

The Aleph and the Labyrinth

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Abstract: In “The Aleph and the Labyrinth” I begin by chronicling Borges’ early readings of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which were a prologue to his lifelong fascination with this novel. In particular, Borges saw in *Ulysses* yet another attempt to write the “total book”: an attempt doomed to failure, perhaps, but nevertheless heroic. In the light of *Ulysses*, Borges explored this ambition in “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote”, “The Library of Babel”, “Funes, His Memory” and particularly “El Aleph”; and offered his faulty and fragmentary reading of Joyce’s text as a metaphor for our equally – and fatally – faulty and fragmentary knowledge of the universe.

Borges was, if we believe his claim, the first writer of the Spanish language to read *Ulysses*:

I am the first traveler from the Hispanic world to set foot upon the shores of *Ulysses*, a lush wilderness already traversed by Valéry Larbaud, who traced its dense texture with the impeccable precision of a mapmaker. I will speak of it with the license my admiration lends me and with the murky intensity of those ancient explorers who described lands new to their nomadic amazement, and whose stories about the Amazons and the City of the Caesars combined truth and fantasy. (*TL* 12)¹

This was written in 1925, in an article entitled “Joyce’s *Ulysses*”. The previous year Borges had attempted what might be the first translation of a fragment of this wild continent: the last two pages of Molly Bloom’s monologue. If we consider *Ulysses* was published in 1922, this was quite precocious indeed, and the young Borges had perhaps the right to boast.

Of course, when claiming he had read *Ulysses*, he had to face the inevitable question all self-proclaimed *Ulysses* readers sooner or later have to face, even today: yes, I know, so have I, but have you read it *all*? Have you been able to *finish* it? Borges confessed he hadn’t, “and yet”, he said, “I know what it is, with that bold and legitimate certainty with which we assert our knowledge of a city, without ever having been rewarded with the intimacy of all the many streets it includes.” (*TL* 12)

Applied to any other novel, this might seem to some of you an easy way out, some kind of coy joke or *boutade*. But when pertaining to *Ulysses*, it becomes the perspicacious exposition of a method. The best way to read novels like *Ulysses*, or to get to know a city you are new to, is to get lost in them, to wander around, to walk the same streets again and again and ignore others altogether. One of Borges's finest stories, if not his finest, suggests that we can better know the universe by falling in love with one of its corners than by attempting to embrace the whole. That story is "The Aleph", and I will return to it later, as one of my contentions today is that without the example of Joyce's enterprise this story in particular might never have come into being.

But coming down to the hard facts, to the rock of Scylla as Joyce would have it, the fact is that Borges never read *Ulysses* in its entirety. Later in life, he even wondered if anybody else had: "One understands *Ulysses* is some kind of microcosm, right? And that it encompasses the whole world... Of course it is pretty long, and I don't think anybody has read it. Many have analyzed it, of course, but as to reading it from beginning to end, I don't think anybody has" he joked in a book of conversations with Osvaldo Ferrari in 1984, when he was 85.

And yet, and yet, Argentine literature has been a dedicated reader of *Ulysses*. Thanks to Borges we were off to an early start, and we persevered. For one thing, *Ulysses* was translated into Spanish for the first time in Buenos Aires: the José Salas Subirat version was published in 1945. And if I had to choose the foreign language novel that most influenced Argentine literature in the twentieth century, that novel would certainly be *Ulysses*. So, now returning to Borges: How did *he* read *Ulysses*? What did he see in it? Or, better still, since writers will never be innocent readers, what did he want from *Ulysses*, what did he take from it? Not, certainly, any of the Joycean styles or procedures. Borges was not given to parody or pastiche, at least when writing on his own: when writing with his close friend and colleague Adolfo Bioy Casares, he certainly indulged this repressed gift.

But what about the first half of *Ulysses*? What about those pages which, if aught that the imagination or the hand of Joyce has wrought in language, deserves to be called Joycean style, shall be called Joycean style? What about interior monologue, what about the painstaking recording of the minutiae of perception? Borges more than once spoke about the difference between the "style of reality", which in his opinion better suits the novel, and the "style of memory", which tended towards economy of language and detail, to the "persistence of isolated features", which better suits the kind of short story he practiced. What he calls the "style of reality" might be better termed "the style of perception": this style reached its apotheosis in *Ulysses*, a novel written in real time, and later in the French school of the *nouveau roman* (anticipated in what we might call the objectivist sections of the "Ithaca" chapter). The style of memory, on the other hand, arises not from the immediacy of perception but from the more or less passive interplay of memory and oblivion. If I were asked, for example, to put this room into words, and I tried to do it while sitting here, I could go on for ages and ages, and pages and pages,

I wouldn't know where to stop. But if I let a week pass, and then give it a try, I might be able to construct a picture of it with a few strokes: a picture that would be synthetic, as the style of memory usually is, rather than analytical – as befits the style of perception. Borges always veered towards the former, and in his essay “New Refutation of Time”, he equates this simplifying power of memory with that of night: “Night is pleasing to us because, like memory, it erases idle details”(OI 187) In the poem “The Night They Held His Wake in the South”, he wrote “the night / that lifts the greatest sorrow from us / the prolixity of the real.”(OC 88)

Of course, all this talk about the economy of memory becomes meaningless babble if you are Funes. In case you haven't read the wonderful Borges story “Funes, His Memory”, it is about a man, a gaucho from the Uruguayan pampas, who after being thrown from his horse and becoming crippled, discovers he has acquired a perfect memory, backed by a preternatural perception of all things. Funes could recover “the forms in the clouds in the southern sky on the morning of April 30, 1882, and he could compare them in his memory with the veins in the marbled binding of a book he had seen only once, or with the feathers of spray lifted by an oar on the Río Negro on the eve of the Battle of Quebracho. [...] Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day; he had never once erred or faltered, but each reconstruction had itself taken an entire day.” (CF 135) (A very Joycean feat!). If Funes had taken to writing, his “style of memory” would have been even more abundant and prolix than Joyce's style of perception, just as Proust's “style of memory” sometimes threatens to be; and as a matter of fact I've never been able to help seeing in Funes a Borgesian joke on Proust.

When I wrote another draft of this essay, some years ago, I was very pleased with myself at having made this connection between Funes and Joyce. I later came across a 1941 piece entitled “A Fragment on Joyce”, a piece not included in Borges' *Complete Works*: “My story's magical *compadrito* [i.e. Funes] may be called a precursor of the coming race of supermen, a partial Zarathustra of the outskirts of Buenos Aires; indisputably, he is a monster. I have evoked him because a consecutive, straightforward reading of the four hundred thousand words of *Ulysses* would require similar monsters. (I will not venture to speak of what *Finnegans Wake* would demand; for me, its readers are no less inconceivable than C. H. Hinton's fourth dimension or the trinity of Nicaea.)” (TL 220). This is the problem with Borges: every time you discover something new about him, you eventually find out he had discovered it before you.

This “prolixity of the real” was anathema to Borges the writer, but was celebrated by Borges the reader. In his 1925 piece he defines Joyce as “a millionaire of words and styles.” (Knowing Joyce as we do, perhaps it would be better to amend “millionaire” to “spendthrift”), and compared him to the Elizabethan dramatists: “In Joyce's unrelenting examination of the tiniest details that constitute consciousness, he stops the flow of time and defers its movement with a pacifying gesture contrary to the impatient goading of the English drama, which encloses the life of its heroes in the narrow, thrusting rush of a few crowded hours. If Shakespeare – to use his own metaphor – invested in the

turning of the hourglass the exploits of many years, Joyce inverts the procedure and unfolds his hero's single day into many days upon the reader." (*TL* 13). And in his "A History of Eternity" after expounding the conception of a Christian eternity, which contains everything that is, has been, and will be, not only in actuality but in potentiality (that is, all the things that might have happened or might happen in the future), he compares it to Joyce's novel: "Unlike the Platonic eternities, whose greatest danger is tedium, this one [i.e. the Christian eternity] runs the risk of resembling the final pages of *Ulysses*, or even the preceding chapter, the enormous interrogation." (*TL* 134).

So, we have it that Borges didn't make use of the stylistic experiments (which doesn't mean he didn't admire them), nor the interior monologue, nor the minute realism. So what was it that so fascinated him about *Ulysses* and its author, what was it that led him to write "Invocation to Joyce" (*SP* 287):

Scattered in scattered capitals,
Solitary and many,
We played at being the first Adam
Who gave names to things [...]
We were imagism, cubism,
The conventicles and sects
That the credulous universities venerate.
You, meanwhile, forged
In the cities of exile [...]
The weapon of your art,
You raised your arduous labyrinths,
Infinitesimal and infinite,
Admirably ignoble,
More populous than history.
We shall have died without having made out
The biform beast or rose
Which are the center of your labyrinth [...]
What does our cowardice matter if there is on earth
A single valiant man,
What does sadness matter if there was in time
Somebody who called himself happy,
What does my lost generation matter,
That vague mirror,
If your books justify it.
I am the others. I am all those
Whom your obstinate rigor has redeemed.
I am those you do not know and those you continue to save.

What Borges most admired was the sheer magnitude and ambition of Joyce's enterprise. Borges was always haunted by the mirage of the total book, a book that could incorporate all of reality without reduction or simplification, a book that could be

considered a complete picture of the universe as we know it. Borges' imagination of this textual totality took two forms: one is that of the book that is literally infinite, a book whose every page divides into two pages, which in turn divide into two, infinitely: this is the Book of Sand. The other one is the Library of Babel, an imaginary universe of bookshelves that exhausts all the possible combinations of the letters in the books included in it, that is, all the possible books that can be written in all possible languages.

Borges liked to imagine large literary objects. He toyed with the idea of a book that could be seen as a mirror of the universe. But such a book exists, in approximate form at least: it is the encyclopedia. Borges' lifelong fascination with encyclopedias, which began in his childhood, would eventually lead him to imagine, in his story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" an encyclopedia about an imaginary planet named Tlön, so complete, exhaustive and well written that humanity chooses to forget this reality and inhabit the one imagined by the encyclopedists. The idea that art can provide images of reality more vivid and lasting than reality itself was not alien to Joyce, and it actually reminds me of what happened to me on my first visit to Dublin: I could only see it in terms of *Ulysses*, and whenever a new building or feature was pointed out to me, all I wanted to know was "but is it in *Ulysses*?" If it wasn't, I walked on, almost indignantly you might say.

Back to Borges, then. Just as he was captivated by the encyclopedia, he was also thrilled by the idea of a book of fiction, a poem or a novel, that could also be an encyclopedia. Closest in time was the example of *Ulysses*; but the original model was, for Borges, Dante's *Commedia*. In the prologue to his *Nine Dantesque Essays* he writes:

Imagine, in an Oriental library, a panel painted many centuries ago. It may be Arabic, and we are told that all the legends of *The Thousand and One Nights* are represented on its surface; it may be Chinese, and we learn that it illustrates a novel that has hundreds or thousands of characters [...] The day declines, the light is wearing thin and as we go deeper into the carved surface we understand that there is nothing on earth that is not there. What was, is, and shall be, the history of past and future, the things I have had and those I will have, all of it awaits us somewhere in this serene labyrinth... I have fantasized a magical work, a panel that is also a microcosm: Dante's poem is that panel whose edges enclose the universe. (*TL* 267)

This description brings to mind Borges' most famous invention, the Aleph, that "point in space that contains all other points", but with an important difference: the Aleph contains all points in space but not all points in time, it shows you neither the past nor the future, but the present state of the universe. Those of you who have read the story will remember that this magical mirror of the universe was in possession of one Carlos Argentino Daneri, whose surname is a collapsed version of Dante Alighieri. This

Argentine Dante is a poet as well, and since he owns the Aleph, he has decided to use it as a source of inspiration and information in the writing of an ambitious poem entitled *The Earth*. When Borges – I mean the character named Borges in the story – visits him, he has completed, or rather “dispatched several hectares of the state of Queensland, more than a kilometer of the course of the Ob, a gasworks north of Veracruz, the leading commercial establishments on the parish of Concepción, Mariana Cambaceres de Alvear’s villa on Calle Once de Setiembre in Belgrano, and a Turkish bath not far from the famed Brighton Aquarium.” (CF 277).

The other problem with Daneri is that he is a very bad poet, exquisitely bad, as a matter of fact. To this we should add his plodding, unimaginative method of composition. Daneri is systematic in the worst sense of the word, and seems never to have heard of synecdoche or ellipsis: his idea of depicting the universe is to take the Aleph and say: “O.K., today I’ll devote myself to the city of Córdoba. Let’s see, I’ll take the University first. Hmm... what classroom shall I begin with?”

In history, this total book or “poem unlimited” was attempted many times: perhaps every age needs to write its own. It was the *Commedia* in the fourteenth century, Michael Drayton’s *Polyalbion* in the XVIth, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in the nineteenth century, and *Ulysses* in the twentieth century. Borges never attempted to write such a book, but preferred to write about them. His method was both lazier and more practical, as he explains in his prologue to *Fictions*:

It is a laborious madness and an impoverishing one, the madness of composing vast books – setting out in five hundred pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes. The better way to go about it is to pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them. (CF 67)

Something I wouldn’t call a difference, but rather an indifference (an indifference, coupled with a fastidiousness, he shared with Vladimir Nabokov), something in *Ulysses* Borges didn’t care much for, were the Homeric parallels. In his “A Fragment on Joyce” he speaks of the Linati and Gilbert-Gorman schemas, and comments: “These imperceptible and laborious correspondences had only to be announced for the world to honor the work’s severe construction and classic discipline. Among these voluntary tics, the most widely praised has been the most meaningless: James Joyce’s contacts with Homer.” (TL 220) And in his “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” he speaks of those “parasitic books that set Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Cannabière or Don Quixote on Wall Street. Like every man of taste, Menard abominated those pointless travesties, which, Menard would say, were good for nothing but occasioning a plebeian delight in anachronism.” (CF 90). Pierre Menard, let us remember, had set out to rewriting *Don Quixote* in the twentieth century, but not another *Don Quixote*, but word by word the same one as Cervantes’, but not copying it, but writing it himself. After setting his character such a task, it is understandable that Borges’ narrator should look down on the Homeric parallels as mere child’s play.

I have discussed so far about what Borges took from Joyce, and of what he disliked in Joyce, about their differences... But what about what they have in common? What did they share?

Let's begin by looking at the surface of things. Both were writers that ushered in the twentieth century into their respective national literatures. Both had to deal with a literature that looked backwards, to a more or less invented idyllic past: the Celtic revival in Joyce's case; the "gauchesca", or "*gaucho* literature", in that of Borges. The *gauchos* are sometimes described as the cowboys of the pampas, though I prefer to think of the cowboys as the *gauchos* of the prairies (in this I follow Borges, who once spoke of the sea as "the pampas of the English"). The function of these born-again-pastorals was somewhat different in both countries: in Ireland it was a means of forging a national identity purified of foreign influence, of celebrating a Celtic Arcadia the British invasion had trampled on. Also, it can be seen as an attempt to claim the superiority of the Celtic spirit over Saxon materialism, to shrug off the Industrial revolution and Modernization that the British prevented from happening as something the Irish did not want anyway. In Argentina, the threat was Modernization itself, mainly represented by the massive influx of European immigration, which threatened to submerge a national identity nobody had cared much for until then.

Another parallel we could draw between Joyce and Borges is that they both decided that this literature of the twentieth century would be urban, and no longer rural-oriented, as it had been in the nineteenth century in both their literatures. This, incidentally, is a major difference between the literature of Argentina and that of the rest of Latin America, and it is perhaps one of the reasons why the influence of Joyce, and particularly that of *Ulysses*, looms so large in Argentine literature. In the rest of Latin America the major influence is not Joyce but Faulkner, because his formula of combining interior monologue, multiple point of view and other Modernist devices with a rural, semi-feudal setting would become, eventually, the formula of the Latin American *boom*, from Juan Carlos Onetti to Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa.

Joyce's commitment to urban literature was more radical than Borges'. Borges was more of a bridge-builder: his Buenos Aires was not that of the city centre, or the port, the dynamos of modernization, but the quieter suburbs that still retained a nineteenth-century air. He gave them a name: *las orillas*, "the shores", that is, the place where the city meets the country, or, as he poetically put it in his poem "The Mythical founding of Buenos Aires", "the street that had no other side".

Borges saw himself as a writer on the shores, or the margins, of the Western world: and this he saw not as a shortcoming but as an ideal vantage post to read the West, as he wrote in his seminal essay "The Argentine Writer and Tradition":

I believe that our tradition is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants

of one Western nation or another may have. Here I remember an essay by Thorstein Veblen, the North American sociologist, on the intellectual preeminence of the Jews in Western culture. He wonders if this preeminence authorizes us to posit an innate Jewish superiority and answers that it does not; he says that Jews are prominent in Western culture because they act within that culture and at the same time do not feel bound to it by any special devotion; therefore, he says, it will always be easier for a Jew than for a non-Jew to make innovations in Western culture. We can say the same of the Irish in English culture. Where the Irish are concerned, we have no reason to suppose that the profusion of Irish names in British literature and philosophy is due to any racial preeminence, because many of these illustrious Irishmen (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) were the descendants of Englishmen, men with no Celtic blood; nevertheless, the fact of feeling themselves to be Irish, to be different, was enough to enable them to make innovations in English culture. I believe that Argentines, and South Americans in general, are in an analogous situation; we can take on all the European subjects, take them without superstition and with an irreverence that can have, and already has had, fortunate consequences. (TL 420)

Borges' epitomizing of the Jewish and the Irish perspective as being at the same time within and without Western culture seems to point directly to Leopold Bloom.

There is a line in this long quotation I want to go back to: "We have a right to this tradition, *a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have.*" Consider the implications of that offhandedly tossed "a greater right". Joyce and Borges are writers of the periphery who are not content with being admitted into the Western canon: they want to occupy its center, and they want to be the ones picking who gets in and who is thrown out. Theirs is a minor literature that takes over from the major ones and redefines them, theirs is a triumphant extraterritoriality, one that relocates the margins at the center of things. Dublin, the city on the outskirts of Europe, becomes the literary capital of the world; the basement of a house on the outskirts of a South American capital hides the Aleph, and thus becomes the sole vantage point from which the whole universe can be seen. Both countries had a colonial or neo-colonial relationship with the great empire of the time, Joyce's Ireland in all possible senses of the word; Borges' Argentina mainly in the economic and cultural sense. And yet both Joyce and Borges took a decisive and, what's more important, intelligent stand against narrow nationalism, seeking not to purify their national culture from foreign influence but to absorb as much of it as possible, and in doing so, rewriting English culture not just for the Irish or for the Argentines, but for the English themselves: Joyce gives one of the most powerful and influential readings of Shakespeare in the twentieth century, and in the "Oxen of the Sun" chapter rewrites the History of English literature as a long march culminating in Irish literature – that is, in Joyce himself. Borges went back to the very origins of English literature, studying Anglo-Saxon and writing stories, poems and essays inspired by this literature. No writer in English, at least in the twentieth century,

has written an Anglo-Saxon literature as imaginatively, as vividly as this Spanish-speaking writer from a distant South American capital. And Borges also redefined the canon of English literature, bringing back in neglected writers such as Stevenson or Chesterton. Something similar could be said about the Greeks and Homer, the Italians and Dante (and Italo Calvino states it in his essay on Borges), the Spaniards and Cervantes, and so on.

I had this experience when I was Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University. Whenever I talked about Argentine literature, politics or history, the English professors would listen with great attention. But if I turned to Shakespeare, or Woolf, or Conrad, they would soon give me some polite nodding attention and then turn away. I was then reminded of Haines' supercilious indifference to whatever Stephen had to say about *Hamlet*.

Joyce's *Ulysses* has been appropriately called the Greek gift to English literature: after *Ulysses*, English writers had to learn their language from an Irishman. Spanish writers similarly had to learn their Spanish from the Latin Americans, Borges in the first place.

It's about time I justified my title, the Aleph and the labyrinth. In a television interview², Borges once again coupled his and Joyce's interest in labyrinths:

There is something curious about labyrinths. The idea of getting lost is not in itself strange, but the idea of a building purposefully constructed for people to get lost in, that is strange. The idea of a builder of labyrinths, the idea of a Dedalus or, if you will, of a Joyce, and of an architecture whose purpose is that people, or readers, should get lost, that is a strange idea [...]

But in the idea of the labyrinth there is hope as well. Because if we could be certain that this world was a labyrinth, then we might feel safe. Because if it is one, then there is a center - even if that center is terrible, even if it means the Minotaur. But we don't know if the universe has a center. Maybe it isn't a labyrinth, maybe it is no more than a chaos, and then we are really lost. But if there is a secret center to the world, be it divine or demonic, we are saved [...]. In the midst of the perplexity of life, we need to believe that the universe has a coherent form, that it is a labyrinth. But we can't be certain that this is the case.

We can read these words in a slightly different way: the truth of the labyrinth lies not so much in its center, because that is where the Minotaur waits, but in the way out. If the story of Dedalus teaches us anything, it teaches us that a labyrinth can only be seen from the outside: either when you design it, or when you fly above it. What you need, as the Greek Dedalus well knew, is a birds' eye view, such as Joyce provides in his "Wandering Rocks" chapter. In "The Aleph", Borges sees London in the Aleph and describes it as "a broken labyrinth". This broken labyrinth we can see from the margins, from the outskirts or *orillas*, from the outside: Buenos Aires or Dublin: And we can see it without the presumption that our imperfect eye will be able to mend it.

Notes

- 1 Hereafter, references to Borges' works will be identified with the initials of the titles.
- 2 Included in the film "Borges para millones". Translation by Carlos Gamerro.

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