

Alpha/Omega within the *Library of Babel*

"There is no universe in the organic, unifying sense of that ambitious word. If there is, then we must speculate on its purpose, we must speculate on the words, definitions, etymologies, and synonyms of God's secret dictionary." J.L. Borges

Borges believed that a well-constructed plot is a moral imperative in the sense that it promises no more than literature should offer to its reader: the pleasure of formal perfection with little interference from the lived world. Fantastic literature offers hypothetical worlds based on the powers of an imagination unspoiled by the constraints imposed by representative aesthetics.

Borges had loved adventure stories since childhood. (Stevenson along with *The Arabian Nights*, are the names that always came to his lips). The pleasure to be derived from them depended on a well-thought plot with no loose threads and little reference to deep psychological motives and impulses. Also, adventure novels do not face the problem of "length", which for Borges always led to a weak plot, because they are generally organized into "episodes" that begin and end within the span of a chapter.

To this respect, *Alpha/Omega* resembles the structure of a typical adventure novel, but devoid of many elements that make one – action, good and evil, betrayal.

Borges created a type of fiction in which ideas are not discussed through the characters, on the contrary, ideas are the very stuff of the plot, and they shape it from the inside. Ideas in Borges are not only necessary to the development of the plot (as they are in such writers as Tolstoy or Joyce); they are presented as the plot itself. His fiction is based on the examination of an intellectual possibility presented as a narrative hypothesis. *Library of Babel*, along with *Tlon*, *Uqbar*, *Orbis Tertius* and *The Lottery in Babylon* are perfect and most famous representatives of Borgesian fiction.

Borges was a classic case of an encyclopedic, just as Greenway, Poe, and Darwin, in their own way. His most recognizable tool to explore seemingly unrelated ideas, objects, or people, is in the use of heterogeneous classification, an order that respects no logical principle of exclusion and inclusion, no logical formation of groups, species and

genres and, above all, one that includes itself in the classification. Under the cover of the Encyclopedia, he manages to explore conventions, because "there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural. The reason is very simple: we do not know what the universe is."

This is the main subject tackled by Borges in the story of *Library of Babel*, a "Kafkaesque fiction". Its main image, the Library, was inspired by his experience as a librarian in Buenos Aires, which the story describes through the lens of an "oneiric magnification". Even if we overlook Borges's fascination with the order and physical or ideal arrangement of books, the Library remains one of the central motifs in his fiction and poetry. The story begins with this motif as a metaphor:

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast airshafts between, surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. The distribution of the galleries is invariable.

The hypothesis the story presents is that the Library, or our known Universe, contains precisely everything. As a consequence of the nature and contents of the books in the Library, Borges states that the solution of the "basic mysteries of humanity" should be found there, but that centuries have elapsed since men began looking for this solution without ever finding it. Today, adds Borges, "nobody hopes to find anything". This is the statement that *Alpha/Omega* takes as its starting point and adds to it the following question and challenge:

Human knowledge has been expanding with an exponential speed. Yet all accumulative knowledge up until this point, still can not answer the "basic mysteries of humanity", those ageless questions; "is there god", "is there after life", "are we in control of our choices or is our life predestined". So now I stand at a point of flux, of a personal crossroad; do I have any reason to believe that I or those to come will ever answer these questions? The logical answer is no, taken into consideration history of knowledge and the answers provided by that search. And although I truly doubt the positive outcome of this ancient search, I, a rational human being, cannot stop the quest for answers. So then I ask, is it in our nature to be hopeful, to seek the answers, and to persist even when all reason points at the fallibility of this search?

The logic of the Library is planned in such a way that it cannot be grasped, and, since the Library is the universe, the logic of the universe is inaccessible. Everything is in the Library but nothing can be found. Besides, the Library is a predestined universe for the very reason that everything, past, present and future is written somewhere, in a book that has little chance of revealing its contents. This unhappy prospect does not diminish, but rather emphasizes, predestination. Life itself is tautological, because everything that can be performed, thought or said has in the past been written in one of the books of the Library. The same process of finding the key to all the "mysteries of humanity", the way to reach that particular book, is also written; and the place of that book is marked in a catalogue. If this is true, the quest of humanity in the Library-universe is pointless. But nobody can establish the truth or falseness of an organization whose rules are secret until the moment somebody finds them in a book.

In this philosophical situation, life is either predetermined by laws which cannot be identified but which have forever defined an order that leaves no space for the introduction of change, or else society is randomly organized to the point where mere change, the eccentricity of fortune (somebody, without reason, stumbles on the key-book), is as strong as a predetermined organization of the world. In either case, human beings are unable to change their place and destiny. In either case, the rules that govern the world are secret and concealed from its subjects. Both cases lead logically to a dilemma. This dilemma is explored and questioned in *Alpha/Omega*.