



Rumours of the Postdigital, or Some Thoughts on the Letter A

Mark Dawson¹

Published online: 10 January 2019
© The Author(s) 2019

Keywords Postdigital · Digital education · Higher education · Borges · Aleph · Academic identity

In what is perhaps one of his most well-known fictions, Jorge Luis Borges weaves a tale in which the primary letter of numerous alphabets and Kabbalist literature, the ‘aleph’, is found in the townhouse of one Carlos Argentino Daneri. On the nineteenth step of the cellar stairs, this primary figure, one which can also stand for the origin of all numbers, is described as a point in space which contains all other spaces:

The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror, let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos. (Borges 1998: 283)

Borges describes Daneri as a “mediocre” poet, one who is working on a momentous text entitled *The Earth*, in which he will open the “floodgates of the imagination” (Borges 1998: 276). For Daneri, the aleph is a window through which he fuels his creative visions; visions which then populate his poem. For the narrator, however, it represents the “ineffable center of my tale” and a point at which writing breaks down, but an ineffable center which the narrator nevertheless goes on to describe. We find, then, that the aleph both resists and provokes response; it stands somehow for the possibility of the impossible.

Reading Borges’ tale, I wonder if this relation to the aleph is also some kind of metaphor for the “postdigital age” (Jandrić et al. 2018). For one single point or position to give us access to the infinite seems an implicit fantasy of the digital, the ultimate hyper-networked logic of every smartphone, and the point at which the singularity

✉ Mark Dawson
mark.dawson@lancaster.ac.uk

¹ Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

might finally kick in. Indeed, there seems to be a quite obvious fascination for, or fetishisation of, this primary symbol, the letter “A”, amongst the digital behemoths which increasingly surveil/organise/control our lives. Alphabet Inc., for example, as the parent company of Google, as well as its two main rivals Apple and Amazon, is headed up by this pyramidal nod to the Egyptian hieroglyph which depicts (somewhat still unfathomably) the head of an Ox (see Sacks 2003: 51). So why this rush to the front of the phone book in a world which has supposedly turned such traditionally linear structures of thought on their heads? What is it about this inability to shake the privileging of the “A”—that primitive figurehead of a primal necessity to encode—which persists into the postdigital age?

Earlier in Borges’ story, Daneri gives a nod to this persistent fantasy of an infinite revelation, a fantasy, which, I would argue, chimes with a certain quandary for education and the human sciences in the postdigital age, one which concerns the production and consumption of knowledge, and in turn our relation to the very notion of the “human”. In Daneri’s “apologia for modern man”, Borges imagines him:

[i]n his study, as though in the watchtower of a great city, surrounded by telephones, telegraphs, photographs, the latest in radio-telephone and motion-picture and magic-lantern equipment, and glossaries and calendars and timetables and bulletins [...] for a man so equipped, the act of travelling was supererogatory; this twentieth century of ours has upended the fable of Muhammad and mountain [...] (Borges 1998: 275)

Amusingly, the story’s narrator suggests such “witless” notions have no place *but* in literature, and, somewhat “predictably”, we are told that they have indeed also been added to the poet’s epic work, his own literary attempt to archive the visions given to him by his underground aleph. Borges is here allowing us to relate the aleph and the origin of the universe, with the ability to see everything at once, with an image of modern man high in his study-cum-watchtower, fully endowed with all the devices that make the need to travel anywhere else a seemingly indulgent irrelevance. It leads one to ask if the dismantling of the ivory towers which the digital purports to bring about is merely an overture to the possibility of everyone having a tower of one’s own.

Is there a lesson here for how we conduct postdigital scholarship? I note how something which resembles the aleph must already exist for me to even write this piece, given that all the connections and references were found online via the workstation in my office; all points were accessed from a single point. Somewhat predictably, I did not have to travel apart from a short trip to the university library, a trip which in time the digitalisation of text will render unnecessary. But this raises a more serious point about the role the digital archive plays in an increasingly precarious academic existence. When the resources for field trips, off-campus archival research and extended, more speculative, research projects are harder and harder to come by, will the digital archive somehow make such changes both inevitable and easier to swallow? Is academic precarity and the postdigital age somehow in cahoots; both entwined in a death spiral or intellectual race to the bottom? Or will this dependence on the digital require that we re-orient the economies of both research and knowledge? Perhaps this predictably “witless” exercise will even be erased completely, once the algorithms are

written to automate these connections and suggestions. And what will this mean for scholarship and for thinking, for science, theory and education, when data is collected at dizzying scale and speed, and when the research papers which analyse that data are all written in advance? Where and how will a thinking of the postdigital occur when even the most traditional watchtowers of academia are themselves populated by bots?

Perhaps Daneri's watchtower symbolises a monument to a certain fantasy of the digital that it is now the task of the postdigital to re-read, re-visit and re-think. What is it about the desire to see everything which relates the very ancient with the very modern? Does it acknowledge some primal fear of the dark, of the not-seen and the unknown; a fear which the digital era, with its big data and ubiquitous surveillance, seems better equipped to resist? One response might again come from the narrator of Borges' story. For him, the aleph is ineffable, it is an unthinkable element, and yet an element it still behoves both Daneri and the narrator to try to document, capture and archive. The aleph stands for both the desire to see everything, *and the impossibility of seeing everything*. If Daneri's poem, which depicts the visions of the aleph, as well as the short story itself, is the after-effect of a traumatic ineffability which also resists representation, but which *in that resistance* provokes the very *potential for* thinking, then there will always be a chance for further scholarship, and for further thought to occur. Indeed, if an irreducible ineffability is encrypted at the heart of scholarship itself, then so is the possibility of difference, and therefore the very driver of academic endeavour. What might be called the "event" of thinking and writing, of poetry, art, scholarship and education, is an event which, at its ineffable heart, remains resistant to any final or definitive definition or computation.

In the postscript to the story, the narrator adds two considerations related to the naming of the aleph, as well as to its nature. He asks if Daneri *chose* the name of the revelatory object as the aleph, or if he read of its existence in one of the texts revealed to him by that very aleph. In other words, might Daneri's aleph be itself the documenting of another, more originary and therefore more primary aleph, and therefore (as there can only be one primal point in space) could Daneri's aleph be false? The second consideration regarding the nature of the aleph concerns a manuscript attributed to a Captain Burton, a British consul who remarks upon reading descriptions and depictions of other similar revelatory objects that:

all the foregoing (besides sharing the defect of not existing) are mere optical instruments. The faithful who come to the Amr mosque in Cairo, know very well that the universe lies inside one of the stone columns that surround the central courtyard... No one, of course, can see it, but those who put their ear to the surface claim to hear, within a short time, the bustling rumour of it... (Borges 1998: 285).

The "real" aleph, then, *resists* the ocular, itself a privileged sense of western culture, and instead the rumours of its existence are encrypted in a stone pillar where they await those prepared to listen. This pillar marks, encodes or archives the ineffable; it is a monument to the possibility of thinking the impossible. The capacity to locate and to listen for such rumours cannot be pre-programmed; such capacities are driven by a certain faith, are quasi-instinctual, and the product of what could be endless and

unplottable wanderings amongst the ruins. The thinking of the ineffable, then, demands its inscription in multiple ways, in multiple spaces, and over multiple temporalities. In the eternal presence or hyper-synchronisation of the digital archive, it is the (re)introduction of durations and diachronicities as the space-time of thought, as the weave of spatio-temporalities into whose gaps, cracks, and stone pillars are encrypted the rumours which are both the call to think *and* the impossibility of thinking everything once and for all.

The awakening of a capacity to think the unthinkable remains, I suggest, one of key responsibilities of the postdigital approach, certainly of postdigital science (broadly understood as inquiry), and, as its corollary, of postdigital education. To recognise that the condition of thought and knowledge is the ineffable and the unknowable, that there is always a point which cannot be automated, digitised, and brought to light, but which is the very condition of these endeavours, is a logic which remains the task of the postdigital to come to terms with. To do this in a way which might out-run a certain witless predictability is a quality which might imbue a certain postdigital erudition, and would act as imperative for all scholars of the ineffable to continue to listen for rumours of its whereabouts.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

References

- Borges, J. L. (1998). The aleph. In J. L. Borges (Ed.), *Collected fictions*. London: Penguin.
- Jandrić, P., Knox, J., Besley, T., Ryberg, T., Suoranta, J., & Hayes, S. (2018). Postdigital science and education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(10), 893–899. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1454000>.
- Sacks, D. (2003). *The alphabet*. London: Arrow.