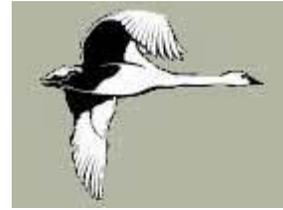


The Trumpeter (2001)

Divining the Aleph

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Surely, when one takes the time to reflect upon it, reading and writing must be understood as something truly magical by those denied access to this form of knowing. To find meaning, to make connections and find knowledge, in something which another experiences very differently, could be seen in many ways. It could be seen as bluff, it could be seen as trickery, even conspiracy, but once it is accepted that meaning is there to be found and that there are means whereby that meaning can be found, it is inevitable that other questions will be asked. In modern times, these are the questions that the illiterate person is obliged to consider. They are the questions that, in a very different way, children must find themselves playing with. They are the question asked by ‘foreigners,’ suddenly lost in a new language and a new cultural reference system and they were, David Abram suggests, the questions forced upon members of ancient cultures when they first came into contact with phonetic writing systems. In his discussion of the history of language in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram tells us that “anthropological accounts from entirely different continents report that members of indigenous, oral tribes” who saw Europeans reading from books “came to speak of the written pages as ‘talking leaves,’ for the black marks on the flat, leaflike pages seemed to talk directly to the one who knew their secret.”¹

The original Semitic ‘aleph-beth’ was the first phonetic system of representation. As distinct from the pictographic and ideographic systems that preceded it (and remain in many parts of the world), the aleph-beth does not refer to a “phenomenon out in the world, or even to the name of such a phenomenon, but solely to a gesture made by the human mouth.”² And yet, while referring to gestures and sounds, the aleph-beth and subsequent alphabets contain considerably more than this. They contain, especially for those who encounter them for the first time, the raw materials that make up the magic contained in reading and writing. This is, Abram says, the basis for the ancient Hebrew claim that each of the letters in the aleph-beth are “living, animate powers” representing “a magic gateway or guide into an entire sphere of existence.”³

Of the twenty-two letters of the aleph-beth, the aleph is the first. While it is also the Hebrew word for ‘ox’ and while the symbol that represented it, like the letter ‘A,’ bears a resemblance to the horned head of an ox, in the mystical tradition of the Jewish Kabbalah, it is the entry point, or doorway, into the secrets of this learning. The aleph can be ‘read,’ therefore, as a conduit to a greater measure of participation in a divine universe.

Like Abram, Argentinean short story writer Jorge Luis Borges has found the aleph a rich source of inspiration. I remember reading his story, ‘The Aleph,’ in the collection, *Personal Anthology*,⁴ many years ago, (and I remember searching through dictionaries and encyclopedias afterwards to find out more about this thing—the ‘aleph’—that he evoked so powerfully). In the story, Borges writes of his (he writes in the first person, of a character who is both a scholar and a writer named Borges) first encounter with the Aleph. He tells us that he, the character, Borges, was introduced to it by fellow poet, Carlos Argentino Daneri. In the story Daneri tells him, “it’s in the dining-room cellar . . .

It's mine, it's mine. I discovered it in childhood, before I was of school age . . . the Aleph . . . the place where, without any possible confusion, all the places in the world are found, seen from every angle."⁵

Somewhat sceptically, Borges is convinced to position himself, under Daneri's direction, on the nineteenth step descending into the cellar of a house in the Calle Garay in Buenos Aires. With his head cushioned, and the cellar door closed, Borges peers into the darkness. Almost immediately he sees 'the Aleph.' He writes, "in that gigantic instant I saw millions of delightful and atrocious acts; none of them astonished me more than the fact that all of them together occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency."⁶ That which Borges reports is stunning and wondrous. He writes about it in exquisite prose. His senses flood this "small iridescent sphere, of almost intolerable brilliance," which he sights "in the lower part of the step, towards the right." He tells us that within the Aleph,

I saw the heavy laden sea; I saw the dawn and dusk; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silver-plated cobweb at the centre of a black pyramid; I saw a tattered labyrinth (it was London); I saw interminable eyes nearby looking at me as if in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors in the planet and none reflected me; in an inner patio in the Calle Soler I saw the same paving tiles I had seen thirty years before in the entrance way to a house in the town of Fray Bentos; I saw clusters of grapes, snow, tobacco, veins of metal, steam; I saw convex equatorial deserts and every grain of sand in them; I saw a woman at Inverness whom I shall never forget; I saw her violent switch of hair, her proud body, the cancer in her breast; I saw a circle of dry land in a sidewalk where formerly there had been a tree; I saw a villa on Adrogué . . .

And on and on and on.

. . . I saw the atrocious relic of what deliciously had been Beatriz Viterbo; I saw the circulations of my obscure blood; I saw the gearing of love and the modifications of death; I saw the Aleph from all points; I saw the earth in the Aleph and in the earth the Aleph once more and the earth in the Aleph; I saw my face and my viscera; I saw your face and felt vertigo and cried because my eyes had seen that conjectural and secret object whose name men usurp but which no man has gazed on: the inconceivable universe.⁷

Part of that which excites me about this passage (of which I have only cited a portion) is also part of that which excites me about Borges. As a writer, he is constantly observing his own process. He is as fascinated by the limits of language as he is its possibilities. It is with this in mind that he prefaces his description of the Aleph with the comment, "what my eyes saw was simultaneous: what I shall transcribe is successive, because language is successive."⁸

It could be said that Borges is concerned with both the 'inner' and the 'outer' aspect of mind and experience. Just as the Aleph contains all meaning in one point, so Borges works on his stories and symbols, polishing them, penetrating them, in search of the richness, the contradictions, the complexities of their content. That complexity then becomes the world that contains his story.

Max von Manen describes the phenomenological method, which he says has some equivalence in the writing process, as "the ability, or rather the art of being sensitive—sensitive to the subtle undertones of language, to the way language speaks when it allows things themselves to speak. This means," he argues, "that an authentic speaker must be a true listener, able to attune to the deep tonalities of language that normally fall out of our accustomed range of hearing."⁹

By finding 'language' in a variety of experiences, by interpreting the processes of 'reading' and 'writing' metaphorically, von Manen suggests that language is not an individual experience. He suggests that a listener or a reader or audience of some kind is always in existence, (even if that audience is the self). This validates the notion that the experience of language, is one of constant participation or immersion in 'linguaging' as Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela prefer.¹⁰

In this regard, the fact that Borges, the writer, depicts the Aleph as a thing, a presence, an object in space, is significant. His character's phenomenological immersion in the experience of 'reading' the vision, which Daneri introduced him to, requires him to wonder about the Aleph. Borges knows that the Aleph is something that is written: "the first letter of the alphabet of the sacred language."¹¹ He knows that it is something that is written about, (including the Kabbalistic reference to it as signifying, "limitless and pure divinity"). Yet, without undermining his experience on the nineteenth step, descending into the cellar, Borges remains sceptical about his experience. Somehow, it isn't, or wasn't, enough. He concludes, "incredible as it seems, I believe there is (or was) another (Aleph), I believe that the Aleph in the Calle Garay was a false Aleph."¹²

Whether 'the Aleph' he saw is the true Aleph or not, it is clear that there is a difference between the experience of the Aleph and the Aleph that recalled as it is written about. Borges acknowledges this.

And here begins my despair as a writer. All language is an alphabet of symbols whose use presupposes a past shared by all the other interlocutors. How then, to transmit to others the infinite Aleph, which my fearful mind scarcely encompasses? The mystics, in similar situations, are lavish with emblems: to signify the divinity a Persian speaks of a bird that in some way is all birds; Alanus de Insulis speaks of a sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere; Ezekiel of an angel with four faces who looks simultaneously to the Orient and the Occident, to the North and the South . . . For the rest, the central problem is insurmountable.¹³

As a writer, Borges approaches the insurmountable with a strategy. In doing so he demonstrates his understanding that writing involves considerably more than inking "black marks on . . . flat, leaflike pages."

He writes about the character, Borges, experience of 'the Aleph' through an extended series of discrete images. One after another after another after another of these images is offered, drawing the reader into Borges' humbling, hypnotic vision. As I read this for the first time I felt my resistance founder, my sense of wonder (and admiration) grow. I enjoyed this: this scatty, scattered but strangely attractive layering. As I read, both my curiosity and my senses were roused. My delight grew. My toes curled. I could feel my body begin to fizz. Fizz? I hear you ask. Well not fizz, no. My body sort of smiled somehow. It sort of knew. It had been charmed, delighted, expanded, opened and it had looked in: between the words, the echoes, the resonances, the shades, the shadows, the glimmering light that haunted that cellar, the one for which you need to get down low, to rest your head, and listen, and hope. I wanted to follow. I wanted to move through this imagery, to know what Borges was knowing. I could feel it in my forehead, my eyes, my head; my body embraced it viscerally. Borges' Aleph touched me somehow. This is what I valued in the reading; both the method and the matter. It was also the mystery, the curiosity, the doorway to which written language offers access. Is this the Aleph?

As Abram suggests, this is that which was closed, which, ever since, we have written and read to open. And this is what I enjoyed gaining access to through the story, written by this quixotic Argentine. In reflection, I recall Anthony Kerrigan's opening sentence in his foreword to this anthology. "Jorge Luis Borges is most poignantly and hauntingly

interested in what men have believed in their doubts.”¹⁴ I felt myself caught by an equivalent curiosity.

Addressing his doubts about the truth or otherwise of ‘the Aleph,’ Borges says those doubts amount to more than doubts about evidence. “Forgetfulness” and the “porous nature” of the mind, under the influence of advancing years, are, he says, among the factors that bring questions. Effectively, he says, the body submits and the vision is diminished, the ‘voice’ falters, ‘the dance’ is slowed. He says, that through which he ‘reads’ or ‘listens’ to the phenomenal world, the body, loses its coherence (or its confidence in its coherence). His eldership, achieved through advancing years, is compromised by the disabilities that come with age. And Lackoff’s and Johnston’s assertion that “what we take to be true in a situation depends on our embodied understanding of the situation”¹⁵ is reinforced.

Like Abram, part of Borges interest in the Aleph is its relationship to ‘divinity.’ Abram describes the aleph as a means whereby a greater sense of participation in a divine universe may be encountered. Borges refers to it as signifying “limitless and pure divinity” (referred to in another anthology as “pure and unbounded godhead”).¹⁶ I too am interested in the phenomenology of divinity. Likewise, I am interested in the way divinity ‘feeds-back’ into the autopoietic or self-organizing system that is—like all biological entities—the body.¹⁷

To all appearances, both Abram and Borges use the word ‘divinity’ without reluctance. And though Kerrigan refers to Borges’ “non-belief in belief” and “belief in non-belief,”¹⁸ Borges’ readiness to accept ‘divinity’ as a concept against which experience can be measured prompts me to consider how I experience the meaning contained in the term. Intellectually, I know it is a word somewhat akin to ‘the aleph.’ I know it contains, like the word ‘ecology,’ a suggestion of networks and relationships of a subtle and intricate variety. I also know that unlike ecology, it suggests networks that extend beyond the physical universe. And while I can inspect an ecology, construct a model for an ecology, consider the health or otherwise of an ecology, I struggle to do the same for ‘divinity,’ especially when I am seeking my “embodied understanding.” What does it feel like, this divinity? Unless it is a separate entity to which humans can only aspire, it must exist in my feeling body, and then of course, my cognition of that embodied experience. How do I find it then, how do I recognise it when it occurs? How do I know?

I remember a time, almost four years ago, in Central Australia. Almost 80 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs, off the road to Yuendumu, the birthplace of the modern Australian Aboriginal art movement, is a deserted cattle station called Hamilton Downs. This property, now managed by its traditional owners, was then the site of a ‘Sense of Place’ colloquium, attended by about thirty national and international invitees. As non-Aboriginal people on Aboriginal land, the invitation from, and on behalf of, the traditional owners was an initiation into a divinity, of sorts.

Hamilton Downs lies just north of the MacDonnell Ranges, an ancient, rocky outcrop that runs through the centre, just north of Alice Springs. It is dry. The land is red and hard. The spinifex bristles low and sharp and the gum trees that reach achingly into the sky are few and far between. It is hot by day (though October, when we were there, is more temperate) and cold by night. And when I got out of my sleeping bed, laid in the sand of a now-submerged stream that rises in flood each decade or two, the sight that greeted me each morning was that great, rocky outcrop. Indomitable and inescapable, the MacDonnell Ranges are unlike any mountain range I have seen. They are indubitably of this land. Geologically, they are the skin of an older landscape. Age has carved them. It has run their soil and sand into gullies, and then watched it baked and blasted away by desert winds, then swept away by flooding rains. And every morning this sight transfixed me, and there was vibrant and abundant life all around. An extraordinary variety of plant life, a rich array of birds, both large and small: eagles, black and white cockatoos,

corellas, finches, wrens and budgerigars. There were insects and reptiles, creeping out from below the ground, digging, wandering and dazzling in the sun. And occasional marsupials, feeding while sheltering in scattered shade. There was texture and colour and contrast, there was silence and sound, and light haze and flurries of localized wind off in one direction, then, suddenly, another. A huge sky: there were boulders and pebbles and flood-carved pools and wind-whipped gullies and chasms and sand and ants and termites and tracks and tracks and tracks and stories. There were stories all around us and the knowledge contained in those stories too. Johnny Campbell,¹⁹ one of the traditional custodians, told us the story of the mountain range. And, as he told the story, I could read the story in the mountain range too. I could read it in the rises and falls, in the outcrops and escarpments, in the ridges and valleys, in the wavering tensions of this fragile, fractured scape. I could see this person chasing that person and at that place making camp. I could see the excitement of the chase and the weapons and the old men and the young girl. I could see the place where the spear was thrown and the place of transformation where death gives birth to new life, which becomes myth. This is the place where the story becomes the mountain range: not explains, not creates, but becomes. In telling the story of the mountain range, the custodian tells the story of its coming into being. In maintaining the story, the custodian maintains the mountain range and the land in its vicinity and its creativity: its divinity. To the degree to which we share in it, it is our divinity too: our cathedral, our text, both written and read, our understanding, embracing and encompassing us, to the degree to which we are willing to admit our ignorance. For out here I was the illiterate one, I was the foreigner.

To find meaning, to make connections and find knowledge, in something which another experiences very differently, could be seen as a demonstration of many ways. It could be seen as bluff, it could be seen as trickery, even conspiracy, but once it is accepted that meaning is there to be found and that there are means whereby that meaning is found, it is inevitable that questions will be asked.

Is this 'the Aleph'? Is this the substance, the divinity that the primordial symbol seeks to communicate across time and space? And is it the relocation of that substance, via both symbol and story, across continents and centuries and cultures and generations, that leads Borges to cast doubt upon that which he finds, or fears he finds, on the nineteenth step, descending into the cellar of the house in Buenos Aires: a vision that contains the story of its own creation, and in that story both life and history?

Abram writes of indigenous, oral tribes who saw Europeans reading from books that 'seemed to talk directly to the one who knew their secret.' I saw a member of an indigenous, oral tribe read from a mountain that 'seemed to talk directly to the one who knew their secret.' Abram writes of the aleph as an entry point into the secrets of learning and a means whereby a greater sense of participation in a divine universe may be encountered. I could make an equivalent claim of my experience, standing alongside a custodian of a mountain range in central Australia.

A custodian is a person who cares for, a keeper, a guardian. In indigenous Australian culture the custodian cares for the story of the land and its creation. This ensures the land continues to tell its story (to those able to listen). The distillation of such a story into one single integer, one discreet symbol such as the aleph, as it is represented in the Semitic aleph-beth, is an extraordinary alchemical feat. However, it would seem, when the symbol, like the story, is separated from its custodian it is diminished, hence my admiration for Borges—the writer, not the character—and his reinvestment of significance. His enchantment of a seemingly empty space proves the vacuity of the term 'empty space.' Space, it would seem, is empty only until its story is told. If Borges can find it in a cellar, beneath the dining room in a house in the Calle Garay in Buenos Aires, it would seem stories of life and history would benefit first and foremost from having custodians, those willing and able to care for the richness of experience that creates and sustains them. Those able to pass that story on to others to ensure it is not ever finally and

irrevocably alienated from its 'place.'

In his story the 'Parable of the Palace' Borges writes of such alienation. The following extract comes from the end of the tale, as the Yellow Emperor concludes a poet's tour of his palace.

It was at the foot of the penultimate tower that the poet (who had seemed remote from the wonders that were a marvel to all) recited the brief composition that today we link indissolubly to his name and that, as the most elegant historians repeat, presented him with immortality and death. The text has been lost; there are those who believe that it consisted of a line of verse; others of a single word. What is certain, and incredible, is that all the enormous palace was, in its most minute details, there in the poem, with each illustrious porcelain and each design on each porcelain and the penumbrae and the light of each dawn and twilight and unfortunate or happy instant in the glorious destinies of mortals, of gods and dragons that had inhabited it from the unfathomable past. Everyone was silent, but the Emperor exclaimed: *You have robbed me of my palace!* And the executioner's iron sword cut the poet down.²⁰

The translation from experience to explanation presents all sorts of difficulties. It is my feeling that if the story is to be found, which means in effect if its significance is to be felt, it is to be found phenomenologically: in the body, in the transforming process of realizing meaning in experience. The actual words are no more than conduits.

There was a time when I thought I could only imagine the awe reported by Abram, of indigenous, oral tribespeople encountering Europeans reading "black marks" on "flat, leaflike pages" for the first time. That I could only imagine the way in which that experience transformed lives. After visiting central Australia I feel less caught. For while the story of contemporary life may appear to be contained in books and journals and stored, quite often, in air conditioned libraries, the world of their creation remains. Without diminishing the value of those books and journals and libraries it would seem that while they have librarians to care for them, the world of their creation requires custodians to care for it and for the stories of divinity waiting to be found in the living earth—the life and history—that surrounds.

Curiously, I write this sitting, a lap top computer warming my thighs. There is comfort in the experience, despite the dizzying power of the electronic device buzzing in my lap. There is, nevertheless, a feeling of conclusion, at least at this stage of the writing. This seems, therefore, an appropriate place to pause.

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18. Borges, J.L. 1972. *A Personal Anthology*. Picador, London. p. ix
19. Not the name of the actual person.
20. Borges op. cit. p. 72

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