

# Discovering the Infinite: Borges's 'The Aleph' and its Implications for Argentine Literature

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## ABSTRACT

In perhaps his most famous short story “*The Aleph*,” Argentine Jorge Luis Borges presents a captivating narrative spectacle: through a magical, shining square on a basement staircase one experiences the infinite universe. While previous scholarly analysis has focused on the story’s literary references, concepts of spatiality, and connection with the mathematical infinity, the story’s implications for Borges’s attitude towards Argentine literature and cultural traditions have been overlooked. This paper argues that through curating the “Aleph” ---a symbolic reflection of infinity, Borges stages two contrasting views on writing about the world and understanding its entirety. Borges suggests that rather than reining experience with established forms, writers (not only Argentine writers) ought to seek their own consciousness and imagination as a means to understand the infinitely diverse and ever-changing world.

## Introduction

“The Aleph’s diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished...for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object: unimaginable universe” (Borges, 14). Yes, this is the complicated description of the “Aleph” in Louis Borges’s eponymous story, *The Aleph*, where the narrator encounters a small opening on the wall that reflects the entire universe. This is also where the story reaches its climax, in which all descriptions about the Aleph burst out in a magnificent long sentence.

In the short story “The Aleph,” Borges dedicates a long and exhaustive paragraph to describe the infinite things in the universe the narrator senses and experiences through Aleph. From straightforward, natural sceneries like “the teeming sea” to complex and abstract concepts like “the coupling of love and the modification of death”, Borges manages to create a feeling of “infinity“ by juxtaposing irrelevant objects and experiences together. However, this spectacle appears only quite late in the story, upsetting the narrator to such a degree that he chooses to forget this experience entirely. How to understand such an enigmatic appearance in this story? Earlier scholarship focuses on Borges’s implied yet unannounced reference of Dante Alighieri, thus reading “the Aleph” as Borges issuing his take on how poetics can produce a sense of “all-inclusiveness” without enumerating (Thiem, 117). Building on the research within literary history, more recent scholars explored the contrasting depictions of “the Aleph” and interpreted them as one’s complex connection—at once objective, numerical and subjective, personal---to physical locations (Richardson, 19). The current scholarship, nevertheless, would benefit from a close examination of infinity represented in the Aleph, and how it links back with Borges’s attitude of Argentine literature and its relationship with cultural traditions. The Aleph, lying in a basement in Buenos Aires, with all time and space folded neatly in a shining square, provides infinite source of rich material for poetic creation. How would a writer react to it? How should a writer react to it? I argue that the Aleph itself is not only a narrative spectacle, but also a symbolic reflection of infinity. Through this

“infinity,” Borges, in essence, is discussing two different views to write about the world and to conceive of its entirety. In this paper, I reference this view as worldview.

Highlighting on Borges’s literary imagination of the world is a strong strand of Borges and Latin American literary criticism. Issues related to the periphery and the center have often been raised in recent years. For example, scholar Héctor Hoyos, in his *Beyond Bolaño: The Global Latin American Novel*, raised the concept of “globality” in lieu of Borges fiction, arguing that Borges’ alternate imagination of the globe (“a broadening consciousness of the world as a whole”) deserves having him placed at the focus of literary research and discussion (Hoyos, 2). However, my paper asks, what is and how could we achieve this “consciousness of the world as a whole” without factoring in how infinitely diverse, infinitely private is this world? To conceive of the world is not to assume a given model of the earth. Rather, as I argue from a close reading of *The Aleph*, it is only possible to understand the world through experiencing, thus conceiving of infinity through one’s lived, personal experience. In other words, Borges implies that it is only possible to understand such a huge concept from the tiniest units : each living, seeing, and feeling individual.

## **The first worldview: Carlos and the European masters**

At the beginning of the story, Borges introduces Carlos Argentino, a poetry amateur who believes that the entire world can be captured and represented through poetry, rendering actual experiences unnecessary. However, Borges critiques this worldview through the narrator's growing impatience with Carlos's endless self-boasting and his poetic ideal. While the narrator initially appreciates the conception of panoramic epic, exemplified by the reference of *Polyolbion*, a topographical epic, he soon highlights the limitations and mediocrity of Carlos's work. Through Carlos's exaggerated self-praise and reliance on European literary traditions, Borges satirizes the overdependence on Western influences in Argentine literature. In a way, Carlos becomes a symbol of this overreliance, preventing him from comprehending the infinity represented by the *Aleph* and hindering his ability to create a truly panoptic poem of the diverse world.

When we first encounter Carlos in the story, his over-arrogance saturates the entire conversation he has with the narrator. After a few drinks, he excitedly remarks that “actual travel was superfluous” in modern society; he refuses to experience the world, while he proudly reveals to the narrator that he has been working on an unprecedented, encompassing epic entitled *The Earth*. In this poem, he hopes to describe every phenomenon and object in this globe, but believes that experiencing these things in real person is entirely superfluous. He claims that modern man is “supplied with telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, wireless sets, motion-picture screens, slide projectors, glossaries, timetables, handbooks, bulletins” (Borges, 5). For Carlos, the transformation modernity brings has decidedly transformed man’s relation to the globe: “nowadays, the mountain came to the modern Mohammed.” For him, modern innovations have rendered individual interactions with the real world unnecessary---the globe shrinks into a miniature through the magic looking glass. For him, to “see” is enough to understand.

However, Borges shows his reservation about this worldview as the narrator gradually find it difficult to hide his impatience over Carlos’s poetic ideal. At first, the narrator approves of the idea of inclusive poetry, that he “has had occasion to look into the fifteen thousand alexandrines of the *Polyolbion*, that topographical epic in which Michael Drayton recorded the flora, fauna, hydrography, orography, military and monastic history of England ”(Borges, 7). Here, Borges enumerates plenty of facets of a country that are included and represented in the *Polyolbion*, indicating how thorough, exhaustive, and achieved the poem is and describes it as a “topographical epic.” Here, the use of “epic” evokes the fundamental and exemplary genre often regarded as the essential genre of literature. Not every work has

its merits to be described as an “epic.” Therefore, for the narrator to describe the poem *Polybion* as an “epic” itself is extolling the poem as a respected literary work.

However, all the accolades from the narrator are soon overshadowed by a sudden twist. Following the mention of *Polybion*, Borges implies from the narrator’s perspective that “this limited but bulky production is less boring than Carlos Argentino’s similar vast undertaking”(Borges, 7). Even if the *Polybion*, the venerable epic, is described as a limited production, let alone that of Carlos’s work. Voicing the narrator’s disapproval, Borges is setting a contrast to further satirize and criticize the work of Carlos Argentino and the epistemologies it represents. Moreover, after Carlos reads a short passage of his tedious and mediocre poem and makes extravagant explications, the narrator thinks of the poem as “nothing remarkable” (Borges, 6). He realizes that “modern art demands the balm of laughter, the scherzo”(Borges, 6). He judges the poet as a scherzo, which further shows that he thinks of Carlos as a ludicrous poet. All these inner monologues of the narrator reflect the absurdity of Carlos, and more importantly, the impossibility of Carlos’s aim to describe the Earth. Through this, the narrator is repudiating the worldview of Carlos, who holds that to “record” is enough to represent.

Besides the content of the poem *The Earth*, Borges also depicts the pretentious personality of Carlos to magnify the absurdity of Carlos. Borges achieves this ironically. As a poet, Carlos is always strenuous in showing the artistry and literariness of his work. In part of his verdict to his own poem, he fatuously compliments, “The second flows from Homer to Hesiod (generous homage, at the very outset, to the father of didactic poetry), not without rejuvenating a process whose roots go back to Scripture — enumeration, congeries, conglomeration”(Borges, 6). Here, for an extensive analysis of his own poem, he invokes nothing of his feelings, his thoughts, and his lived experience, but merely empty forms of the European literary tradition. It is implied in his speech that if one is to write poetry one must adhere to the “great fathers of literature.” Here, in subjugating his own work to that of Homer, Hesiod, and the Scripture, Carlos announces his work a vessel of the European literary tradition.

What is more at stake here, is that the description of the ridiculous Carlos and his fervent dedication to the Masters echoes Borges's critique of an overdependence and “superstition” of the Western cultural tradition in Argentine literature. In his examination of what constitutes the “Argentine tradition,” Borges answers that “I think our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition” (qtd. in Sarlo 28). However, as Borges immediately emphasizes, what makes a cultural subgroup “outstanding” is to “act within that culture and, at the same time, do not feel tied to it by any special devotion.” Thus, to work in the rich Western poetic tradition does not mean that one must take such traditional standards canonical. To understand one’s work, like Carlos relates to his, purely in terms of how many Western tradition he evokes, runs far against Borge’s standard of great poetry. Just like Borges adds later, that one can write with and maybe benefit from the European tradition without developing a “superstition” to it. In fact, as Beatriz Sarlo further comments on Borges’s understanding, “The fabric of Argentine literature is woven with the threads of all cultures, our marginal situation can be the source of our true originality. It is not based on local colour (which binds the imagination to empiricist control) but on the open acceptance of influences”(Sarlo, 28). Thus, the amateur Carlos comes off not merely as a poet with insufficient talent, but more as a symbolic representation of such poetic overreliance on European influences. To put this detail in the context of the infinity discussion, we could find that it is exactly this limited reliance prevents Carlos from comprehending the infinity the Aleph endows him with, that he fails to compose a truly panoptic poem of the infinitely diverse world. Regretfully, Carlos’s lens of European literary tradition also blinds him from the marvelous potential of the Aleph to literally, show him the world.

As the narrator becomes ever more bored with Carlos's empty flaunt of literary techniques, Borges pours his ink on the narrator's disapproving, even sarcastic commentary to further intensify the figure of Carlos. After meeting with Carlos, the narrator is thinking "Once more I've come to realize that modern art demands the balm of laughter, the scherzo," which expresses his scorn. Carlos's flamboyant attitude towards his own literary work forms a sharp contrast with the narrator's dismissive attitude. Therefore, with the help of the narrator, Borges is denying Carlos's literary work and even his personality. This absurd poet figure further refutes the worldview of Carlos.

## **The contrasting worldview: Borges and the consciousness inward**

Of course, Borges does not only critique. In *The Aleph*, Borges provides another way to conceive of infinity from the perspective of the narrator. The narrator believes that the infinite universe cannot be described but can only be comprehended. This worldview comes out most strongly when the narrator attempts to describe what he sees through the Aleph. From the surface, the Aleph is inconspicuous. It situates in the stairs of a dusted, dark basement, and it is only "a small iridescent sphere", while "all space was there in Aleph, actual and undiminished" (Borges, 13). Here, Borges sets a drastic contrast between the size of the Aleph and the size of the universe inside. His emphasis to such contrast is so extreme that he doesn't bother to drive it home with these absolute qualifiers: "all," "actual" and "undiminished." Although it is a small sphere, it contains the entirety of space, tying the Aleph closely with the perplexing, "infinite-finite" characteristic of infinity. In other words, an infinite set is supposedly limited, but it nevertheless retains within it an endless array of numbers. What's more, at the postscript of *The Aleph*, Borges further expounds on the nature of the Aleph, describing it is a "pure and boundless godhead," a "man pointing to both heaven and earth," a "symbol of transfinite numbers" (Borges, 16). The words "boundless," "both heaven and earth," and "transfinite" all show the infinity nature of the Aleph within a limited shape. Therefore, the Aleph can be seen as the symbolic representation of infinity—an infinite universe we cohabit.

Once the narrator has seen the Aleph in his own way, Borges wields an elaborate paragraph to further accentuate the infinite nature of Aleph through the worldview of the narrator. Granted, Carlos cannot understand the infinity. But how could another understand? How could Borges demonstrate this comprehension? In this long sentence which constitutes a paragraph, Borges, through the voice of the narrator, displays a conjunction of imageries, motions, sounds, sentiments from various corners of the world with isochronism, multidimensionality, and randomness. What's more, he again emphasizes the paradoxical nature of infinity: the limitlessness of Aleph and the limit of words.

"What my eyes beheld was simultaneous" (Borges, 13) reflects the isochronism. Here, the term isochronism means that all the events take place at the same time, which makes the universe difficult to describe because language has the characteristic of successive. "The teeming sea," "daybreak and nightfall," and "the coupling of love and the modification of death" (Borges, 13) illustrate the multidimensionality. "The teeming sea" is a three-dimensional physical entity, "daybreak and nightfall" is a four-dimensional process, while "the coupling of love and the modification of death" is a non-existing abstract concept. Because things come from various dimensions all exist in the universe, it is abstruse to comprehend, let alone describing it within words. Irrelevant imageries, such as "tigers, pistons, bison, tides, and armies" (Borges, 13) show the randomness. Lacking predictable orders, these images, like a montage of video recordings from everywhere, plays at once. Here, from "tigers" to "armies," there is no regularities, which further marks the randomness of the universe. As the universe cannot be logically predicted, it is thus impossible to describe. All those factors together lead the narrator to think that he "can't translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass," and "this account would become contaminated by literature,

by fiction” (Borges, 13), which denotes that the narrator believes that limited words are unable to summarize the infinite universe. Those views not only express that the narrator sees the universe as infinity, but he also believes that infinity cannot be described, but can only be comprehended.

It is this “comprehension” that is key here. As Richardson puts it:

“These statements present the human condition as one in which we as creatures who exist in an infinite universe live out our lives in terms of a sequence of individual experiences. What we perceive is a set of unique and unrepeatable phenomena, and so the role of the perceiver is crucial. If the external world will not make itself amenable to generalization, then what matters is our own experience of those phenomena, and each such experience is different; is, in effect, an event in itself.”

Indeed, it is this role of the “perceiver” makes any perception of “a world” possible. Even if one is served with all footages from everywhere in the world (like Carlos), without experience, without emotion, without personal memory of the world one could only yield a regurgitation of established forms. Like Carlos, a writer’s infinite imagination based on his infinite material (the Aleph) is cut short by an overreliance of European norms.

At the end of the story, Borges further drives this idea home, that Aleph functions only as a coincidence to invite ways of looking and writing. Despite the vividness of this “infinity,” Borges hints at the spurious existence of “the Aleph” by referencing various legends and folktales. In various sources, there exists a crystal, a cup, a mirror, a spear that all function as Aleph, that one can see “infinity” through it. Interestingly, all these “Alephs” either contain a reflective surface, inviting gaze and representation. These referenced “Alephs” are thus meaningful only in their metaphoric existence as a lens through which a writer observes the world. What’s more, invoking the action of “seeing” into another medium and seeing reflections of oneself, Aleph exists whenever people start to experience the world with the awareness of oneself. Here, it is reasonable to believe that Borges is reminding writers to tap into their own experience of the world and recreate their respective, marvelous “Aleph.”

The Aleph, in the end, could also be read as a metaphor for a consciousness turned inward. In recounting his experience seeing the infinity through Aleph, the narrator’s minds construct the universe consciously. “I saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph, I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth; I saw my own face and my own bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon — the unimaginable universe”(Borges, 14). To the narrator, the Aleph is the reflection of his mind and, moreover, the projection of human mind and the universe itself. In the Aleph, the reappearance of memories, the feeling of reality and the illusion of the future intertwine. This not only shows the infinity and eternity of the universe, but also the profundity and richness of human minds. Through the symbolic image of Aleph, minds of human beings and the entire universe are integrated, reflecting each other. It helps the narrator realize the existence of human and explore his own position and the value of life. Along the same vein, in Borges’s narrative spectacle, we see his encouragements for readers, for writers to tap into the infinite imagination.

Therefore, "The Aleph" by Jorge Luis Borges stands as a profound exploration of infinity, Argentine literature, and the act of writing. Through the enigmatic symbol of the Aleph, Borges transcends the boundaries of time and space, simultaneity and linearity, while inviting readers to ponder the infinite diversities inherent in our existence. In a way, the Aleph also becomes a metaphor for the literary tradition of Argentina, encapsulating the multitude of voices,

limitless imagination, and multicultural perspectives that shape its rich cultural heritage. Just like Beatriz Sarlo observes, Borges's writing "belongs to a frontier between Europe and America; it reveals distances and transformations, in the same way in which the inscription of writing separates the spaces of the Borges, from the spaces of life" (Sarlo, 49). Straddling the lines, "The Aleph" serves as a commentary on the act of writing itself. It explores the inherent limitations of language in capturing the infinite complexity of human experience and seeks to transcend those limitations through the power of imagination. With isochronism, multidimensionality, and randomness, Borges challenges the linear line of the writing system, inviting the readers to reflect the paradoxical nature of writing, which simultaneously reflects and distorts reality, blurring the line between truth and fiction.

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