

“Of *a/0* in the work of Borges”

In this paper I investigate the ways in which scale is conveyed in the work of Jorge Luis Borges. I argue that Borges expresses notions of incomprehensible scale via three avenues that may subvert the “traditional” literary form: enumeration, excess, and infinite regression.

In “The Library of Babel,” “The Aleph,” “The Zahir,” and “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” Borges depicts scale through enumerating objects and concepts, at times randomly selected, and at times seemingly arbitrarily classified. The randomness and arbitrariness suggest vast magnitudes of possibility. The stories “The Library of Babel,” “The Garden of Forking Paths,” “The Book of Sand,” “Funes the Memorious,” “On Exactitude in Science,” “Shakespeare’s Memory,” and “The Immortal” all express stunning magnitudes: of combination, decision, information, memory, space, and time. The story “The Circular Ruins” and the essay “Partial Magic in the *Quixote*” illustrate dizzying recursions that stretch our imagination of scale.

In *The Infinity of Lists*, Umberto Eco holds that there is a type of artistic representation wherein “we do not know the boundaries of what we wish to portray. . . . We cannot provide a definition by essence and so, to be able to talk about it, to make it comprehensible or in some way perceivable, we list its properties . . .” (15). This explanation conveys that list-making is a means by which we define and therefore understand something which otherwise would be too ambiguous or chaotic. The tropes of enumeration, excess, and infinite regression likewise approximate a description of the indescribable.

Mathematician William Goldbloom Bloch published *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges’ Library of Babel*, which details his perspective on the permutations and combinations presented in Borges’ story. Jamie Alazraki and Edna Aizenberg have written extensively about the instances of Kabbalistic thought in Borges’ oeuvre, and these often link to infinity, combinatorics, and the ineffable.

By exploring the aforementioned depictions of scale in the work of Borges and drawing on Eco, Bloch, Alazraki, and Aizenberg, I am interested in delineating the ways in which narrative tropes succeed – through creative form – in imparting otherwise ephemeral and abstract concepts of magnitude.