*El hacedor*). In the end all of these efforts at total enumeration collapse: the all-inclusive map is abandoned as useless; the man who tries to depict the world merely reproduces the lines of his own face; Funes's memory is a terrible curse; Hermes's achievement is lost; and the poet who wanted to summarize the universe discovers at the end of his labors that he has left out the moon.¹⁸

In this context, a remark by Borges from an essay of 1949 is revealing about his view of Dante. Borges imagines a total picture, a magical engraving, "lámina," of which he says that "nothing on earth is not included there," "no hay cosa en la tierra que no esté ahí" ("Estudio preliminar" ix). In this engraving one sees all that is, was and will be—the history of the past and that of the future. It is a "microcosm," "microcosmo" (ix). "That engraving of universal compass," "esta lámina de ámbito universal" (ix), he says, is Dante's *Commedia*. For Borges then, the *Commedia* is an anomaly, a human fabrication that miraculously achieves the quality of all-inclusiveness. In this respect Dante's masterpiece suspiciously resembles Borges's Aleph.

Given Borges's preoccupation with the inclusionary obsession, it is hard not to infer that in "The Aleph" Borges has excluded the mention of Dante so that the authorial audience will see reflected in the narrator/pseudo-author the pathos of unintentional omission. The Dante omission, which is at once conspicuous, supposedly unintentional, and broadly significant, offers a key to understanding Borges's own procedures in dealing with total vision. He knows that the law of unintentional omission invariably undermines the inclusionary process. Out of this knowledge he has drawn the paradoxical conclusion that a method of *significant* omission is essential to a modern poetics of total vision.

¹⁸ Borges's fascination with the idea of infinity—cf. his ironic project of writing a history of infinity—stems in part from the spoiler role that infinity plays in any drama of total enumeration ("Avatares de la tortuga" 149f).

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Thus the theme of total enumeration and the method of significant omission coexist in the story in a relation of ironic tension. They also have something in common: each points to the epic as a poetic vehicle of all-inclusive vision. The omission of Dante references in a parody of the *Commedia* calls to mind the fact that for Borges, as for many moderns, Dante's magnum opus is the paradigmatic epic. So too, total enumeration is one of the main procedures by which epic poems create the effect of all-inclusive vision. In this matter I follow Tillyard (6) and a host of others who regard epics as long poems distinguished by their amplitude and inclusiveness. Tillyard's perspective is useful here because he differentiates the heroic poem from the epic, which need not have a "heroic matter" but which does give a "heroic impression" through the ambitiousness and comprehensiveness of its project (10-11, 147-148). In fact, this accords well with medieval views of the epic poet as encyclopedist/polymath and of the classical epic as a compendium of knowledge (Curtius 203-207). The encyclopedia is ultimately the most comprehensive type of total enumeration. When critics refer to the epic as encyclopedic, they mean that its mode of narration, extended and digressive, tends to generate an enumeration of all things. In this sense, the major epics from the *Iliad* to *Paradise Lost* become the summas of their worlds.¹⁴

Yet epic is not the only literary mode of all-inclusive vision, nor is total enumeration the only means to convey such a vision. The short poem or the prose meditation can also convey a total vision, usually through the mystical apprehension of the unity of all things in God. Here the mode is lyrical or meditative rather than encyclopedic. The rhetoric, depending as it does on the method of significant omission, employs oxymoron, apophasis, the *via negativa*, and the ineffability topos to communicate the experience, rather than the content, of total vision. The works of the Spanish mystics and the English metaphysicals are the best known examples of the lyric or meditative mode of total vision.

These divergent modes necessarily entail different versions of total vision: the one, extensional and objective, describing the contents of total vision; the other, intensive and subjective, centering on the paradoxical experience of total vision. It is perhaps yet another measure of its all-inclusiveness that Dante's epic incorporates both modes and both versions of total vision. As we have seen, this is especially evident in the *Paradiso* where the enumerative or sequential presentation of the cosmos is declared an enabling fiction and where the encyclopedic descrip-

¹⁴ For Borges's view of the *Commedia* as encyclopedic in its comprehensiveness, see "Estudio preliminar" ix, "El noble castillo de canto cuarto," and "El verdugo piadoso" 9.

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tion of the heavenly order is ruptured by lyrical moments of significant omission, of blindness, muteness, and amnesia. Here paradox and oxymoron reflect the inadequacy of total enumeration in the face of the pilgrim's mystical experience of the unity of all things in God. In this way the *Paradiso* offers paradigms for both the encyclopedic epic of total vision and its lyrical, apophatic counterpart.

If taken too seriously as an evaluative principle, this neo-Crocean typology of visionary modes would not be very tenable.¹⁵ But it does serve as a helpful way of approaching both the theme and method of "The Aleph," where it accounts for three models of poetic form for total vision offered by the story: Daneri's *The Earth* (an encyclopedic epic), Dante's *Commedia* (which uses both encyclopedic and lyric modes), and the story "The Aleph" itself, whose mode of total vision is lyric-meditative.

Borges presents *The Earth* as an encyclopedic epic. We learn, for instance, that *The Earth*, like Dante's epic, unfolds in cantos, that it has the epic aim of putting into verse "the whole wide world," "toda la redondez del planeta" (156), and that it uses such epic conventions as the digression and the apostrophe (154). It is not surprising that Borges compares *The Earth* to the encyclopedic *Polyolbion*, a "topographical epic," "epopeya topográfica" by Drayton (156). And four of the quoted verses from *The Earth* allude to Homer's *Odyssey* and Hesiod's *Works and Days*, thereby signalling the encyclopedic range of Daneri's work (154). Yet the narrator rarely tires of pointing up the mediocrity of *The Earth*, in spite of the Dante legacy suggested in Daneri's name.

The second model, covertly present, is Dante's epic, especially the *Paradiso*. The Dante parodies, allusions, and parallels in the story continually bring the authorial reader back to Dante's own poetics of total vision as set forth in the *Paradiso*. Drawing on Borges's comments as well as his practice, one can infer three aspects of the *Commedia* that make it for Borges the paradigmatic long poem: it encompasses the medieval cosmos in a total vision; it exploits the method of significant omission to give the impression that it is neither incomplete nor redundant; and, also by this method, it enforces the illusion of its own unity and thereby the transcendental unity of all things.

Unlike Daneri's and Dante's poems of total vision, "The Aleph" is

¹⁵ The principle underlying this typology resembles Croce's distinction between "structure," "struttura" and "poetry," "poesia" in the *Commedia* (50-68). By non-poetic structure Croce means the *Commedia's* "otherworldly, encyclopedic schema," "schema oltremondano ed enciclopedico" (64). He also refers to the poetic areas as lyrics and to the canticles as collections of lyrics (68, 135). Though conversant with Croce's interpretation of Dante, Borges himself does not seem to accept it; see "El verdugo piadoso" 9.

not a long poem and its very brevity implies a critique of these two works. One might, I suppose, read Borges's caustic evaluation of *The Earth* narrowly. But the transparent allusions to Daneri as a Dante manqué suggest that the author is doing much more in this respect than lambasting a regional poetaster. They suggest that the case of Daneri refers to a far-reaching problem in modern poetics, namely, the viability of the long poem of total enumeration in modern times. More specifically, these allusions suggest that even if one allows a modern experience of total vision, the encyclopedic epic of Dante or Daneri can no longer serve as its vehicle. Certainly one of the main obstacles to encyclopedic epic in our times is the disappearance of the faculty of total vision. In the most propitious of times total vision is evanescent, difficult to re-present. For Borges, too, the alephic vision is a fantastic, doubtful occurrence: in the end, he says, our "skeptical world" requires the destruction of the Aleph (*The Aleph* 263), and the narrator himself comes to doubt its authenticity by the end of the story (169). Yet the salient point here is that Borges's tale does presuppose an authentic total vision. The real problem that the story poses is the discovery of an adequate poetic form for such a vision. Further, reading the critique of *The Earth* as a critique of the encyclopedic epic of total vision serves to throw light on Borges's own predilection for brevity, on his peculiar use of Dante, and on the efficacy of his own poem of total vision, "The Aleph."

Daneri's project illustrates the difficulties of writing epic in the post-Romantic age. True, his mental activity, "continuous, impassioned, wide-ranging," "continua, apasionada, versátil" (153), would seem to equip him especially well for the epic enterprise. But, concludes Borges, that mental activity is "completely insignificant," "del todo insignificante" (153). Likewise, the verse of *The Earth* turns out to be dull, regular, and cacophonous; the diction, inflated, precious, and gratuitously periphrastic (155, 158). These defects of style are precisely those pointed out by moderns in their critiques of long poems, especially those postdating *Paradise Lost*. As to structure and substance, Daneri boasts of the poem's "formal perfection and learned rigor," "perfección formal y el rigor científico" (159), which are also admired qualities of Dante's epic. However, Borges undercuts this appreciation when he describes *The Earth* as a "pedantic farrago," "pedantesco fárrago" (158: note the pun on "dantesco"). The traditional conventions of encyclopedic epic, Borges implies, cannot be transferred to modern poetry, even when an access to total vision, which seems to call for them, occurs.¹⁶

¹⁶ For modern discussions of the viability of the long poem see Poe and Lindenberger. Croce's view of the *Commedia* as a group of lyrics embedded in a geographico-didactic schema is an extension of the modern rejection of encyclopedic

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The authorial reader also sees that because the conventions of encyclopedic epic have such a strong hold over Daneri's poetic conception, the latter has utterly misconstrued the significance and poetic value of the vision provided by the Aleph. Daneri trivializes the Aleph. He reduces it to the order of such modern inventions as the telephone, the moving picture, and the astronomical observatory (153, 166). Using the Aleph as a kind of panoptic videotape machine, he fails to view it as anything more than a total repository of real life images. He ignores its truly marvelous feature: the capacity to annihilate the limits of human spatial perception, to convey visually a transcendental order of space. Narrator and reader alike recognize that this Aleph, the Aleph that "The Aleph" makes us see, is far more fascinating than Daneri's universal peephole.

It is ultimately Borges's own method for creating an adequate poetic form for a total vision that best dramatizes Daneri's failure. That is, Borges's diatribes against *The Earth* are less harmful to the encyclopedic epic than is the example of his own solution, "The Aleph." Whereas Daneri ignores the perplexities of expressing a total vision, Borges constructs his story in direct response to the problem. By admitting the impossibility of a solution, by evoking the pathos of his own omissions, Borges succeeds precisely where Daneri evidently failed, namely in giving the reader the illusion of having experienced a total vision.¹⁷ Unlike Daneri's epic, Borges's story is succinct, oxymoronic, and self-consciously defective, qualities which form a *via negativa* to the experience of total vision. It is here that Borges becomes the true successor of Dante: not in trying to reintroduce the encyclopedic epic, but in creating ecstatic moments that arise out of the failure of language, memory, and vision, moments that succeed in evoking a total vision, almost to the extent that they forgo its exhaustive re-presentation.

The story is effective in this respect because it functions as an Aleph. Like its subject the story epitomizes the principle of *multum in parvo*, much in little.¹⁸ The *multum* relates to the story's richness—its inexhaustible allusiveness and byzantine convolution—while the *parvum*

epic. Borges, personally, is clearly fond of the epic. In the case of Whitman, for example, he insists that *Leaves of Grass* is an epic rather than a mere collection of lyrics (Barnstone 84, 135). Yet the fact that his favorite long poem of the last two centuries is so often treated as a collection of lyrics is revealing in this context. Cf. Borges's mention of *Leaves of Grass* as a precursor of "The Aleph" (*The Aleph* 264).

¹⁷ Daneri's purpose, one might argue, was not to give the reader the experience of total vision, but rather to reproduce its contents. True, but here the choice of poetic purpose seems mistaken: the experience can be conveyed, the contents not.

¹⁸ Christ (12, 150), Lefebvre (224), and McMurray (229-230) have observed that Borges's stories in their condensed amplitude function like Alephs.

refers to its brevity. The complexity of "The Aleph" would approach chaos were it not for the fact that, in spite of the centrifugal features—the far-ranging erudition, haphazard inventories, the postscript—the story achieves a remarkable coherence of subject and form. The subject, one point containing all other points, finds expression in a brief narrative of enormous amplitude.

Borges conveys the effect of amplitude within small compass by relying on suggestion, a mode of significant omission, rather than on total representation through total enumeration, the ponderous method of Daneri. For Borges, re-presentation, the extended, exhaustive description of objects, results in works that are "large," "considerable" but "limited," "limitado," to use the narrator's characterization of *Polyolbion*, and by implication *The Earth* (156). The results of encyclopedic re-presentation reverse or overthrow the alephic principle, which seeks to confine the unlimited in something small. Suggestion, as opposed to re-presentation or direct expression, is alephic. Suggestion draws on ellipsis, allusion, apophysis, *pars pro toto*, and veiling, all techniques of significant omission. An analogy from the visual arts illustrates well the power of suggestion through significant omission. As E. H. Gombrich has noted, Rembrandt and Leonardo deliberately blurred those features of the face that would be most expressive. Paradoxically, this partial omission of the most expressive features makes the face much more expressive than if they were fully expressed (219-222). This method foreshadows Borges's neo-Symbolist poetics, already enunciated in 1932 in his essay "Narrative Art and Magic." Here Borges speaks of blurring as a means of emphasis, citing William Morris and Mallarmé as examples (34-36). Thus omission, which is a serious defect from a representational viewpoint, becomes a virtue in evocation. Through omission evocation is alephic: it encompasses more with less. Even so, Borges asserts that this method can never achieve the complete presentation of the essential object: "I think you can only allude to things, you can never express them" (Barnstone 169).

Two Borgesian parables, written after "The Aleph," recall the earlier work in illustrating the futility of trying to "express" a total vision. Each refers to Dante. "A Yellow Rose," "Una Rosa Amarilla" brings together a rose—the ideal poetic object—and the Italian baroque poet, Giambattista Marino, who lies dying. Having tried to re-present in verse the yellow rose at his bedside, Marino experiences a vision in which he sees the rose of Adam in its eternal essence. From this he realizes that "we can mention or allude but not express," "podemos mencionar o aludir pero no expresar" (31). He then understands that his opus, written to be a "mirror of the world," "espejo del mundo" is not a mirror but only one more thing added to the world (32). Thus,

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not only does the parable present a vision about the ineffability of visions, it also condemns the total enumeration. Borges closes with the observation that Dante and Homer may also have attained this revelation (32). The second parable, "Inferno, I, 32," reworks the theme of a deathbed vision about the nature of poetry, only this time the protagonist is Dante. In a dream vision God shows Dante who he is and the overall purpose of his life and work, but on awakening, Dante "felt he had received and lost something infinite, something he would not be able to recover," "sintió que había recibido y perdido una cosa infinita, algo que no podría recuperar" (49). Here Dante's experience of the loss of infinite vision parallels that of the pilgrim in the last canto of the *Paradiso* (58-60, 64-66, 94-96) and also that of Borges in "The Aleph" (167, 169). In all these cases, the poignant expressions of inadequacy, loss, and amnesia in the aftermath of total vision help intensify the illusion of totality, of ultimacy.¹⁹ Similar in effect is another of Borges's favorite poetic procedures: the evocation of an ineffable something by cataloguing the ways in which it cannot be expressed. In the poems "The Other Tiger," "El otro tigre" and "The Rose," "La rosa," for example, Borges gives us lists of ineffectual images, and regrets that through them he cannot express the essential tiger or the essential rose, which exist outside of his verse (*Selected Poetry* 128, 130, 254). Yet this gesture of defeat works apophatically. The chaotic list of rejected images constitutes a *via negativa* that leads, however elliptically, to the very essence of the desired object. A potent evocation is achieved, one that ends up usurping the functions of re-presentation. In a way, the method of significant omission becomes a cryptic mode of re-presentation.

The archcatalog of the Aleph, which incorporates similar devices to recreate an experience of total vision, is the center of Borges's story. A marvel of condensation, it is only a little over five hundred words in length. Self-consciously limited, the enumeration of images is fragmentary rather than encyclopedic. The choice of images seems arbitrary and their disposition, chaotic. From the viewpoint of total enumeration the archcatalog is deficient, as the narrator himself proclaims (163-164). Here follow two fragments of the catalog which must stand for the entire catalog, itself a fragment:

... vi en un traspatio de la calle Soler las mismas baldosas que hace treinta años vi en el zaguán de una casa en Frey Bentos, vi racimos, nieve, tabaco, vetas de

¹⁹ The following critics have discussed the ineffability issue in "El Aleph": Alazraki (79-80), Barrenechea (113-120), Monegal (414f), and Sturrock (108). Christ has a good discussion of Borges's preference for suggestion over re-presentation (7). In interviews Borges claims to have had two mystical experiences, which, he says, cannot be recounted in a direct fashion (Barnstone 11, 168).

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metal, vapor de agua, vi convexos desiertos ecuatoriales y cada uno de sus granos de arena, . . .

. . . vi caballos de crin arremolinada en una playa del Mar Caspio en el alba, vi la delicada osatura de una mano, vi a los sobrevivientes de una batalla, enviando tarjetas postales, vi en un escaparate de Mirzapur una baraja española, vi las sombras oblicuas de unos helechos en el suelo de un invernáculo, vi tigres, émbolos, bisontes, marejadas y ejércitos, vi todas las hormigas que hay en la tierra, vi un astrolabio persa, . . . (165)

(. . . I saw in a backyard of Soler street the same floor tiles that I saw thirty years before in the vestibule of a house in Frey Bentos, I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam, I saw convex equatorial deserts, and each one of their grains of sand, . . .

I saw horses with swirling manes on a shore of the Caspian Sea at dawn, I saw the delicate bone structure of a hand, I saw the survivors of a battle sending postcards, I saw in a shopwindow of Mirzapur a pack of Spanish playing cards, I saw the oblique shadows of some ferns on the floor of a greenhouse, I saw tigers, pistons, bisons, sea swells, and armies, I saw all the ants that there are on earth, I saw a Persian astrolabe . . .)

Here significant omission appears in the form of gaps, in the evident lack of connection, between the disparate things listed. The arbitrary juxtapositions that result produce an effect of strangeness and wonder, analogous to the effect of the Aleph itself. In the archcatalog evocation works through a kind of transcendental metonymy: the list of about four score things comes to stand for, to suggest, the totality of the universe. *Pars pro toto* in an absolute sense. As Borges later observed, his task was to make a "limited catalog of endless things" (*The Aleph* 264). The limited/endless polarity signals not only the metonymic, as opposed to re-presentational, nature of his task. It also reflects the paradoxicality of the Aleph itself, which is both small and endless.

Lists and catalogs usually function at a low level of organization. Discontinuous in form, their unity is aggregative rather than organic. Though sequential, lists and catalogs normally lack all but the most primitive forms of syntax; the alphabetical listing—from which the letter aleph gains its distinction—is a case in point. The catalog tends to be the literary equivalent of a heap. Borges's famous catalogs, as in the poem "Matthew, XXV, 30," "Mateo, XXV, 30" (*Selected Poems*), usually accentuate the centrifugal principles of diversity, randomness, discontinuity, and parataxis. In the archcatalog of "The Aleph" pistons follow tigers, a Persian astrolabe, ants. Borges in his commentary calls it a "chaotic enumeration" (264).

Yet the ultimate effect of the archcatalog is not really confusing and chaotic. True, the kaleidoscopic succession of disparate items evokes the incomprehensible amplitude of all things as seen in the alephic vision.

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At the same time the brevity of the list in the face of the totality for which it is meant to stand elicits a feeling of concentration, a feeling that is intensified as the reader begins to sense a cryptic unity underlying the farrago of things. This unity mimics in turn the concentration of the total point. In the 1970 commentary, Borges himself speaks of a hidden affinity uniting the disparate items (264). At this juncture, a comprehensive analysis of the archcatalog is not appropriate, but a limited perusal can illustrate this principle. The line "I saw tigers, pistons, bisons, sea swells, and armies" is itself a microcatalog (165). At first this seems an impressively heterogeneous list. A re-reading, however, yields the unifying image of powerful movement, of which two types are exemplified: regular and inorganic (pistons, sea swells), and irregular and organic (tigers, bisons, armies). The examples of these two types are themselves deployed in a regular alternation, suggestive of mechanical motion. In a similar way the entire catalog expresses a unity governed by secret affinities, complementary oppositions, and subtle patternings.²⁰ Even so, recognition of this does not entirely dissipate the initial effect of arbitrary, even absurd, juxtaposition. Thus, overtaking the effect of randomness, which evokes the bewildering totality of things, there emerges a sense of the interconnectedness of things. All this helps evoke the oneness of a single point containing all points. This complementary opposition between the centrifugal and the centripetal brings Borges as close to re-presenting the alephic principle as seems poetically possible.

In Borges's hands the method of significant omission has become a powerful means for conjuring the total vision. At the end of his essay "The Wall and the Books," "La muralla y los libros," Borges wrote that the "imminence of a revelation that does not appear is, perhaps, the aesthetic event," "inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético" (12). In both "The Aleph" and the *Paradiso* the converse of this proposition seems to hold true: the aesthetic event arises out of the partial evocation of a revelation that cannot be recovered.

Through the example of his own tale the author of "The Aleph" has sought to define a modern poetics of total vision based on significant omission. The apophatic omission of Dante's name in a story laden with

²⁰ Numerous critics have discussed Borges's "enumerations," including Alazraki (77), Barrenechea (115-119), Bell-Villada (57, 220), Carlos (42-43), Christ (8, 65-66), Molloy (193-220), Monegal (414f), Paoli (46-48), and Sturrock (116). A good case could be made that Borges's method of defective enumeration owes a great deal to Whitman, as Borges himself suggests (*The Aleph* 264). For an analysis of "chaotic enumeration" as a characteristic of modernist poetry, see Spitzer's classic essay.

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Commedia allusions posed several problems for the reader. One of these, the narrator's unintentional omission, underscored a central theme of the story: all-inclusiveness in its relation to poetics. Another concerned the authorial reader's difficulty in finding the author: the narrator's omission and the author's Dante disclaimer in the 1970 commentary precluded the reader's identification with either. Though we now know that the real author is preoccupied with poetics, the problem of who he is and his relation to Dante remains. Dante's presence, unacknowledged and ineluctable, beckons us to return to the question of poetic influence and authorship.

To be sure, Dante is a mighty precursor of Borges. But whether or not Borges suffers the anxiety of influence in this regard is probably impossible to determine. Borges has often enough depreciated the idea of literary indebtedness and its attendant anxieties. Yet even here one can hardly know if Borges's rather fanciful ideas coincide with his personal convictions. From a Bloomian viewpoint the suppression of Dante references seems both consistent with the anxiety of influence and inconsistent with Borges's own ideas on the subject. It may be, however, that these ideas provide the most economical resolution of the contradiction. In other words, the Dante anomaly may have been designed to actualize, rather than undermine, Borges's metaphysical fantasies about literary relations. Such an approach to the problem must be no less speculative than the Borgesian notions it wants to employ.

These notions involve a radical depersonalization of the creative process: the individual writer has much less personal control or choice than he or she is usually thought to have. For Borges, to be a writer means obligatory participation in an Aleph of authorship. In other words, all authors are, wittingly or not, the avatars of one Universal Author, timeless and anonymous. Ultimately, there is no plurality of authors: all authors are one and all books are finally one book. Since an author's individuality and even time itself are illusory, the anxious competition for literary priority, originality, and influence are futile and come to nothing. Likewise, plagiarism and borrowing are not conscious processes involving personal responsibility, but rather are transpersonal manifestations of the Universal Author.²¹

The idea that the Universal Author has his or her hand in the story helps account for Dante's unacknowledged presence and the pseudo-author's denial of intentional Dante allusions. Borges the narrator, as

²¹ For references to the Universal Author in Borges, see note 3. The degree to which the author is individual and autonomous is a major issue in contemporary literary theory; see especially Lentricchia (8-14) on Frye and on various anti-personalist views of the poet. Cf. Bloom's characterization of the 1960s as the "Age of Frye and Borges" because at that time a depersonalized view of literary relations was in vogue (*A Map* 31).

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well as the pseudo-author, become objects of dramatic irony, for we see, though they do not see, the silent workings of the Universal Author through them. The evidence has been inscribed into the story for us, but they, convinced of their own scribal authority, of the prerogatives of authorial intentionality, fail to register what lies outside of their own limited vision of authorship. Thus they remain unwitting agents of the Universal Author. And of Dante. In the wonderful Aleph of universal authorship Dante and Borges are one, but the narrator does not know this. He does not know that through him Dante, too, has had a hand in writing "The Aleph." Rather he tries to pay off his literary debts by listing precursors *he* has collected, *he* controls, a list of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic precursors which itself constitutes an unintentional testimonial to the Aleph of authorship.

The postulation of a Universal Author also has the virtue of accounting for the many blurrings and confusions of authorial identity that have exercised critics of the story.²² We have already discussed the unanimity of narrator and pseudo-author. We have noted the confounding of Dante and Borges, the latter "unintentionally" filling his story with Dante allusions and parallels, "unintentionally" drawing his poetics from the *Paradiso*. But Dante is also Daneri, Dan-te Alighi-eri, the Daneri who writes in cantos. And Daneri is also Virgil, Virgil who is Dante's teacher, and who guides Borges-Dante into the cellar-underworld of the Aleph. And, most astonishingly, Borges and his rival, his nemesis Daneri, are one. Like Borges Daneri held a "subordinate position in an unreadable library," "cargo subalterno en una biblioteca ilegible" (152), a library named after Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur, who was a paternal ancestor of Borges. Also, Daneri's first alephic vision comes after he trips and falls on the cellar stairs (161); in his "Autobiographical Essay" Borges attributes a critical turning point in his own career to a similar accident in a stairway (*The Aleph* 242). Finally, Borges the narrator sometimes echoes, one assumes unwittingly, the detested speech rhythms and rhetorical excesses of Daneri.²³ The narrator, of course, is unconscious of this circle of confusions and identifications—Borges-Dante, Dante-Daneri, Daneri-Borges. Yet one surmises that Borges the author—not the narrator or the pseudo-author,

²² Borges's story "The Immortal," "El inmortal," for example, is unintelligible without the recognition that some sort of Universal Author is manifest in the story; see Christ 198-199, 225. "El inmortal" and "El Aleph," the first and last stories, respectively, of *El Aleph*, are among Borges's longest stories. To my knowledge no critic has yet recognized the role of the Universal Author in the companion story of "El inmortal."

²³ Compare, for instance, Daneri's "¡La casa de mis padres, mi casa, la vieja casa inveterada de la calle Garay!" (160) to Borges's "Beatriz, Beatriz Elena, Beatriz Elena Viterbo, Beatriz querida, Beatriz perdida para siempre . . ." (162).

but Borges the self-conscious avatar of the Universal Author—has planned these parallels and correspondences and that he plays the same role with the authors in his tale as he imagines the Universal Author does with real, historical writers, merrily mixing up and reintegrating their lives, their times, and passages from their works.

If this theory were taken seriously—and who knows if Borges himself takes it so—one might then conclude that all writing, all poetics, however distinguished, however distinguishable, is one. Indeed literary relations in "The Aleph" do reflect this mystical principle, which, if true, would make most influence studies absurd, this essay included. Even so, literary criticism has helped reveal one of the story's main convolutions: the way the unity and diversity of writing in the story mirror the workings of the mysterious Aleph. In the end the poetics of alephic vision turns into a vision of the alephic character of all poetics.

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