

THE UNIVERSE IN A NUTSHELL:
THE LONG SENTENCE IN BORGES'S "EL ALEPH"¹

Daniel Balderston

for my dear Hernán

In the basement of a house in Buenos Aires, an unhappy man, unsuccessful in love and in literature, sees a luminous object about an inch across:

Vi el populoso mar, vi el alba y la tarde, vi las muchedumbres de América, vi una plateada telaraña en el centro de una negra pirámide, vi un laberinto roto (era Londres), vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo, vi todos los espejos del planeta y ninguno me reflejó, vi en un traspatio de la calle Soler las mismas baldosas que hace treinta años vi en el zaguán de una casa en Fray Bentos, vi racimos, nieve, tabaco, vetas de metal, vapor de agua, vi convexos desiertos ecuatoriales y cada uno de sus granos de arena, vi en Inverness a una mujer que no olvidaré, vi la violenta cabellera, el altivo cuerpo, vi un cáncer en el pecho, vi un círculo de tierra seca en una vereda, donde antes hubo un árbol, vi [en] una quinta de Adrogué, un ejemplar de la primera versión inglesa de Plinio, la de Philemon Holland, vi a un tiempo cada letra de cada página (de chico, yo solía maravillarme de que las letras de un volumen cerrado no se mezclaran y

1 This is the text of the "inaugural lecture" I gave as Mellon Professor of Modern Languages at Pittsburgh on 2 February 2012. Versions were presented at Wesleyan University and the University of Reno (in English) and at the Colegio de México, the Universidad Santo Tomás and the Universidad Industrial de Santander (in Spanish). I would like to thank Provost Patricia Beeson for the invitation to give the inaugural lecture, and Fernando Degiovanni, Darrell Lockhart, Diana Paola Guzmán, Rafael Antolínez and Jorge Maldonado for the other invitations. I am especially grateful for the lively discussions that helped me sharpen points of the paper.

perdieran en el decurso de una noche), vi la noche y el día contemporáneos, vi un poniente en Querétaro que parecía reflejar el color de una rosa en Bengala, vi mi dormitorio sin nadie, vi en un gabinete de Alkmaar un globo terráqueo entre dos espejos que lo multiplican sin fin, 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, vi en un cajón del escritorio (y la letra me hizo temblar) cartas obscenas, increíbles, precisas, que Beatriz había dirigido a Carlos Argentino, vi un adorado monumento en la Chacarita, vi la reliquia atroz de lo que deliciosamente había sido Beatriz Viterbo, vi la circulación de mi oscura sangre, vi el engranaje del amor y la modificación de la muerte, vi el Aleph, desde todos los puntos, vi en el Aleph la tierra, y en la tierra otra vez el Aleph y en el Aleph la tierra, vi mi cara y mis vísceras, vi tu cara, y sentí vértigo y lloré, porque mis ojos habían visto ese objeto secreto y conjetural, cuyo nombre usurpan los hombres, pero que ningún hombre ha mirado: el inconcebible universo. (OC 625-26)

There are much longer sentences in the history of literature²—think of Joyce, García Márquez, Faulkner, Saramago—but this one has a wonderful complexity. It is remarkable for its compactness: in 430 words it goes off madly in all directions, at the same time working from a still center: “vi”: I saw. As the narrator (who is called “Borges” in the story) says a bit earlier, his problem is how to transmit the infinite Aleph in a finite number of symbols, through the “enumeración, siquiera parcial, de un conjunto infinito” (625). His solution, a sentence which Fernando Vallejo has called the “punto culminante de uno de los relatos de Borges (¿o de su obra, acaso?)” (*Logoi* 203), is what I will analyze here.

Perhaps the first thing to say about this sentence is that it is wonderfully strange. Unlike his host, Carlos Argentino Daneri, who has used this luminous object to survey the surface of the earth and write plodding quatrains about particular places seen, and who proposes to continue—in a remarkably tedious way—block by block, square kilometer by square kilometer, our narrator’s approach to geography is radically unsettling: he records big things, tiny things, some things that

2 For an entertaining account of long sentences, see Ed Park’s article “One Sentence Says It All.”

are shockingly private (his beloved Beatriz's obscene letters to her first cousin, his host upstairs), many that are in the public domain. The "system" of enumeration here, which we will examine in some detail, looks like an embrace of chaos, but it gets at a different, and perhaps better, way of expressing the totality than other, more methodical, approaches. Leo Spitzer used the term "chaotic enumerations" (in an essay published in Buenos Aires in 1945, the year of publication of the story) for lists that give a bewildering sense of a whole; Sylvia Molloy prefers the term "heteroclitite" to "chaotic," and for good reason: the radical otherness of this list constitutes a kind of order.

In terms of rhetorical structure, it is hard to say anything in general about this sentence since, as we'll see, the different clauses of it have a great variety of structures and use a variety of rhetorical strategies, but one thing jumps right out: the sentence is organized around 37 repetitions, at the heads of sequences, of the verb "vi," I saw.³ (There is also a "vi" in the middle of a clause and, near the end, an "había visto," which looks back on the whole sequence.)⁴ This is of course a radical use of anaphora, the structure of repetition that is so important in the Bible (and in some modern poetry, including that of Walt Whitman, Vicente Huidobro and Pablo Neruda, and for that matter in some poems by Borges). But, as we'll see, what comes after the repeated first person singular verb implies a lot more than 37 visions: there are many more things, to recall Hamlet's words to Horatio, than are accounted for at first.

As often happens with Borges, the references are mundane and erudite and precise and muddled, encompassing vastly different fields of knowledge, things both natural and artificial, simple and paradoxical. We are fortunate to be able to map out much of Borges's reading over the ten years or so that precede the composition of the story (it was published in September 1945, just after the nuclear bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki

3 Bill Richardson in an article in this same issue of *Variaciones* counts 40. He includes a "vi" clause from earlier in the paragraph, the "vi" in the middle of the long clause about the tiles, and the "había visto" at the end of the sentence. I am counting only the 37 instances of "vi" at the beginning of clauses in the long sentence itself.

4 There is another place in the sentence where Borges could have used "había visto" but used "vi" instead: "vi en un traspatio de la calle Soler las mismas baldosas que hace treinta años vi en el zaguán de una casa de Fray Bentos." The effect is of a flattening of past time, since the remote experience is narrated in the same tense as the recent one.

and the Japanese surrender), thanks to his reviews, chronicles, and now even the marginal annotations in some books in his library. It is all here: mathematics, history, medicine, geography, encyclopedias, literature (in translation and in the original), sex, death, himself, you, me: everything at once, simultaneously yet without juxtaposition.

In the case of the readings, it is not a stretch to find Bertrand Russell, Franz Werfel, Sigmund Freud, Georg Cantor, Edward Kasner and James Newman, Josiah Royce and Rabindranath Tagore here, as well as from the explicit references to Pliny the Elder and to his English translator Philemon Holland. To give one example: those globes in Alkmaar must refer to the seventeenth-century Dutch cartographer Willem Janszoon Blaeu (1571-1638), famous for his atlases and globes and author of a book translated into English in 1654 entitled: *A Tutor to Astronomy and Geography, or, an Easie and Speedy way to Understand the Use of Both the Globes, Celestial and Terrestrial: laid down in so plain a manner that a mean capacity may at the first reading understand it and with a little practise, grow expert in those divine sciences*; another of his books described globes (presumably celestial this time, not terraqueous) that were made in accordance with Ptolemy's astronomy versus those globes made in accord with Copernicus. Another example: the sunset in Querétaro, which (thanks to a biographical note from 1937 and a preface published a year after the story) probably refers to that moment where the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico is shot by firing squad in Querétaro, the subject of the play *Juarez und Maximilien* by Franz Werfel, and of course of a famous group of paintings by Manet.⁵ As Borges says about Dante, one of the remarkable things about the text is the precision with which it is imagined (*Nueve ensayos dantescos* 88). Paul Fussell comments in *The Great War and Modern Memory* that the detail about the battlefield postcards is breathtakingly exact (183-84): British soldiers in the First World War were given postcards of this kind, in which they were allowed to fill in only certain sections.). The items in the long list are precisely imagined, at the same time that the sequence is odd: what to make,

5 In the Werfel play the hour of Maximilian's execution by firing squad is not given, but it seems to be early morning. In the Manet painting of the event, though, the light is that of the early morning or late afternoon, as shown by the long shadows. There is some uncertainty about the hour of the real event. See David Joselit, "Speedily Dispatched": "various sources unable to agree on even basic facts, such as the time of day Maximilian was shot."

for instance, of the color of the sunset in Querétaro (which, as just noted, probably evokes the execution of Maximilian) with the color of a rose in Bengal (a reference perhaps to the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, such as these lines from “The Sick-bed,” written in 1940-41: “When I look at the sky I see spreading petalled layers,/ A vast and resplendent rose”: (*Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology*, 373).⁶

The sequencing of the elements serves to make them strange—“vi el engranaje del amor y la modificación de la muerte,” for instance, focuses on the physicality of sexual intercourse and of the decay of corpses in a way that Freud’s Eros and Thanatos (which I take are being alluded to here) does not. Sex is a matter of “engranaje,” literally “gearing”: the two bodies are engaged like parts of a machine, not unlike the pistons (“émbolos”) mentioned earlier. And what to make of the two sequences in which “vi” is followed by a series of nouns: “vi racimos, nieve, tabaco, vetas de metal, vapor de agua” and “vi tigres, émbolos, bisontes, marejadas y ejércitos”? If these can somehow be construed as semantic series, what would the other terms in the sequence be? What is the design in these particular moments of “chaotic” or “heteroclitite” enumeration? Is the apparent randomness of some of the portions of the sentence itself a way of evoking (by negative means) an infinite whole? How else to put together tigers, pistons, bison, tides and waves, or clusters of grapes, snow, tobacco, veins of metal and steam?

It is worth noting that despite the parallel structure there is the great variety of syntactic structures here, with dependent clauses linked by a great variety of prepositions (de, en, a, sin, entre, desde, etc.), by conjunctions (y, como, etc.), with inset parentheses of different kinds, and with different kinds of comparisons (the same as, all those that are, all/none). There are clauses with one predicate, others with as many as five; sometimes there are whole verbal clauses in the predicates. This makes for radical changes of rhythm from clause to clause, and allows some of the clauses to be short (with a concentration on one or several things seen) and others to be quite long. In the clauses with parentheses there are miniature narratives (as when the narrator talks about his childhood fantasy that the letters in a book would jumble together during the night, and in

6 Flowers are very frequent in Tagore’s poetry; roses specifically are mentioned less often.

the terrible sequence in which the narrator learns that his beloved Beatriz Viterbo, now dead, had sexual relations with her first cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, the occupant of the house overhead, who has invited Borges to view the aleph in the basement). At the end of the long sentence, as noted already in passing, there is quite a different syntactic structure: a summation of what the narrator has seen (the universe) and what he feels about his vision.

It is also notable that some of the things seen are singular, others collective; most are concrete, but a few are very abstract. And there is no relation between the number of words used and the mass or importance of the object. For instance, in the sequence “vi en Inverness a una mujer que no olvidaré, vi la violenta cabellera, el altivo cuerpo, vi un cáncer en el pecho,” 22 words (and three of the “vi” clauses, a twelfth of the whole set) are used to describe one woman, where far fewer words (and only one “vi” clause) are used to evoke all the ants in the world.

There are anomalous details, that serve—like the barometer in *Madame Bovary*, (famously discussed by Roland Barthes in “L’Effet de réel”—as “reality effects,” isolated details that don’t connect with anything else in the series but instead are what Barthes would call a *punctum* in his book on photography. The “convex equatorial deserts,” for instance, refer to a formation in sand dunes, often concave on the leeward side and convex on the windward side. The reference to the horses running by the Caspian Sea, similarly, doesn’t seem to connect to anything else here, or to a literary referent; a colleague in the Slavic department has assured me that the shores of the Caspian Sea are indeed very windy, and an ancient race of small Caspian horses was rediscovered in 1965 (twenty years after the publication of the story), but there does not seem to be anything more precise at stake here.

A detail of a different kind is the map within the map. This refers to a famous short text, “Del rigor en la ciencia,” that Borges conjured up out of several passages in Josiah Royce, as John Durham Peters has shown eloquently and in great detail. Peters comments:

Royce’s map-within-the-map on the soil of England is an illustration of Cantor’s discovery that infinity need not sprawl off into vertiginous seriation, but can take on manageable order, specificity and determinateness.

His map is a vivid metaphor of the one-to-one mapping that is central to Cantor's set theory. (8)

He also notes, as have many other critics, that Cantor uses the symbol of the aleph to represent various degrees of infinity, thus establishing a definite connection between both the mathematical and the philosophical sources here.

Carlos Argentino Daneri is a figure of ridicule in the story; the narrator's scorn for him culminates when some "trozos argentinos" of his poem *La tierra* are published by Editorial Procusto in Buenos Aires, with an amusing reference to the Greek myth about the hotel keeper who stretched his guests, or amputated their limbs, to make them fit his beds. The reference to Argentine cultural nationalism is unmistakable: this is 1945, the fifteenth year of military rule that would culminate in the rise to power of Juan Domingo Perón the following year.. But there is also a strong local element in our sentence: mentions of the Chacarita Cemetery, the calle Soler, Adrogué, the narrator's room, as well as a reference to the Uruguayan town of Fray Bentos (on the Uruguay River across from Gualeguaychú, Argentina). Note that one of the first elements in the series is "las muchedumbres de América," which causes the translator a headache because the Spanish meaning is broader than the English. And that the next item after that, the spider web in the middle of a pyramid, acquires a New World context from its contiguity with the "Americas" (a connotation that is confirmed a few years later by a recasting of our sentence in "La escritura del dios").

The sentence is also a tour de force in its portrayal of the self, in all its vulnerability. The narrator sees eyes watching him, sees his own room empty, sees his body and bodily processes (including his intestines). He sees all the mirrors in the world and "ninguno me reflejó."⁷ There is a play with metonymy and its opposite ("vi mi dormitorio sin nadie"): not just what is contiguous but what is absent. This wounded portrayal of the self reaches its culmination near the end of the sentence when the narrator sees the obscene letters that Beatriz Viterbo had written to her first cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri: they had had sex, and the narrator (if he truly

7 In the manuscript, "ninguno me reflejaba": the hesitation in verbal aspect is eloquent of the uneasiness in the representation of the self.

sees everything) must have seen that too (which is what is implied by “el engranaje del amor”). This detail is related to the strange autobiographical trace that is recorded in the story. Borges at the time was in love with the writer Estela Canto (to whom the story is dedicated), but she famously refused to marry him without having sex beforehand, which he was unwilling or unable to do. Canto was known for declaring that the best sexual experience she had ever been with her brother, the philosopher Patricio Canto; interestingly, in the manuscript Beatriz and Carlos were initially brother and sister, before being changed into first cousins. Canto says in her book *Borges a contraluz* (1989) that Borges used the nickname “Beatriz Viterbo” to refer to her; that he should also put in the scabrous detail of her incestuous relations with her brother is, to say the least, odd. Borges uses self-inscription in this story, then, with an emphasis on pathos: just as he (or the narrator, his alter ego) is unsuccessful in literature, so he is wildly unsuccessful in love. This self-destructive aspect is mirrored in an aggressive interpellation of the reader (“tu cara”), the last element in the enumeration. If earlier the narrator had spied on Beatriz and Carlos in their intercourse, so now he spies on you, on me, on us, and we are put into the end of a series that includes cancer, sex and death, a skeleton, intestines and blood.

In the manuscript, unsurprisingly, the sentence that we have been discussing shows a great deal of work. Borges dedicated the story, as already mentioned, to Estela Canto, and gave her the manuscript; many years later, in need of money, she sold it at Sotheby’s (after telling Borges that she was going to do so and getting his approval). Spain’s National Library bought it, and it is now in Madrid; a (rather poor) facsimile edition was published by the Colegio de México, with introduction and notes by Julio Ortega and Elena del Río Parra. The manuscript is fascinating because it shows that Borges worked intensely on this sentence.⁸ There is a first version, just six clauses, on page 14:

⁸ He says to Richard Burgin: “That piece gave me great trouble, yes. I mean, I had to give a sensation of endless things in a single paragraph. Somehow I got away with it” (212).

{Vi el populoso mar, vi el alba
y la tarde, vi en un traspatio de la calle Soler las mismas baldosas que hace treinta años vi
en el zaguán de una casa en Fray Bentos, }
en un zaguán del Paso del Molino, en Montevideo,} vi convexos desiertos interminables y cada
uno de sus granos de arena, +

This is immediately followed by a second version, with many emenda-
tions, on pages 14 and the top of 15:

Vi el populoso mar, vi el alba y la tarde, vi las muchedumbres
de América, vi una plateada telaraña en el centro de una negra pirámide, vi en un traspatio
de la calle Soler las mismas baldosas que hace treinta años vi en el zaguán de una casa
silbando }

en Fray Bentos, vi naciones amando, agonizando, cantando } esperando un tren, vi convexos desier-
racimos, nieve, tabaco, vetas de . . .

tos ecuatoriales y cada uno de sus granos de arena, vi nieve, fango, sal, vetas de metal, mármol
vapor

rojo, vi en Inverness a una mujer que no olvidaré, vi su altivo cuerpo, su piel, vi un lento [?]
de agua la violenta cabellera, el altivo cuerpo, un
cáncer en el vientre, vi un

tercera
segunda

cáncer en el pecho, vi en una biblioteca de Córdoba un ejemplar de la primera edición del
Cherubinischer Wandersmann de Silesius, vi a un tiempo cada letra de cada página (de chi-
co, yo solía maravillarme de que las letras de un volumen cerrado no se mezclaran y perdieran
en el decurso de la noche), vi la noche y el día contemporáneos, vi mi dormitorio vacío, vi en
sin nadie,

Alkmaar

un gabinete de Upsala un globo terráqueo entre dos espejos que sin fin lo multiplicaban, vi
los monstruos geométricos de mi sangre,
la circulación de mi sangre, vi mi cara y mis vísceras, vi tu cara⁹

The second version is quite a bit longer than the first, with twenty “, vi”
clauses, all but one of which survive in the third and published versions.
The predicates are “sea,” “dawn, dusk,” “multitudes,” “spider-web,” “tiles,”
“nations” (this is the one that is omitted, another reference to the world
wars), “deserts,” “snow, mud, salt, veins of metal, red marble,” “woman,”

9 Unbelievably, the facsimile edition by Julio Ortega and Elena del Río Parra does
not include a full transcription of the first version of the famous sentence, or comment
on the fact that there are three versions of it. On page 67 they transcribe only the first
six clauses of the first version of the sentence, then mix together transcriptions of the
second and third versions.

“body, skin,” “water,” “hair,” “Silesius” (the book is later changed to Pliny), “letter,” “night, day,” “bedroom,” “globe,” “blood,” “my face, my viscera,” “your face.” The sentence is acquiring its final shape, including the pathetic references to the narrator and the aggressive interpellation of the reader, but without much of the latter half of the next version.

The third time, all on page 15, there is a red cross to mark off the definitive version and a series of numbers, mostly in red, that mark the order in which the elements were to be rearranged. The writing continues in the left margin (in two different directions), then at the top of the page (upside down). We don’t have a clean copy or typescript, so this is as close as we get to the final pre-publication manuscript version:

		1		2
			Vi el populoso mar, vi el	
	1	inacabables		7
alba y la tarde, vi	2	interminables ojos inmediatos	escrutándose en mí como en un espejo, vi	
		planeta	reflejó, vi }	
todos los espejos del continente y ninguno me reflejaba, vi}			una plateada telaraña en el	
	8			
centro de una negra pirámide, vi			en un traspatio de la calle Soler las mismas baldosas que	
	9			
hace treinta años vi			en el zaguán de una casa de Fray Bentos, vi	
	10		racimos, nieve, tabaco, vetas	
de metal, vapor de agua, vi			convexos desiertos ecuatoriales y cada uno de sus granos de are-	
	11			
na, vi			en Inverness a una mujer que no olvidaré, vi	
	13			
un cáncer en el pecho, vi			en una biblioteca de Lomas} un ejemplar de la primera versión ingle-	
			quinta de Adrogué}	
sa de Plinio, la de Philemon Holland, vi			a un tiempo cada letra de cada página (de chico, yo solía	
	14		maravillarme de que las letras de un volumen cerrado no se mezclaran y perdieran en el curso	
de la noche), vi			la noche y el día contemporáneos, vi	
			{una rosa en Bengala cuyo color parecía	
			{un poniente en Wind River que parecía [illeg.]	
reflejar el de un ocaso en Méjico,}	16		17 Querétaro	
reflejar el color de una rosa en Bengala,}			vi mi dormitorio sin nadie, vi	
			en un gabinete de Alkmaar un	
			lo multiplican sin fin, 19	
globo terráqueo entre dos espejos que sin fin lo multiplicaban, vi			la delicada osatura de una	
	23	bisontes		24
mano, vi			tigres, émbolos, cariatídes, tempestades y ejércitos, vi	
	30	imanes	marejadas	20
en la tierra, vi			el engranaje del amor y la modificación de la muerte, vi	
			a los sobrevivientes	

The third and most complete version includes 33 predicates (and the final “había visto” clause, with its reference to the inconceivable universe), close to the final count of 37, though the ordering is rather different. Also, notably, the culmination of the sentence, the sight of the aleph in the earth and the earth in the aleph and so forth, is absent here.

As often happens with Borges manuscripts, the second version (which is the first full one) is not terribly different from the third one, but in both versions there are alternatives, sometimes in series in brackets, sometimes one above the other. The red-haired woman in Inverness initially has uterine cancer instead of breast cancer, the book in the library is Angelus Silesius’s *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*¹⁰ instead of Pliny and the book is in Córdoba instead of Adrogué, and the globe is first in Upsala before moving to Alkmaar. Before referring to “la circulación de mi sangre” he wrote of “los monstruos geométricos de mi sangre.” And interestingly, in keeping with the “American” theme discussed earlier, before it was “all the mirrors in the planet” it was “all the mirrors in the continent.” There are a few strikethroughs with a single line and an occasional dark blot that completely covers the first version of a word or expression, but these two pages of this manuscript show for the most part that the various versions coexist, without a sure indication of which alternatives would be chosen. Michel Lafon, in his recent facsimile edition of the manuscripts of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” and “El Sur,” notes that this sort of revision is more typical of the “El Sur” manuscript (1953) than of the “Tlön” manuscript (1940), but I have seen the same sort of fan-like or arborescent structure in the “Hombre de la esquina rosada” manuscript from 1932. The principle is one of accretion and variation, with choices made at a later stage (not attested to in the manuscript itself). It should be said that in the rest of the manuscript of this story there are numerous blots and strikethroughs; the pages of our long sentence are noticeably different from the rest, showing again that Borges knew he was facing special challenges here.

We could summarize the writing process in the manuscript as follows, using columns for the three versions and a fourth column on the right for the published version:

10 Of interest in the manuscript is the hesitation about whether to refer to the first, second or third edition of this book, first published with this title in 1674 but which includes poems published in earlier books in 1657 and 1668.

sea
dawn, dusk
tiles
deserts

sea
dawn, dusk
multitudes
spider-web
tiles
nations
deserts
snow
woman
body, skin
water
hair
Silesius
letter
night, day
my bedroom
blood
my face, viscera
your face

sea
dawn, dusk
eyes
mirrors
spider-web
tiles
grapes, etc.
deserts
woman
hair, body
cancer
Pliny
letter
night, day
rose, sunset
my bedroom
study, globe
hand
tigers, etc.
ants
love, death
survivors
Tarot card
ferns
labyrinth
astrolabe
horses
obscene letters
monument
remains
blood
my face, viscera
your face

universe

sea
dawn, dusk
multitudes
spider-web
broken labyrinth
eyes
mirrors
tiles
grapes etc.
deserts
woman
hair, body
cancer
dry soil
Pliny
letter
night, day
sunset, rose
my bedroom
study, globe
horses
hand
survivors
Tarot card
ferns
tigers etc.
ants
astrolabe
obscene letters
monument
remains
blood
love, death
Aleph, earth etc.
my face, viscera
your face

universe

In “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote,” Borges’s narrator mentions Menard’s handwriting: “Recuerdo sus cuadernos cuadriculados, sus negras tachaduras, sus peculiares símbolos tipográficos y su letra de insecto” (OC 450). These are all features of Borges’s own handwriting and his writing practices, as we can see here with the use of geometrical symbols that signal insertions. “El Aleph” was written on graph paper, as mentioned in “Pierre Menard,” and there are “negras tachaduras” (but not on the two pages of the manuscript that I have shown you) as well as Borges’s characteristically tiny handwriting.

The numbered items in the long enumeration show that the sequence was modified considerably even after the third version, with items 3, 4 and 6 inserted at one point, item 5 inserted in their midst, items 12 and 18 moved quite radically in location in the sentence, and modifications affecting items 23, 24 and 30. These changes imply that the decision to put the New World into the beginning of the sentence was a late and important decision. We should also note the process of composition of the end of the sentence that greatly resembles Borges’s ways of writing a poem:

y lloré, porque mis ojos habían visto ese objeto secreto y
 conjetural, cuyo nombre usurpan los hombres, pero q. ningún
 hombre ha mirado, <el querido universo. + hablo del universo>
 : el inconcebible
 universo.

The “revision narrative,” as John Bryant calls it, shows a particular attention, then, to the beginning and the ending of the sentence, but with many adjustments in the middle also.

I have already mentioned Fussell’s discussion of the battlefield postcards. A similar detail, left out of the story, talks of nations loving, organizing, whistling or singing in train stations: this recalls the mass mobilizations of 1914, referred to obliquely in “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” and “Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto,” as I have argued elsewhere, or perhaps to the more immediate experience of the Second World War, which as already noted had just ended when the story was written. This is interesting because the “nations loving” in the second version of the sentence is the only element that does not survive in subsequent versions: everything else from the first version survives in the second and subsequent ones, from the second the same,

from the third the same. The sentence is built by accretion, with significant rewriting and rearranging: the vision expands but does not fundamentally change. In fact, this practice is true even here, since one detail that evokes the First World War is replaced by another. There are other. Other details in the manuscript that are omitted in the published version are the references to Paso del Molino, a Montevideo neighborhood, to mud (“fango”), and to Wind River (an area in Wyoming near Yellowstone where Sacajawea is buried), but these confirm the rule: there are displacements and substitutions, but not (to take another concept from Freud) condensation.

Importantly, the climax of the sentence is not in the manuscript at all: the phrase when the narrator sees the world in the aleph and the aleph in the world and so on. The mirroring effect is mentioned twice earlier in the sentence, but the actual vision of the vertiginous images within images within images is added at some moment between the manuscript and the published version. The manuscript allows us, then, to confirm the importance of the sentence, which Borges worked on three times in close succession, making further modifications (including the addition of the brilliant climax) between the manuscript stage and the probable typescript.

Borges revisits this sentence from 1945 twice more, at four year intervals: in “La escritura del dios” (1949) and, in the last story he wrote before his blindness, “El Sur” (1953).¹¹ Significantly, then, a writer who became internationally famous after he went blind, and who wrote numerous texts about blindness, writes brilliantly here about things seen. “I saw . . . I saw . . . I saw”: the subject who sees is still in the darkness, while the things of the world make themselves manifest. It is interesting that the character who most resembles Borges the writer (Dahlmann in the 1953 story “El Sur”) has a rather prosaic vision that is related in the third person, unlike the ecstatic total visions of “Borges,” the narrator of “El Aleph,” or the Mayan priest Tzinacán in “La escritura del dios.” Borges is distancing himself from mystical experience, or narrating it in a prosaic way (something he admired in Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell*). And it is also noteworthy that

11 He also used the same construction in “La muerte y la brújula” in 1943: “Vio perros, vio un furgón en una vía muerta, vio el horizonte, vio un caballo plateado que bebía el agua crapulosa de un charco” (OC 304). Note in this case the concreteness of all of the things seen.

in 1945 the subject is an unhappy man and unsuccessful writer named Borges, who speaks in a first person singular that evokes the experiences of the author; in 1949 he is a Maya priest in a Spanish jail, who speaks in the first person singular of a mystical experience that is highly coded in accord with the hermetic traditions of his culture; in 1953 he is an Argentine librarian named Juan Dahlmann who is spoken about, but who does not himself speak in his own voice in the story.

In the case of the Maya priest, Tzinacán, his vision follows the same syntactic structure, but is spread over several paragraphs and numerous sentences:

Vi la cara y las manos del carcelero, la roldana, el cordel, la carne y los cántaros. . . .

. . . Yo vi una Rueda altísima, que no estaba delante de mis ojos, ni detrás, ni a los lados, sino en todas partes, a un tiempo. . . . Vi el universo y vi los íntimos designios del universo. Vi los orígenes que narra el Libro del Común. Vi las montañas que surgieron del agua, vi los primeros hombres de palo, vi las tinajas que se volvieron contra los hombres, vi los perros que les destrozaron las caras. Vi el dios sin cara que hay detrás de los dioses. Vi infinitos procesos que formaban una sola felicidad y, entendiéndolo todo, alcancé también a entender la escritura del tigre. (OC 598-99)

Here, the anaphoric structure of the vision suggests mystical rapture, with a number of specific esoteric images that have to do with Mayan traditions as recorded in the *Popol Vuh*, as I discussed in detail in *Out of Context*. Note that the end of the passage circles back in summation, like the end of the long sentence in “El Aleph,” to comment on the narrator’s having glimpsed the totality.

In the case of “El Sur”, Juan Dahlmann, who is even more an alter ego of Borges than the “Borges” of “El Aleph,” has a vision is almost cinematic, as he sees flashes of the pampa from a train going south from Buenos Aires:

Vio casas de ladrillo sin revocar, esquinadas y largas, infinitamente mirando pasar los trenes; vio jinetes en los terrosos caminos; vio zanjas y lagunas y hacienda; vio largas nubes luminosas que parecían de mármol, y todas esas cosas eran casuales, como sueños de la llanura. (OC 527)

Here the sequence is much closer to the conventions of literary realism: these are actual things seen from the train (unless Dahlmann is dream-

ing them in the hospital); the only oddities are the houses looking at the trains and the comparison of the bright clouds to marble.¹² In the Borges fantastic story which is most resolutely an either/or proposition—Dahlmann goes to the south or Dahlmann dreams of a trip to the south while dying in a Buenos Aires hospital—the realist details anchor the experience of what the reader is probably persuaded is an actual trip. (The dream details mostly come later.) It is interesting that the character who most resembles Borges the writer has a rather prosaic vision that is related in the third person, unlike the ecstatic total visions of “Borges,” the narrator of “El Aleph,” or Tzinacán in “La escritura del dios.” Borges is distancing himself from mystical experience, or narrating it in a prosaic way (something he admired in Swedenborg’s *De coelo et de inferno*).

Borges says, after seeing the vision in the aleph and when he is preparing to narrate what he saw:

Arribo, ahora, al inefable centro de mi relato; empieza, aquí, mi desesperación de escritor. Todo lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos cuyo ejercicio presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten; ¿cómo transmitir a los otros el infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca? Los místicos, en análogo trance, prodigan los emblemas. . . . Quizá los dioses no me negarían el hallazgo de una imagen equivalente, pero este informe quedaría contaminado de literatura, de falsedad. Por lo demás, el problema central es irresoluble: la enumeración, siquiera parcial, de un conjunto infinito. En ese instante gigantesco, he visto millones de actos deleitables o atroces; ninguno me asombró como el hecho de que todos ocuparan el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es. (OC 624-25)

Borges’s brilliant solution to this problem is the sentence we have been examining, the longest and one of the most memorable in his work. A pertinent word in the passage I just quoted is “informe,” “report”: the solution he finds is certainly “literary” (and thus contaminated with artifice), but it is also composed within the codes of realism, without metaphor, and in a fairly plain style, at least if one looks at the individual clauses (rather than at the baroque whole). The effect of the 37 “vi” clauses is brilliantly suggestive of the “millions” of things seen (or even of an infinity of

12 The reference to marble is displaced from the first version of the long sentence in “El Aleph,” though it disappeared from the second version (and the published one).

things seen), while the single long sentence, with its wavering bits of description and narration, sharp changes of rhythm, doubling back on itself, and a tone that is at once very personal and startlingly objective, achieves the challenge of an effect of simultaneity, despite the successive nature of language.

Daniel Balderston
University of Pittsburgh

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