



Mythical Spaces – The Aleph as Seen by Borges and Coelho*

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Abstract. The following study is aimed at presenting the concept of mythical space mainly based upon the theories of Ernst Cassirer and Mircea Eliade. In Cassirer's view, mythical thinking involves a basic mental opposition between the sacred and the profane. There is an inherent presence of mystery, of the supernatural and hidden connotations and connections which are disclosed at particular moments. The second part of the paper deals with the representation of mythical spaces in the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Paulo Coelho.

Keywords: mythical space, myth, the sacred and the profane

A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.

Jorge Luis Borges: *El hacedor*

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Time and space have always represented the main pillars of human perception of the world and of its phenomena. Yet, there seems to be more focus upon temporal issues than there is on spatial aspects. This is probably due to the fact that although space and spatial aspects often stand at the core of a narrative text, there is no clear and complete definition of the term itself. Critics are either interested in the relationship between certain locations given in a literary work and their counterparts in reality, such as *The Atlas of Literature* by Malcolm Bradbury, or they conduct studies upon cities, e.g., Susanne Hauser, Sabina Becker or Andreas Mahler, landscapes, e.g., Eckhard Lobsien, James Turner or Greg Garrad, border areas, e.g., Richard Faber or Norbert Wokart, or journeys and horizons as presented in narrative texts (in Dennerlein 2009, 1-2). A comprehensive concept of space does not exist; 'space' in narratives can refer to the space consisting of the letters that make up the text, or to topographical conditions and experienced spaces (in Dennerlein 2009, 3-5). Merleau-Ponty, for example, introduces the dimension of seeing/watching as a feature of experienced space (in Dennerlein 2009, 3-5). Thus, the space we live in and the one we experience are conceived from the viewpoint of the individual (Dennerlein 2009, 54). Another approach is given by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958); he combines psychoanalysis with phenomenology in order to get a new form of describing space. He is interested in space from the perspective of the Heideggerian life-world. He analyzes the house starting from the cellar to the roof, defining places as experienced space that influence the human subconscious (1994, 3-37).

The present paper analyzes spatial structures within a short story by Jorge Luis Borges and a novel by Paulo Coelho, both entitled *The Aleph*. Although many of the above mentioned theories would work when conducting the study, here the focus lies upon the concept of mythical space. In this respect the theoretical background is mainly provided by Ernst Cassirer and Mircea Eliade.

Ernst Cassirer – in his study entitled *Mythical, Aesthetic and Theoretical Space* dating from 1931 – concludes that the concept of space means the general idea underlying the possible coexistence of various substances in a determined sequence. Space is seen as a basic organizational principle, which thus becomes a general symbolic form. As such, it can be perceived in a number of ways, resulting in several different concrete concepts of space, each offering us a system which provides the phenomena and events with a special meaning by assuming a position within the system and by entering into relations with other elements.

Mythical space as a system undertakes an initial division of space that functions as an ordering structure for the single phenomena and events appearing in it. This structure bears none of the known formal characteristics typical of our everyday perception of space. It stems from a specific mythical way of thinking and life experience inherent to all the creations of the myth.

Mythical space is made up of specifically meaningful *places*. There is a contrast between their value and meaningfulness: the space we naturally experience is endowed with positive or negative forces relating various places in a system of positions. When we speak of up and down, left and right, the East and the West or the North and the South in mythical terms, we do not refer to them as points and directions as in geometric or empirical and physical space. Each place and direction has a mythical quality. This mythical quality defines its content, meaning and specificity. What we are looking for here are magical traits. Salvation or damnation, accessibility or banning, blessing or cursing, familiarity or alienation, luck or danger – these are the trademarks that allow the myth to separate places from each other. For example, we attribute a positive value to the East – because the Sun rises in the East – and a negative value to the West – because the Sun sets in the West. The East stands at the origin of light and thus represents the source of life, contrary to the West, where decay, horror and the dead dwell. Yet, we cannot regard such spatial structures independently from the substantial fields they connect. They are rather *qualities* of the *considerable importance* inherent in these places. If in mythical space we do find an initial, fundamental orientation of space, this spatiality has no independent formal value. The form(s) of mythical space can only make sense to us if we start out from and return to the universal mental function of the myth itself (Bundgaard 2011, 43-57).

When talking about how people experience the world, Mircea Eliade (1987) makes a distinction between the religious man, who accepts the sacrality of the world and the nonreligious man, who rejects it. Thus, time and space are also perceived in two different ways, namely as sacred and as profane. Space is not homogeneous, which means that some of its parts differ in quality from others. There is sacred space with sacred places, which are similar to mythical ones. In opposition to sacred space, which is strong and significant as it constitutes primordial experience, identical with the founding of the world, there is the profane space, which is heterogeneous, chaotic and relative. When the sacred manifests itself, it ontologically founds the world, revealing “an absolute fixed point, a center” (Eliade 1987, 20-21). There must be a theophany or hierophany or at least some sign that indicates the sacredness of a place:

Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different. (Eliade 1987, 26)

A *sign* is asked, to put an end to the tension and anxiety caused by relativity and disorientation – in short, to reveal an absolute point of support. (Eliade 1987, 27-28) [emphasis in the original]

Sacred space allows the real to show itself, opening a communication between the cosmic planes – e.g., earth and heaven – and thus, making the ontological passage from one form of existence to another possible (Eliade 1987, 63).

In conclusion, mythical/sacred spaces represent significant locations where one can experience some sort of an opening towards understanding the world and oneself.

In literature myths have always been present under various forms as imaginary structures. As a phenomenon of contemporary modern narrative, mythology not only represents a process which uses its own motifs, characters and images, but also constitutes itself as a method. From among the essential elements of the mythological method – time dimensions and initiation processes – we have decided to focus upon the dimension of space. In general, we can divide space into two categories, namely the vertical and the horizontal. If we look at the vertical category, we will have to work with the opposition up and down, which in its turn divides the world into three realms: the underground, the earthly and the celestial. If we take the horizontal level, we encounter the opposition left/right, the East and the West. If we look at the two subsystems at the same time, we will see an image resembling the cosmic tree/the cross/the axis mundi (Abrudan 2003, 221).

The beginning of the twentieth century brought a change to the traditional structures of narration. Writers such as Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce started to increase spontaneity in their literary texts by resorting to symbols and myths. Thus, mythologizing began to structure the narrative. Undoubtedly, it was James Joyce who had the greatest impact on the mythologizing process of twentieth-century fiction (Abrudan 2003, 223). Mythologizing meant that mythical and ritual structures were kept as a form but were filled with a different content. One of the most important issues seemed to be the hero's real or imaginary journey that often followed paths presented in myths or the Bible. The hero directs his attention upon himself; he tries to find his own personality by discovering another existential dimension within his *self* and within the limited space of ordinary life. The focus shifts from the outside to the inside, from the mythical hero's itinerary (Ulysses), to the town (Dublin), to the garden, to the room, to the cellar, to the inner self. Thus, when certain temporal and spatial conditions come together, even if randomly, a shift in perception takes place and the epiphany can occur. The modern hero seeks and finds the real dimension of existence, so that he is united with the world and human beings.

Time and space may differ; myths can vary and be transmitted in different ways. In the Western modern novel myths are losing their sacredness being substituted by irony, the grotesque and humor (Abrudan 2003, 225). Latin American literature also uses dreams, myths and fairy tales to recreate the real. Alejo Carpentier, Ernesto Sabato or Jorge Luis Borges all establish a free exchange of the real and the imaginary. By projecting the fantastic emerges into a mythical

space and time where the law of surprise and metamorphosis governs the world (Abrudan 2003, 226).

The authors – Borges and Coelho – and literary texts that will be discussed are somehow all connected to the same spatial structure or, better said, point in space, that is the Aleph, which became the title of both literary works. *Aleph*, א, is not only the first letter of the Hebrew, Arabic, Phoenician, Aramaic and Syriac alphabets, but also represents number one in Hebrew. In the Kabbalah it is related to the origin of the universe. In mathematics, *aleph numbers* denote the cardinality of infinite sets. The Aleph is also similar to Leibniz's concept of the monad, which is a mirror onto every other object of the world. Somehow it contains all that is important in our universe and recalls the primordial moment of founding the world.

Borges's short story, *The Aleph*, which was first published in 1945, tells us the story of a man, the narrator, who at the beginning is mourning the recent death of a certain Beatriz Viterbo, a woman he loved. Each year he comes back on her birthday to pay his respect. He gets to know her first cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, who considers himself a good poet. Daneri's aim in life is to write an epic poem giving a detailed description of every single place on Earth. When later a business on the same street wants to pull down Daneri's house, Daneri is furious, because this would mean that he would lose the cellar containing an Aleph, which helps him write the poem. The narrator thinks Daneri to be insane, yet he wants to see the Aleph for himself. Alone in the dark cellar, first he fears Daneri wants to kill him, but then he experiences the Aleph. Later on, he pretends to have seen nothing perhaps in order to get revenge on Daneri.

In the postscript to the story Borges explains that Daneri's house was demolished, but that Daneri managed to win second prize in the Argentine National Prize for Literature. Regarding the Aleph he now thinks that the Aleph in Daneri's house was not the only one to exist, based on a certain Captain Burton's report describing the Amr mosque in Cairo, where there is supposed to be a stone pillar containing the whole universe; this Aleph cannot be seen, but heard.

The Aleph in this short story is found in a dark cellar under the dining room, it can be reached through a steep stairway. The first time it is mentioned, Daneri gives us its description: "Yes, the only place on earth where all places are – seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending.[...] If all places in the universe are in the Aleph, then all stars, all lamps, all sources of light are in it, too."

Then the narrator provides us with a more detailed picture of the phenomenon:

On the back part of the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance. At first I thought it was revolving; then I realized that this movement was an illusion created by the dizzying world it

bounded. The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); [...] I saw in a backyard of Soler Street the same tiles that thirty years before I'd seen in the entrance of a house in Fray Bentos; I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam; I saw convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of sand; I saw a woman in Inverness whom I shall never forget; I saw her tangled hair, her tall figure, I saw the cancer in her breast; I saw a ring of baked mud in a sidewalk, where before there had been a tree; I saw a summer house in Adrogué and a copy of the first English translation of Pliny – Philemon Holland's – and all at the same time saw each letter on each page (as a boy, I used to marvel that the letters in a closed book did not get scrambled and lost overnight); I saw a sunset in Querétaro that seemed to reflect the colour of a rose in Bengal; I saw my empty bedroom; I saw in a closet in Alkmaar a terrestrial globe between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly; I saw horses with flowing manes on a shore of the Caspian Sea at dawn; I saw the delicate bone structure of a hand; I saw the survivors of a battle sending out picture postcards; I saw in a showcase in Mirzapur a pack of Spanish playing cards; I saw the slanting shadows of ferns on a greenhouse floor; I saw tigers, pistons, bison, tides, and armies; I saw all the ants on the planet; I saw a Persian astrolabe; I saw in the drawer of a writing table (and the handwriting made me tremble) unbelievable, obscene, detailed letters, which Beatriz had written to Carlos Argentino; I saw a monument I worshipped in the Chacarita cemetery; I saw the rotted dust and bones that had once deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo; [...] 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)

Thus, encountering the Aleph is a moment of epiphany/hierophany, when one gets an insight into the whole universe and experiences the ultimate unity with it. After revealing the essence of the Aleph to us, the narrator somehow takes it back at the same time, when he says, even if only to get revenge on Daneri, that there is no Aleph. In the postscript then he reassures us that the Aleph exists, moreover, there might be many places where it would reveal itself. In this respect, the Aleph is not unique, the experience cannot be considered as the ultimate one either.

Coelho's protagonist in his novel *Aleph*, published in 2010, sets off to Africa, then to Europe and via the Trans-Siberian Railway to Asia, on a journey to find energy and passion again. On his journey he meets Hilal, who is not only a gifted young violinist, but also turns out to be the woman Paulo loved and betrayed five hundred years ago. His betrayal in the past prevents him from finding real happiness in this life. Hilal and Paulo undertake a mystical voyage through time and space, teaching them love, forgiveness, and the courage to overcome the challenges of life.

Apart from sharing the same title, there is also a direct connection between the works of Borges and Coelho. There is a motto by Borges at the beginning of Coelho's book. Moreover, when asked in an interview whether he was influenced by Borges or not, Coelho replied as follows:

He is my icon, the best writer in the world of my generation. But I wasn't influenced by him, I was influenced by the idea of aleph, the concept. In the classic tradition of spiritual books Borges summarizes very, very well the idea of this point where everything becomes one thing only. (Bosman 2011)

Coelho chooses a different location for the Aleph and thus gives credit to Borges, who stated that there would be more than one place where the Aleph was present. In Coelho's novel we can enter the Aleph on the train, in the small passage between two cars. Paulo and later Hilal too will encounter the Aleph in this small space, mainly in the evening or at night, so that it resembles Daneri's cellar. The description of the experience given by Paulo is also similar to that of Borges's narrator:

I look at the light, at a holy place, and a wave comes towards me, filling me with peace and love, though these two hardly ever go together. I can see myself, but at the same time I can also see the elephants in Africa with their trunks high up in the air, and there are the camels in the desert, people talking to each other in a bar in Buenos Aires [...] – everything is so clear and so huge, and at the same time so tiny and so dear. This is the Aleph, the point where everything is there in one place at the same time. I am in a window that opens onto the world and onto secret places, onto poetry that got lost in time and onto words that were forgotten in space. [...] I am standing in front of doors, which open for a moment and then close immediately, but show us what hides behind them: treasures, traps, unknown roads and journeys surpassing imagination. (Coelho 2011, 81-82) [translated by me]

Both times we have a small, dark place representing space, where the protagonists experience the whole universe. The cellar and the cabin become

sacred/mythical spaces to those who undergo the spiritual awakening. The protagonists attribute positive meaning to the space where the Aleph manifests itself: to Daneri it is the source he needs in order to be able to write/create a piece of art, to Paulo and Hilal it is a means of finding the creative power of language, forgiving the sins of the past, so that they can move on as reborn individuals. The physical darkness lets its opposite, the spiritual light come in and thus, makes it possible for the protagonists to see/experience/live the Aleph.

Moreover, in both literary texts there is a focus upon *seeing* the Aleph. In Borges's short story, the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived, as implied by the act of *seeing*, is very complex. On the one hand, it underlines the role of the physical body which functions as the ultimate space where the spiritual experience can take place. On the other hand, the physical body is a mirror which reflects everything without being itself reflected in any mirror at all; it shows a detailed image of the body, down to the organs, it is a mirror-eye:

[...] I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me; [...] I saw the circulation of my own dark blood; I saw the coupling of love and the modification of death; 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; [...] (Borges)

In Coelho's novel the narrator sees the Aleph through Hilal's eyes – in this case we have a perceiver, who also becomes the perceived, but there is a second person involved in the process functioning as a channel for the experience.

Both authors seem to agree upon the fact that though the Aleph experience needs special circumstances in order to reveal itself, it cannot or rather should not be bound to a single place. Borges's narrator somehow mocks at Daneri's exaggerated fondness of the house and the cellar. The narrator does not say that there is no Aleph at all, because he has also experienced it. What he emphasizes is that there are many potential places where one can meet the Aleph, as well as many ways of seeing/perceiving it. In Coelho's novel the protagonists encounter the Aleph on a moving means of transport. Here it is this movement that expresses the infinite proliferation of the space-based Aleph experience.

Borges likes playing with the text and the reader, his works are often "ludic thought experiments," aiming "in irony at the epistemological urge that fosters the ten thousand different beliefs that humanity has considered to be knowledge, at the same time he satirizes the undying thirst for the transcendence once granted by absolute knowledge" (Thiher 2005, 238, 240). Just like Joyce, Proust or Virginia Woolf, Borges develops experimental possibilities of a connection between science and literature. Thus, similarly to modern cosmology, Borges's fiction states that

there is a coexistence of a great amount of alternative events, as in so many multiple universes, or so many infinite groups of things (Thiher 2005, 239). In Borges's view, the world includes all the claims to know the world, as well as claims about these claims, without ever coming to an end. Therefore, a real/factual representation demands each and every thing and its mirror image, every statement and its opposite, reflected images of reflected images (Thiher 2005, 240). The motifs, themes and narrative techniques used by Borges support his theoretical views: e.g., here the Aleph, writing a book within a book, etc. Coelho's approach is slightly different; he tries to render esoteric/spiritual epistemologies. In his novel the Aleph represents *the* ultimate mystical initiation.

In conclusion, in its definition as a point where everything is present at the same time, in both literary texts the Aleph stands at the meeting point of the vertical and horizontal levels of space, connecting them with each other and looking upon them from above at the same time. In this respect the Aleph is also similar to the center of a labyrinth/mandala, where the initiates would find the true face of themselves and of the sacred universe.

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