To my father, mother, sister, and two brothers
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LOCATING FEMALE EXPERIMENTAL STYLISTICS WITHIN AVANT-GARDE AESTHETICISM: JORGE LUIS BORGES, MARY CAPONEGRO, AND CAROLE MASO

By

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My paper situates contemporary female experimental writing within an avant-garde tradition of amoral aestheticism, by drawing out how “metafiction” has progressed from Jorge Luis Borges’s apolitical critiques of Realism to Mary Caponegro and Carole Maso’s tentatively feminist, self-consciously aesthetic narratives. To this end, I compare Borges’s “El Aleph” with Caponegro’s “The Star Café” and Borges’s “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” with Maso’s AVA. As I show, in both of his stories, Borges uses fantasy to deconstruct the Realist tradition: in “El Aleph,” he proposes a ‘surreal portal,’ through which the protagonist seems metaphorically dropped into a Realist narrative; in “El jardín,” he proposes an ‘infinite novel,’ consisting of all possible plotlines, which seems a parody of the Realist novel’s assurances of narrative certainty. In “The Star Café” and AVA, Caponegro and Maso can be seen as writing into Borges’s fantastic proposals, not to critique Realism, but to champion anti-mimetic art: in “The Star Café,” Caponegro reconfigures the ‘surreal portal,’ to have her protagonist seemingly metaphorically released into an anti-Realist narrative; in AVA, Maso reconfigures the ‘infinite novel,’ to create a non-linear piece, designed to elude closure at every turn, allowing infinite interpretive possibilities. However, whereas Caponegro
creates in her story a realm of questions left unanswered about gender and literature, seemingly offering the reader no 'message,' Maso infuses her novel with a self-contradictory didactic quality, as she seemingly uses her protagonist to advocate for her own marginalized views on feminism and formally experimental, non-didactic art.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Of the many difficulties one confronts in attempting to theorize innovative female writing’s relationship to both feminism and the male avant-garde, perhaps the most fundamental is precisely that experimental stylistics (at least, as they have been developed over the 20th and 21st century) are designed to elude rational interpretation. Mainstream feminist literary circles have long found this aspect of experimental female writing objectionable, preferring a conventional view of language as transparent and thus capable of representing female specificity and difference (Hite 13–6). However, post-structuralist feminists—including such notable writers as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Mary Jacobus—have tended to regard experimental stylistics as intrinsically feminist, as functioning to “inscribe femininity” by disrupting formalized communication modes in which they argue the patriarchal symbolic order inheres. Yet, as Marianne DeKoven points out, this perspective is difficult to maintain in light of the similarity between female and male experimental writing, with both traditions’ shared emphasis upon (and similar tactics for) disrupting the ‘coherent text’ (72). As DeKoven shows, post-structuralist feminists have been forced to grapple with this contradiction by either embracing male experimental writing as part of écriture féminine and thus reinforcing society’s privileging of the male avant-garde, or appropriating experimental stylistics for women’s writing and denying the existence of a separate avant-garde tradition (72–8).

A deeper problem with the post-structuralist feminist position, in my view, is how it fails to accept much female experimental writing on its own terms. While certainly many female experimental writers have political intentions for their work, many others
connect to a competing avant-garde tradition of skepticism of politically or socially committed art. Moreover, I would argue that, precisely because experimental stylistics function to obscure reality, even those experimental writers who are politically motivated may find that their writing resists conveying the message they intend. Giving lie to the critical notion that formal devices arrive already imbued with determinate political effects, Johnny Payne points comically to the fact that the Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges, commonly regarded to have been a political reactionary during his lifetime, has been criticized for crafting an ‘apolitical’ or right-wing aesthetic, even as Borges employs techniques distinctly similar to those found in the fictions of Luisa Valenzuela, William Burroughs, and Kathy Acker, all well-known leftists, whom critics have lauded for producing radically progressive fictive realms (197).

In my view, female experimental writing merits greater attention than it currently receives for its explorations of the freeing potential of form. According to the late British experimental novelist, Christine Brooke-Rose, the female experimental writer who does not write exclusively, or even mostly, on gender themes is perhaps the least likely writer to be read: not only does she face the indifference of the mainstream literary community and the male avant-garde, she also tends to be overlooked by feminist critics devoted to women’s writing, who are often more focused on gender issues than artistic possibility (67). Nonetheless, many female experimental writers continue to shape their work around a desire to provide the reader a space for imaginative freedom, where the reader can wander free from the writer’s desire to ‘control’ her with a message, feminist or otherwise. Indeed, many female (and male) experimental writers express a desire to attain for their writing the purity of music, an art form conceived of as consisting entirely
in style, lacking content (Benson 123). Ironically, the most controversial aspect of female experimental stylistics, then, may be its focus on aesthetics over practical concerns, its suggestion that art has intrinsic value.

In this paper, I would like to draw attention to two of the most formally subversive fiction writers in America today, both women, Mary Caponegro and Carole Maso, to suggest how (and why) their work opens the reader into a self-consciously aesthetic realm. While both Caponegro and Maso owe demonstrable literary debts to earlier female writers—including, most importantly, Virginia Woolf—I can best serve my paper's intention by drawing out the presence of a common male precursor in their fiction, Jorge Luis Borges. I agree with Herman Rapaport that Borges, perhaps more than any other writer, has used his fiction to dramatize the problematic of reading, calling attention both to the impossibility of a 'readable' text, as well as to the inevitability of the reader falsely presuming just this possibility (140–1). Seeking Borges's presence in Caponegro and Maso's work opens up a way of reading their fiction as a form of grappling with this problematic. As I hope to show, Caponegro and Maso's fiction can be fruitfully read as writing into what Borges suggests constitutes “el inefable centro” “the ineffable core” of the Realist literary tradition. From this “inefable centro,” in which the assurances of referential language collapse, I believe Caponegro and Maso suggest that literature, though perhaps too unwieldy to offer remedies for worldly problems, may serve a quieter purpose for readers: extending release from the strain of being human.

Importantly, Borges, writing in Argentina in the 1920s, was an early pioneer of many of the key literary critical notions which have dominated Euro-American literary circles for the last fifty years. He independently developed a theory of literature as an
exploration of form and syntax, rather than of content, believing that literary novelty can only consist in the crafting of old ideas into new forms (Alazraki 101–5). Although the Russian Formalists were cultivating similar ideas during the same period, their work was not introduced into western Europe until the 1940s, and Borges was almost certainly unfamiliar with it (Alazraki 105). Moreover, unlike the Russian Formalist critics, Borges considered himself primarily a creative writer, and tinkered in literary theory mostly to hone his craft (Alazraki 105); thus, he must be acknowledged as one of the first writers to model his creative work upon these ideas of literature. At the same time, given that Russian Formalism led the way for French structuralism and post-structuralism, Borges can also be seen as anticipating these important critical movements (Alazraki 105), which presented literature and formalized language as “structures,” or systems of knowledge that determine and stabilize meaning through a fixed interpretive framework. In particular, as Jaime Alazraki and Johnny Payne demonstrate, Roland Barthes’s 1953 *Writing Degree Zero* overlaps with many of Borges’s ideas (Alazraki 107; Payne 98). In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes privileges form over content, arguing that formal conventions reproduce hegemonic ideologies and binary modes of consciousness. In Barthes’s view, only through ceaseless experimentation, through the creation of original forms, can the writer topple the literary structure, to liberate her writing from ideology, and compose the ideal, third-way, politically neutral, “writing at the zero degree” (74–8). Like Barthes, Borges was strongly opposed to politically motivated art, and believed in the possibility of literary experimentation opening an apolitical realm (González 4). Borges stressed that he had no didactic purpose for his fiction, claiming, “I have no
intentions,” and instead advocated for a view of his work as “a kind of juggling” of “just words” (Tanner 165).

Another key literary critical notion of which Borges was an early practitioner is “intertextuality.” Although the term itself would not be coined until 1969—notably, by the influential post-structuralist feminist, Julia Kristeva (Desire 36–8)—the concept of “intertextuality” itself can be easily detected in Borges’s view of literature. As Alzraki puts it, Borges conceives of literature, “not as an archipelago of isolated texts but as a written continent that comprises one single text” (101). In other words, for Borges, texts do not live isolated from one another within the borders of their physical surfaces, but rather exist in unity, as they all confer meaning upon and derive meaning from one other.

With this view of literature, Borges also became one of the first writers of “metafiction,” a term only coined in 1970 by William Gass to refer to fictions which self-consciously reflect upon the nature of fiction (25). Borges’s signature narrative approach consists of a metafiction which, as Robert Chibka argues, functions to deconstruct Realist fiction from within a seemingly Realist form (117). Importantly, Mary Caponegro and Carole Maso also predominantly compose metafictions. Yet, whereas Borges uses the ‘metafictional’ property of his stories mostly to deconstruct Realism, Caponegro and Maso seem to accept and move beyond his critique of Realism, using the ‘metafictional’ property of their narratives to stress the astonishing—and beautiful—possibilities of a sheer ‘aesthetic’ space, divorced from the fallacies of mimesis. Indeed, Caponegro and Maso employ the ‘metafictional’ property of their narratives, among other reasons, to hint to the reader how she might enter into their own highly stylized
pieces. Caponegro, a writer of short stories and novellas, crafts densely worded, syntactically playful stories of surrealistic and fabulist content. Maso, a novelist, composes non-linear, image-driven, lyrical fictions, replete with typographical blanks representing textual silences. Through the ‘metafictional’ property of their writing, Caponegro and Maso indicate their hopes for their unconventional writings, that the reader find might within their pages a space, freed from the authorial control of the Realist tradition, for imaginative freedom and aesthetic joy.

Whether or not Caponegro and Maso should be identified with the tradition of écriture féminine is a difficult question, given the theoretical complications of that term. When Hélène Cixous developed the concept of “écriture féminine,” a term she first coined in her 1975 essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” she was working within the French post-structuralist literary critical school. Within this school, Jacques Derrida—who, one might note, was heavily influenced by Borges’s writings (Monegal 128)—stresses the hegemonic control of what he terms “phallogocentrism” in Western discourse and thought. For Derrida, language is “phallogocentric,” because it is both “logocentric” (organized by a faith in referential language, the rules of logic, and the existence of an objective and knowable reality) and “phallocentric” (functioning to privilege male power, and also relying upon the “phallus” as its chief signifier and source of legitimacy) (Dely 5–6). Accepting Derrida’s argument, Cixous concludes that “[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing” (309), by disrupting conventional literary forms as well as standardized language codes to challenge the philosophies of determinacy and male superiority at the same time. In this way, Cixous argues, women can communicate their experience of the female body,
with its more circular, passive, and elusive sexuality, “its thousand and one thresholds of ardor” (315). Not surprisingly, feminists have criticized Cixous for the biological essentialism underpinning her explanation of ‘women’s writing’ (Frost xxii). However, to suggest that Cixous attempts to carve out a distinct ‘women’s sphere’ in literature, based on biological difference, would be too simplistic: in fact, feminists have also criticized her for extolling James Joyce as her exemplar writer of the ‘feminine,’ to the neglect of earlier, and arguably more radical, female writers, such as Gertrude Stein (Howe 12). What becomes clear as one attempts to parse Cixous’s concept of écriture féminine is that the desire to subvert both the philosophy of determinacy and patriarchal power at once creates a double bind, as these two objectives frequently emerge in conflict; to this end, one might argue that feminism (or any political movement) relies upon a degree of logocentrism to stake its claims. Of course, by the same token, because Cixous argues against the import of logic, that her theory of écriture féminine is rife with contradictions need not necessarily be viewed as troublesome.

In any case, as shown, Cixous advocates an approach to writing nearly indistinguishable from that which Barthes and Borges advocate, and yet, she ironically views this writing as politically positive, functioning to challenge patriarchal norms, whereas Barthes and Borges view it as politically neutral, functioning to sever the link between literature and the world. Meanwhile, Caponegro and Maso arguably represent opposite poles in their views on the relationship between experimental stylistics and ‘woman’s writing.’ Caponegro has expressed her “great resistance … to gendered categories … when interpreting literature” (Interview, Palleau-Papin 18–19), presumably because she fears how such categories prefigure the reading experience, when she
prefers to view literature as a sphere of indeterminacy. Meanwhile, Maso emphatically proclaims experimental stylistics (or what she calls, “hybrid forms—fluid, porous, strange, bleeding texts”) as “feminine” (Interview, Evenson), and frequently acknowledges her debt to Cixous. Despite these distinct perspectives, Caponegro and Maso notably both introduce issues of gender difference and inequality into their fiction. At the same time, both writers stress equal levels of commitment to the primacy of aesthetics—not ideology—in fiction. For these writers, literature exists, not to dominate the reader with the author’s (false) political beliefs and perceptions of reality, but to offer her aesthetic joy as consolation for the incomprehensibility of the world. As Maso puts it, “But I do believe, and no doubt childishly, unquestioningly, in the supremacy of beauty, in pattern, in language, as a child believes in language, in diversity, in the possibility of justice—” (“Rupture” 175). As Caponegro puts it, “Art is our solace; it’s certainly mine” (Interview, Madera).

To reveal why Caponegro and Maso maintain such an idealized view of aesthetics, I propose to draw out Borges’s influence upon their work, to show how his conception of fiction—and, moreover, metafiction—continues to shape contemporary writers’ aesthetic objectives. To show how metafiction has progressed from Borges’s apolitical critique of Realism to Caponegro and Maso’s tentatively feminist, self-consciously aesthetic narratives, I propose to compare Borges’s “El Aleph” “The Aleph” (1945) with Caponegro’s “The Star Cafe” (1985), and then Borges’s “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941) with Maso’s AVA (1993). In both “El Aleph” and “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” Borges proposes (but only proposes; does not attempt to portray) a distinct fantastic possibility,
in order to deconstruct the Realist tradition: in “El Aleph,” he proposes the existence of a ‘surreal portal,’ through which the protagonist can be interpreted as being metaphorically dropped into a Realist narrative; in “El jardín,” he proposes the existence of an ‘infinite novel,’ consisting of all possible plotlines, which can be interpreted as a parody of the Realist narrative’s assurances of narrative certainty. In “The Star Café” and AVA, Caponegro and Maso can be seen as writing into Borges’s fantastic proposals, into “el inefable centro” “the ineffable core” of the Realist tradition, not to critique Realism, but to champion anti-mimetic art: in “The Star Café,” Caponegro reconfigures the ‘surreal portal,’ to have her protagonist released into what can be metaphorically viewed as an anti-Realist narrative; in AVA, Maso reconfigures the ‘infinite novel,’ to create a non-linear highly experimental piece, designed to elude closure at every turn, to allow infinite interpretive possibilities. Writing after the development of Cixous’s concept of écriture féminine, Caponegro and Maso both incorporate gender issues into their fictions, while simultaneously suggesting a desire not to advocate ideas through their work, but to simply open the reader through aesthetics into new channels of perception. However, as I will show, a fundamental distinction emerges between the writers’ approaches: whereas Caponegro presents her story in an unusually humble manner, offering the reader a realm of questions left unanswered about gender and literature, Maso infuses her story with a self-contradictory didactic quality, as she uses her protagonist to articulate her own marginalized views on the importance of feminism, and moreover, formally experimental, non-didactic art.
CHAPTER 2
BORGES’S “EL ALEPH” AND CAPONEGRO’S “THE STAR CAFÉ”: CONVERTING THE ‘SURREAL PORTAL’ FROM A DOOR TO COMPLETE OBJECTIVITY (THE REALIST NARRATIVE) INTO A DOOR TO COMPLETE SUBJECTIVITY (ANTI-MIMETIC ART)

Opening Argument

Linked by subject matter, Borges’s “El Aleph” and Caponegro’s “The Star Café” seem ripe for comparison, with both stories depicting a protagonist who stumbles upon what might be described as a surreal portal, which opens him into ‘reality’ from an utterly new angle. In both stories, the protagonist’s incredible experience through the portal can be read as a ‘metafictional’ entry into a certain kind of narrative approach. However, whereas Borges seems to use the surreal portal to introduce his protagonist metaphorically into the ‘Realist narrative,’ Caponegro seems to release her protagonist metaphorically into an anti-mimetic narrative. Also, notably, whereas Borges’s story portrays a span of fourteen years of the protagonist’s life and thus only briefly describes the protagonist’s experience in the portal, Caponegro’s story is made up entirely of her protagonist’s experience in the portal, opening only moments before the protagonist enters and concluding only moments after she exits. To my mind, then, whereas Borges employs his protagonist’s fantastic experience as a tool to undermine his story’s predominately Realist narration, Caponegro seems to seize upon Borges’s projection of a fantastic experience as a potentially productive site for constructing a new, more open aesthetic form. In this form, Caponegro offers lush, resonant sentences, designed to allow the reader freedom to luxuriate in what Nabokov called “aesthetic bliss” (316). At the same time, Caponegro notably introduces gender issues into her story. However, rather than offer didactic messages to the reader, she situates these issues within a
realm of questions, where the reader might think through, free from authorial control, what answers such questions might yield.

**Borges’s “El Aleph”**

In “El Aleph,” Borges casts the surreal portal as an “Aleph,” a small sphere which displays all of the points on the globe, from every angle, without overlapping. His protagonist’s deeply affecting and troubling experience in the “Aleph” becomes a locus for the story’s greater reflections upon the nature of Realism and its claims to project “objective truth.” If, as James Wood argues, the Realist impulse consists in convincing the reader that the story “could have happened” (238), Borges, in “El Aleph,” carries that impulse to a comic extreme, presenting his story as an essay, thus literally encouraging the reader to wonder if the story is true. Most conspicuously, he names his protagonist, who speaks in the first person, “Borges,” and sets the story in his hometown of Buenos Aires. At the same time, he floods his story with a continuous stream of seemingly unnecessarily precise and abstruse references to actual (though little-known) geographical locations, historical artifacts, and cultural practices: for example, to the Mexican city of Querétaro, Michael Drayton’s epic poem from the Elizabethan era, *Poly-Olbion*, and various Mystic symbols for the ‘ineffable.’ Through this overstated intellectual strutting, Borges renders his reader passive to his seemingly boundless knowledge, his reliability—as sure as that of an encyclopedia—as an arbiter of truth. However, when Borges suddenly turns the tables, and introduces an element of the fantastic—the “Aleph”—into his rigidly realistic narration, the reader becomes fully conscious of Borges’s role as manipulator. In this way, Borges shines a light on the subtler manipulations of the Realist writer, who is similarly guilty of attempting to
persuade the reader of the ‘truth’ of his fiction, but, unlike Borges, never reveals the façade. At the same time, I would argue Borges, unfortunately, also acts in this way to connect himself to a more egotistical tradition of the (typically male) artist as “genius”—posturing here as a subversive master, out to dupe and expose the mindlessly conventional masses.

That said, Borges goes to lengths in “El Aleph” to suggest that all people live in delusions, that people invent whole worlds for themselves in their minds. As the story opens, Borges’s protagonist, “Borges,” is revealed to have been living a delusion for years, as he mourns the death of his longtime unrequited love, Beatriz Viterbo, who, during her lifetime, amply conveyed her indifference toward him. While Beatriz was living, “Borges” continually made visits to her house, in spite of her clear disinterest, justifying his presence with gifts of books. However, to pre-emptively protect himself from any painful disruptions of his delusion, he reveals that he finally learned to cut the pages of these books in advance, “para no comprobar, meses después, que estaban intactos” (156) “so as not to find out, months later, that they lay around unopened” (Monegal and Reid 155). Subconsciously aware of his status as an unwanted guest in Beatriz’s life, “Borges” seems to actually find some relief in Beatriz’s death, because now he can continue to indulge his obsession with her, without feeling her irritation. He plans to start visiting her home every year on her birthday; he says, “Consideré que el treinta de abril era su cumpleaños; visitar ese día la casa de la calle Garay para saludar a su padre y a Carlos Argentino Daneri, su primo hermano, era un acto cortés, irreprochable, tal vez ineludible” (156) “I recalled that April 30th was her birthday; on that day to visit her house on Garay Street and pay my respects to her father and to Carlos
Argentino Daneri, her first cousin, would be an irreproachable and perhaps unavoidable act of politeness” (Monegal and Reid 155). The superfluity of euphemistic adjectives at the end of this sentence reveals “Borges’s” efforts to mentally reinforce his own delusion, crafting a socially acceptable veneer for his pitiful behavior. He then goes on to describe how he manages to burrow into Mr. Viterbo and Daneri’s lives: each year on Beatriz’s birthday, he shows up a bit later in the evening, until one year, due to a storm, the hosts find themselves obligated to invite him to stay for dinner, an opportunity which “Borges” seizes on as “un buen precedente” (157) “a lucky precedent” (Monegal and Reid 155) for what he converts into a yearly tradition. In this way, “Borges” shows how he brings his delusion into reality, successfully imposing himself on Beatriz’s family with seemingly no encouragement from them.

Comically, once “Borges” establishes a relationship with Beatriz’s family, he then finds the situation inverted, as Daneri begins to impose himself on “Borges.” Daneri, a pompous library employee, lectures “Borges” on his conception of “el hombre moderno” (158) “modern man” (Monegal and Reid 155), and reads to “Borges” from his appallingly poorly written long poem-in-progress, in which he plans to describe every point on the planet. Only later does Daneri confess to “Borges” over the telephone the source of his poem: the presence of an Aleph—“el lugar donde están, sin confundirse, todos los lugares del orbe, vistos desde todos los ángulos” (166) “the only place on earth where all places are seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending” (Monegal and Reid 159)—located in his home basement. Taking Daneri’s ‘confession’ as proof of Daneri’s madness, “Borges” demands to see the Aleph immediately, and heads over to Daneri’s house. At Daneri’s house, Daneri invites
“Borges” down into the basement, but not before serving him “una copita del seudo-coñac” (167) “a glass of pseudo-cognac” (Monegal and Reid 160). Then, “Borges” descends the stairs to the basement—or what Ludmila Kapschutschenko views as representing, “las regiones más profundas y oscuras—representativas del Caos” (30) “the deepest and darkest regions, representative of Chaos”—and lies down alone in the dark, staring up at the nineteenth step as Daneri prescribed. Suddenly, he becomes stricken with panic:

Súbitamente comprendí mi peligro: me había dejado soterrar por un loco, luego de tomar un veneno. Las bravatas de Carlos transparentaban el íntimo terror de que yo no vier a prodigio; Carlos, para defender su delirio, para no saber que estab loco, tenía que matarme. (168)

For the first time, I realized the danger I was in: I’d let myself be locked in a cellar by a lunatic, after gulping down a glassful of poison! I knew that back of Carlos’s transparent boasting lay a deep fear that I might not see the promised wonder. To keep his madness undetected, to keep from admitting he was mad, Carlos had to kill me. (Monegal and Reid 160)

In other words, just as “Borges” had worked to protect his delusion about Beatriz by preemptively cutting the pages of the books he gave to her, “Borges” believes that Daneri has decided to murder “Borges,” in order to protect his own delusion of the existence of the Aleph, and by extension, the value of Daneri’s long poem. In mellifluous language, Borges captures his protagonist’s desperate attempt to distract himself from his fear:

“Sentí un confuso malestar, que traté de atribuir a la rigidez, y no a la operación de un narcótico. Cerré los ojos, los abrí. Entonces vi el Aleph” (168) “I felt a shock of panic, which I tried to pin to my uncomfortable position and not to the effect of a drug. I shut my eyes—I opened them. Then I saw the Aleph” (Monegal and Reid 160). With the passage’s final three independent clauses, short and punctuated, alternating iambic

---

1 Translation mine.
tetrameter’ and ‘iambic trimeter’ (or something like, in prose), recalling perhaps the opening two lines of a hymn, Borges evokes formally his protagonist’s own surprise when the Aleph emerges (like a vision of “amazing grace”?), allowing the reader to experience this surprise linguistically as well.

In the story’s following two very long paragraphs, spanning roughly three pages, “Borges” attempts to describe his vision of the “Aleph.” However, immediately, he stresses his inability to do so, inviting the reader to view his experience in the ‘Aleph’ as beyond the scope of language:

Arribo, ahora, al inefable centro de mi relato; empieza, aquí, mi desesperación de escritor. Todo lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos cuyo ejercicio presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten; ¿cómo transmitir a los otros el infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca? (168)

I arrive now at the ineffable core of my story. And here begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? (Monegal and Reid 160)

In this way, “Borges” offers a profound critique of the writer’s artistic tool—language—arguing that this tool faces limitations, precisely because it serves a social function. He suggests that, even as human beings employ language in order to make themselves comprehensible to one another, language simultaneously pre-supposes a certain commonality of experience between users, in order to function ‘properly.’ When that commonality of experience cannot be presumed, “Borges” suggests, the system of communication breaks down.
Beyond that, “Borges” explains that, in his view, the temporal nature of language renders it incapable of conveying what he considers the most miraculous aspect of his vision of the Aleph. As he explains:

*En ese instante gigantesco, he visto millones de actos deleitables o atroces; ninguno me asombró como el hecho de que todos ocuparon el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es.* (169)

In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive.” (Monegal and Reid 161)

Again, “Borges,” here, calls attention to the inability of language to convey his spectacular experience, implicitly encouraging the reader to use her imagination to conjure what language cannot express. Then, somewhat ironically, “Borges” makes an effort to describe what he saw. In a long sentence, consisting of thirty-seven independent clauses beginning with “vi,” he says, *“Vi el populoso mar, vi el alba y la tarde, vi las muchedumbres de América, vi una plateada telaraña en el centro de una negra pirámide, vi un laberinto roto (era Londres)...”* (169–70) “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)...” (Monegal and Reid 161). By creating parallel clauses, beginning with a repeated “vi,” “Borges” asks the reader to keep in the foreground of her mind the fact that all of these images emerged before his eyes simultaneously. As the long sentence finally nears its conclusion, “Borges” adds, *“y sentí vertigo y lloré, porque mis ojos habían visto ese objeto secreto y conjetural, cuyo nombre usurpan los hombres pero que ningún hombre...”*
ha mirado: el inconcebible universo” (171) “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” (Monegal and Reid 161). With this conclusion, “Borges” transitions from describing (a few of his) observations from within the Aleph to describing his own powerfully emotional response to these observations. It is this powerful emotional response which then carries “Borges” to the story’s ostensible conclusion (prior to the post-script). When Daneri interrupts “Borges” from his vision in the Aleph, and “Borges” ascends from the cellar, “Borges” is distraught, rather than exhilarated, from the knowledge he has acquired. He gazes upon Daneri with pity, and leaves the house in a rush, “nervioso, evasivo” (171) “distraught, evasive” (Monegal and Reid 162). Back on the streets of Buenos Aires, he believes, with terror, that he recognizes every face around him; he says, “temí que no me abandonara jamás la impression de volver” (172) “I was afraid I would never again be free of all I had seen” (Monegal and Reid 162). In this way, “Borges” suggests his terror that he may never be able to return comfortably to his former position in the universal order. He finds his world suddenly depleted of mystery, and he has become depressed. In Borges’s hands, transitioning from blindness to vision is not restorative, but rather deeply painful.

While Borges’s concept of the Aleph—a site from which the entire world can be seen, from every angle—is an exceptionally rich symbol, which critics may never finish mining, I would argue that the text privileges two particular readings of this symbol, as representing either the false projection of ‘objective truth’ made in Realist literature or
the concept of ‘objective truth’ itself. Both of these readings derive from Borges’s portrayal of Daneri, the Aleph’s ‘owner.’

Supporting the first reading, Borges seems to go to lengths to offer Daneri as a satiric portrait of the Realist writer whom Borges defines himself against. As Jonathan Stuart Butler points out, Borges treats Daneri with a light tone, and always presents his poem to the reader as a source of comic absurdity (366). Even as Daneri’s poetry is characterized by “degenerate rhetoric, cacophony, chaos, extravagance, and metrical clumsiness,” Daneri’s supposed unique vision into reality, afforded by his Aleph, renders his writing valuable, by the standards of Realism (Núñez-Faraco 623). By this reading, the Aleph can be seen as a metaphor for the Realist writer’s (false) claim to possess privileged insight into the nature of reality. When Daneri mentions to “Borges” that he is composing a poem, “Borges” explains that he felt compelled in politeness, to ask to hear it: “Borges” says, “Le rogué que me leyera un pasaje, aunque fuera breve” (158) “I asked him to read me a passage, if only a short one” (Monegal and Reid 156), comically underlining “Borges’s” desire for the passage to be as brief as possible. Evidently, Daneri does not pick up on the hint, because Borges then devotes more than three pages of the nineteen-paged story to describing Daneri’s readings from and discussion of his abysmal poem. Notably, when “Borges” describes what he saw in the Aleph, he includes: “vi todos los espejos del planeta y ninguno me reflejó” (170) “I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me” (Monegal and Reid 161). With this powerful line, Borges suggests that Daneri’s unbearable egotism is an intrinsic trait of the Realist author, who conceives of himself as transforming into what Ralph Waldo
Emerson famously called the “transparent eyeball,” becoming capable of mirroring reality objectively, from a perspective unfiltered by the ‘self.’

On the other hand, Daneri’s comments also suggest that the Aleph may literally represent ‘objective truth,’ rather than the false claim to objective truth implied by Realist writers. When Daneri expounds to “Borges” on his views on ‘modern man,’ he eloquently suggests that human beings are undergoing radical changes in their nature, due to the unprecedented amount of knowledge becoming available to them, through technology:

“Lo evoco,” [Daneri] dijo con una animación algo inexplicable, “en su gabinete de estudio, como si dijéramos en la torre albarrana de una ciudad, provisto de teléfonos, de telégrafos, de fonógrafos, de aparatos de radiotelefonía, de cinematógrafos, de linternas mágicas, de glosarios, de horarios, de prontuarios, de boletines…”

[Daneri] observó que para un hombre así facultado el acto de viajar era inútil; nuestro siglo XX había transformado la fábula de Mahoma y de la montaña; las montañas, ahora, convergían sobre el moderno Mahoma. (158)

“I view him,” he said with a certain unaccountable excitement, “in his inner sanctum, as though in his castle tower, supplied with telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, wireless sets, motion-picture screens, slide projectors, glossaries, timetables, handbooks, bulletins…”

[Daneri] remarked that for a man so equipped, actual travel was superfluous. Our twentieth century had inverted the story of Mohammed and the mountain; nowadays, the mountain came to the modern Mohammed. (Monegal and Reid 156)

In other words, Daneri holds that technology is becoming so advanced that human beings no longer need to physically explore; they can satisfy their curiosity about the world from within their own homes or offices. In this way, the ‘Aleph’ seems to function, then, as a metaphor for technology, which does allow human beings something like greater ‘objective knowledge’ of the world; indeed, for this 2012 reader, the Aleph recalls nothing so much as a highly advanced version of Google Map. Yet, Daneri’s
optimistic view of these ‘advancements’ upon human experience—conveyed both by his visible enthusiasm as well as by his playful rhymes (‘teléfonos, “telégrafos,” “fonógrafos,” etc.; “glosarios,” “horarios,” “prontuarios”) (“telephones, telegraphs, phonographs,” etc.; “glossaries, timetables, handbooks”)—contrasts sharply with “Borges’s” disturbing experience in seeing the Aleph. For “Borges,” the depletion of mystery in the world is nothing to celebrate. For him, it seems, technology is actually making the world too small, claustrophobic. Indeed, the adjective, “claustrophobic,” seems a particularly apt description, modifying Daneri’s image to suggest the mountains closing in on Mohammed.

However the ‘Aleph’ should be interpreted, whether as a symbol for the Realist writer’s false claim to objective truth, or objective truth itself, its impact upon “Borges” remains the same: when he leaves Daneri’s house for the streets of Buenos Aires, he becomes stricken with the fear that he would never again be treated to the pleasure of surprise. To this end, Borges suggests that Realism is destructive, not only (or even primarily) because its projection of ‘reality’ is false, but because it offers a ‘complete’ picture, whether true or false, denying the human longing for mystery.

That said, Borges demonstrates that “Borges” need not have worried. Ostensibly concluding the story, “Borges” explains that his sense of panic did not last long: “Temí que no quedara una sola cosa capaz de sorprenderme, temí que no me abandonara jamás la impresión de volver. Felizmente, al cabo de unas noches de insomnio, me trabajó otra vez el olvido” (172). “I was afraid that not a single thing on earth would ever again surprise me; I was afraid I would never again be free of all I had seen. Happily, after a few sleepless nights, I was visited once more by oblivion”
(Monegal and Reid 162). With this passage, Borges comically highlights the fleeting nature of human perceptions, by transitioning so abruptly from portraying “Borges’s” melodramatic trepidation to his blithe forgetfulness.

In a surprising twist, Borges re-opens the story after the ostensible conclusion with a postscript, dated “March 1, 1943.” As Pedro Ramírez Molas puts it, the postscript functions as the story’s “irónica refutación de sí mismo” (46) “ironic refutation of itself,” with “Borges” explaining that he has come to believe that Daneri’s Aleph was “un falso Aleph” (173) “a false Aleph” (Monegal and Reid 163). He reveals that he now speculates that a true Aleph lies within a stone pillar in the mosque of Amr, in Cairo. “Borges” poses rhetorical questions about this perceived Aleph: “¿Existe ese Aleph en lo íntimo de una piedra? ¿Lo he visto cuando vi todas las cosas y lo he olvidado?” (176) “Does this Aleph exist in the heart of a stone? Did I see it there in the cellar when I saw all things, and have I now forgotten it?” (Monegal and Reid 163). However, rather than proposing answers to these questions, or to the many questions they inspire—including (1) how might one distinguish between a false and true Aleph?, and (2) how would it look to view an Aleph through an Aleph?—“Borges” leaves the questions ringing in the air, as he closes the postscript. He only adds, “Nuestra mente es porosa para el olvido; yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo, bajo la trágica erosión de los años, los rasgos de Beatriz” (176) “Our minds are porous and forgetfulness seeps in; I myself am distorting and losing, under the wearing away of the years, the face of Beatriz” (Monegal and Reid 163). With this final line, “Borges” reveals that, despite his best intentions to remain true to Beatriz’s memory, he has begun to move on even from

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2 Translation mine.
her. By describing the mind as “porosa” “porous,” he suggests that maintaining rigid positions or beliefs—in “Borges’s” case, staying wedded to his attachment to Beatriz—is antithetical to the constantly shifting, mutable nature of human perceptions. A vision of the ‘Aleph’—whether it represents the Realist writer’s false claim to truth or actual objective truth—induces pain, because it offers a ‘totalizing’ picture, denying the mind’s “porosa” “porous” nature, its need to absorb new ideas, but also wring them out, to remain open to uncertainty and change.

**Caponegro’s “The Star Café”**

Caponegro’s “The Star Café” bears striking similarities to Borges’s “El Aleph,” which is perhaps not surprising, as Caponegro cites Borges as an important influence (Interview, Palleau-Papin 20). However, in “The Star Café,” Caponegro reconfigures Borges’s story in important ways, which shed light on how she seems to move beyond Borges’s critique of Realism to enact the radical implications for literature of his critique. Whereas Borges dramatizes in “El Aleph” the tension between the Realist impulse to present an orderly and comprehensible projection of reality, and the fact that ‘reality’ tends to resist falling into line, Caponegro seems to take up Borges’s implicit challenge and crafts a fiction which does *not* attempt to present an orderly and comprehensible projection of reality, and instead embraces disharmony at every turn. In this way, Caponegro presents literature as a rare place in which reality can be re-thought, in which the reader can (at least, temporarily) roam freely through the rooms in her mind, even the socially unacceptable ones, which she has been encouraged to avoid. By loosening her narrative’s bonds to mimesis, Caponegro casts aesthetics as the site of this anarchic space.
Importantly, whereas Borges’s approach in “El Aleph” to describing the ‘surreal portal’ (the Aleph) consists in having his narrator immediately confess to being incapable of describing such a wondrous experience, Caponegro in “The Star Café” offers no such disclaimers. Caponegro simply describes Carol’s experience in the ‘surreal portal’ (the Star Café) to the best of her ability, leaving the reader with baffling sequences, loose threads, and narrative gaps, for which Caponegro neither accounts nor apologizes. This difference in authorial approach seems crucial, because Borges’s method can actually be seen as reinforcing Realism, to an extent: one might argue that Borges implies that his protagonist’s experience in the Aleph is the only part of his story which cannot be rendered adequately in language, arguably suggesting that Realism is adequate for describing the real, the non-fantastic. Meanwhile, Caponegro submerges her reader in a realm of uncertainty, without providing life rafts of faith in representable experience.

Another crucial difference in Borges and Caponegro’s approach can be most clearly illustrated by comparing their stories’ opening sentences. Following two epigraphs, Borges begins his story:

La candente mañana de febrero en que Beatriz Viterbo murió, después de una imperiosa agonía que no se rebajó un solo instante ni al sentimentalismo ni al miedo, noté que las carteleras de fierro de la Plaza Constitución habían renovado no sé que aviso de cigarillos rubios; el hecho me dolió, pues comprendí que el incesante y vasto universo ya se apartaba de ella y que ese cambio era el primero de una serie infinita. (154–55)

On the burning February morning Beatriz Viterbo died, after braving an agony that never for a single moment gave way to self-pity or fear, I noticed that the sidewalk billboards around Constitution Plaza were advertising some new brand or other of American cigarettes. The fact pained me, for I realized that the wide and ceaseless universe was
already slipping away from her and that this slight change was the first of an endless series. (Monegal and Reid 154)

Meanwhile, Caponegro begins her story:

Carol heard a noise as she undressed for bed; it frightened her—she’d actually been half undressing for bed and half searching for the book she had intended to read in bed, but after she heard the noise she was only a third involved with each of these tasks and a third involved in trying to figure out where the noise had come from—though of course these things could not be measured like sugar or flour; in fact, it would be more than a third of trying to determine the source of the sound anyway, because there was fear attached to that fraction, and fear has a way of dispossessing its neighbors. (23)

By juxtaposing the two writers’ prose in this way, Borges’s influence upon Caponegro’s style becomes unmistakable: the long musical phrasings, the lawless conjunctions, the cascading detail, the free association of the protagonist’s thoughts. And yet, the difference in their style becomes equally clear. Most obviously, whereas Borges’s prose is ripe with precise dates, full names, and concrete locations, Caponegro’s prose is shorn of these sorts of journalistic niceties, and the story seems to resist being pinpointed in time and space. At the same time, whereas Borges portrays his protagonist as seeking deeper meaning in his experiences, drawing connections from them to timeless philosophical concerns (“pues comprendí que el incesante y vasto universo ya se apartaba de ella y que ese cambio era el primero de una serie infinita” “for I realized that the wide and ceaseless universe was already slipping away from her and that this slight change was the first of an endless series”), Caponegro portrays her protagonist’s impressions as highly localized upon the events immediately surrounding her (hearing a frightening noise, undressing, searching for a book). In this way, Borges seems intent upon dominating the reader, with his narrator’s majestic authority, but
Caponegro’s narrative remains floating and light. And even as Caponegro may overwhelm the reader with detail, the surplus of information in her story does not seem to dominate the reader, so much as offer her a rich texture for her imagination, sounds to play off in her mind, to read aloud.

In “The Star Café,” Caponegro narrates the story of Carol, a young woman, who, while searching her apartment for a book she has misplaced, hears a frightening noise from below. Carol exits her apartment to place the noise, although not before first coincidentally locating the book and carrying it out with her. In the apartment stairwell, Carol accidentally drops the book, and it falls to the second-to-bottom step. Recalling “Borges’s” descent down the cellar stairs to view the Aleph from the nineteenth step, Carol descends the stairs to the penultimate step, and sits beside her book. While critics have not, to my knowledge, mentioned the book’s presence in Caponegro’s narrative, I emphasize it here, because it seems to serve a crucial purpose of projecting “The Star Café” as a metafiction, encouraging the reader to view what happens to Carol next as actually occurring in her imagination as she reads the book. However, if the Aleph can seem a symbol for Realist literature, the Star Café appears as a symbol for anti-Realist or experimental literature, for reasons that will soon become clear.

After a moment, Carol walks down the apartment hallway, and opens a door to the little café she had lived above for months without having entered: the Star Café. There, Carol discovers, to her relief, that the noise was due to a blender, mixing banana daiquiris. The bartender, whom Carol has never met, greets her by name, and immediately offers her a daiquiri, recalling Daneri’s offer to “Borges” of a glass of “seudo-coñac” “pseudo-cognac” prior to revealing to him the Aleph. Carol, who has
been so wound up with fear, begins babbling meaninglessly to the man, opening up to him. In the passion of the moment, the two quickly fall into each other’s arms, and move into a back room (with a bed) to make love. For Carol, the sex is exquisite. Afterwards, she falls asleep.

When Carol awakens, she finds herself alone again. She discovers that the room is entirely covered in mirrors, making it impossible for her to locate an exit. With this image, Caponegro audibly pronounces her debt to Borges, in whose fiction the mirror is a recurring trope; as Gerry O’Sullivan explains, for Borges, “[t]he mirror, and very often facing mirrors, betokens infinity while undermining representation” (118). And indeed, recalling the Aleph, with its infinite projections of every point on the globe, from every angle, “this room ... from [Carol’s] position on the bed, allowed her to see her body from every angle” (27). Carol can even see herself from underneath, “as if there were no bed obstructing” (28). Soon, the man returns, and crawls on top of Carol, and they begin to have sex again. As Carol observes their twists and contortions in the mirrors, she suddenly realizes, with horror, that she cannot see the man in the reflections, despite feeling his weight on top of her. In this way, the mirrored room seems to invert the Aleph’s expansive lens on to the ‘self’: whereas “Borges” could see the world in the Aleph, without seeing himself reflected in any of the mirrors, Carol can see nothing but her own reflections in the mirrored room. If the Aleph offers “Borges” a perceived objective projection of reality, evoking the idea that we can know the world independently of our own filters, the mirrored room seems to offer Carol an emphatically subjective projection of reality, insisting that we can only see ourselves when we look to the world.
From this disturbing experience, the story evolves into further scenes, equally baffling, portraying Carol as (1) relieving herself in a restroom urinal, in front of the bartender, (2) back in the café, demanding that the bartender explain the preceding events, and (3) retreating into another restroom, this time alone, where she masturbates to her own image in the mirror. In other words, Caponegro portrays two rounds of sex on the bed in the back room, two conversational scenes occurring within the café itself, and two scenes in which Carol uses the restroom. While each of these ‘twin’ scenes are far from mirror images of the other, they nonetheless echo one another, and interpenetrate in the reader’s mind, breaking down the narrative’s integrity, and creating a mosaic of responses in the reader. In this way, the story evokes the associative logic of dreams, as well as the disquieting sense of unplaceable familiarity provoked by déjá vu.

Not surprisingly, given the story’s plot, critics have often focused upon the gender issues present in “The Star Café” (Eder 1–3, Gardaphé 195). Indeed, Caponegro seems to invite this critical emphasis, as she has described “The Star Café” as representing the process of a man becoming transformed into a woman, and then turning back into a man at the end (Interview, Palleau-Papin 21). To this end, the story finds an important precursor in Virginia Woolf’s Orlando, a fictional ‘autobiography’ of a man born in England during the Elizabethan era who lives into the twentieth century, and, during the course of his life, transforms into a woman. As critics have observed, Woolf’s novel functions to deconstruct gender identity, by suggesting that society manipulates the concept of biological difference to justify female repression (Watkins 110). One might similarly argue, then, that Caponegro’s story functions to deconstruct
heterosexual male norms of sex, showing that when the protagonist transforms into a woman, sex transforms into an intensely dangerous and alienating experience.

That said, I find myself reluctant to make such a claim for “The Star Café.” I agree with Robert McLaughlin that critics who have sought to apply feminist messages to Caponegro’s work have often oversimplified her fiction (“Caponegro” 113); in fact, the story resists easy feminist morals. Even as the bartender seems to border on raping Carol for much of their sexual encounter, making her feel “utterly victimized” (32), Carol nonetheless derives much satisfaction from the experience:

She felt the irony of the whole thing as deeply, as physically, as a metallic taste in her mouth: that the only time she’d ever felt not removed from her body, when will and act had meshed, was with him; it had felt so right, but clearly had been wrong, as wrong as anything can be (38).

And notably, when the bartender finally finishes, and moves off of her, Carol suddenly feels “renewed attraction” for him (32). Then, when she believes that, from across the room, he forces her to have an orgasm, she becomes furious with him. As she describes the experience, the sudden climax causes her to fall back forcefully against the bed, but not before witnessing the mirror’s projection of that moment in her periphery vision. In a sentence that evokes formally the fleeting instance it describes, beginning with the man’s presence and, as quickly, concluding with his absence, Caponegro writes, “It contained two genders; a man’s reflection had been for that instant there: a single thrust by all the reflected men in all the mirrors: multiple petals around her lonely, central, actual pistil, from which no bee sucked nectar” (34). By charting the vicissitudes of Carol’s emotional response so closely, registering not only her feelings of violation, but also her feelings of desire, pleasure, shame, anger, and loneliness, Caponegro seems to refuse to offer the reader a coherent reading of the
sexual encounter, encouraging her to embrace the questions, rather than seek solutions, for the questions her story raises.

Indeed, Caponegro’s aesthetic, more than anything, seems designed to allow a field for questions, of every kind, to thrive. Perhaps she learns this from Borges, whose closing questions in the post-script of “El Aleph” about the possibility of another Aleph—a true Aleph—in the Mosque of Amr in Cairo, radically suggest that an author may not be able to answer every question his story raises, that an author might play other roles besides the ‘all-knowing god’ of his work. Notably, though, whereas Borges preserves his (two) questions until the story’s end, and then offers them in a ‘grand’ gesture to topple the reader’s confidence in the story’s central plotline, Caponegro employs questions more continually and subtly throughout her story. She sprinkles questions throughout the story—a total of forty-six!—and she frequently uses them to reflect upon concepts of little to no consequence to the story’s development. For example, when Carol steps out of her apartment into the stairwell, Caponegro writes: “Carol wondered why there wasn’t a [light] switch at the top as well as the bottom. Perhaps the architect was biased toward those ascending? Or would it be the electrician? She knew so little about these practical matters; she knew so little about the building she lived in” (24). While Carol’s building’s poor design will play no role in Carol’s surreal experience in “The Star Café,” Caponegro’s incorporation of such questions calls attention to how little we all know of the environments we inhabit, the communities in which we live. In this way, Caponegro returns the reader to a state of humility, disabling the confidence we have in our knowledge upon which our ideologies rely.
Another strategy Caponegro seems to employ to undermine the reader’s confidence in her knowledge of reality is to establish a subtle disconnect between Carol’s understanding of how the story’s scenes are unfolding chronologically and the evidence from the scenes themselves. This disconnect becomes most loudly pronounced when Carol returns to the café front the first time, apparently after having found her way out of the mirrored room. The bartender is in the café and offers her another banana daiquiri. Carol notes that the man’s “demeanor toward her suggested that they were only now about to be lovers, but she knew they’d already been,” and he explicitly asks her if she is certain she has had one of his daiquiris before, as if he does not recall the previous encounter (39). When Carol begins to argue with him, demanding to know if he was actually in the room with her when they were having sex, he offers her only cryptic answers that she cannot decipher. In this way, the story seems to suggest that, even as Carol believes that the scenes are occurring in a linear sequence, this may not actually be the case. It is even possible that she is here reliving the earlier scene a second time. Arguably, Carol here can be compared to a reader, raised in the Realist tradition, suddenly immersed in a non-linear fiction, and finding herself perplexed, unsure how to organize a story without the assurances of a reliable chronology.

Importantly, just as Borges aligns the Aleph with questions about the meaning of travel for ‘modern man,’ Caponegro also invites the reader to reflect upon the Star Café’s relationship to travel, by portraying Carol as preoccupied with a travel poster of Greece, hanging in the café. Caponegro reveals that Carol had always dreamed of visiting there: in a seeming allusion to Caponegro’s own fascination with form in art, she
writes, “[Carol] was enamored of that civilization which was a celebration of the splendor of form” (40). Then, as the story closes, and Carol returns to the café one last time, naked, after masturbating in the restroom, the closing image consists in Carol gazing at the poster:

[I]t was far away, and the contents of the little boxes were fuzzy, like the last letters of the eye-doctor’s chart, but she could see rocks and white sand, and tall, white columns. She was drawn toward them, she wanted to see every box clearly; her nakedness did not inhibit her for some reason. He didn’t matter so much anymore; she wouldn’t let him keep her from exploring (45).

These lines are strikingly different from how “Borges” responds after exiting the Aleph, or “Realist literature,” when he gets on the subway, and becomes overwhelmed with a sense of claustrophobia, as he has already seen every element of the globe, and has nothing left to dream over. Carol, at the end of her experience in “experimental literature,” is eager to continue exploring and learn more. In this way, Caponegro suggests how experimental fiction functions to ‘open up’ the world.
CHAPTER 3
BORGES’S “EL JARDÍN DE SENDEROS QUE SE BIFURCAN” AND MASO’S AVA: CONVERTING THE ‘INFINITE NOVEL’ FROM A REALM OF INFINITE CERTAINTY (THE REALIST NARRATIVE) INTO A REALM OF INFINITE POSSIBILITY (ANTI-MIMETIC ART)

Opening Argument

While Borges’s influence on Mary Caponegro has been widely acknowledged, due to the surface similarities that exist between their stories, Borges also merits recognition as a fundamental theoretical precursor for other metafictionalists of Caponegro’s generation, including those who may owe greater stylistic debts elsewhere. Seeking Borges’s presence in Carole Maso’s AVA—a novel which shares little stylistically with Borges’s narratives, and which Maso herself views as deriving principally from Virginia Woolf’s The Waves (“Notes” 34)—allows for a richer conception of the novel, by revealing how and why Maso uses the novel to glorify the aesthetic quality of literature. To this end, Maso’s AVA can be fruitfully compared with Borges’s story, “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” “The Garden of Forking Paths.” In this story, as in “El Aleph,” Borges deconstructs the Realist narrative from within a seemingly Realist form. In “El jardín,” he presents an ostensibly Realist plotline before the reader, but then goes on to undermine the plotline’s reliability in a number of ways, to suggest the fallacies of mimesis. At the same time, Borges incorporates a ‘metafictional’ property into the story to propose a fantastic possibility: an ‘infinite novel,’ which narrates all possible plotlines. Because the proposed ‘infinite novel’ can offer the reader the narrative assurances which Realism claims to but cannot provide, it becomes a parody of Realist exigencies for certainty and closure. Through this critique of Realism, Borges implies the need for alternate forms of fiction, which might embrace, rather than deny, the incomprehensibility of the world.
In AVA, Carole Maso can be seen as accepting Borges’s implicit challenge. As if taking his fantastic proposal of an ‘infinite novel’ seriously, Maso crafts in AVA a spacious, non-linear piece, which can be metaphorically considered as an ‘infinite novel’ itself. Yet, whereas Borges’s ‘infinite novel’ takes the logic of Realism to an extreme, offering an utterly complete and closed system, Maso’s AVA relies upon suggestion rather than completion, and refuses closure at every turn, encouraging the reader to embrace ‘infinite’ interpretations. At the same time, Maso incorporates a ‘metafictional’ element into her piece as well, through the reflections of her protagonist, Ava Klein, a former comparative literature professor, on ‘women’s writing,’ and even more so, on experimental art generally. Again, if Borges employs the ‘metafictional’ property in his story to deconstruct Realism, Maso uses the ‘metafictional’ property in her novel to move beyond his critique, with Ava suggesting what beauty might be discovered in an anti-mimetic, aesthetic sphere. At the same time, through Ava, Maso indicates her fascination with Hélene Cixous and the concept of écriture féminine, inviting the reader to view her work as belonging to that feminist tradition. Notably, Maso’s use of the ‘metafictional’ property of her novel in this way imbues it with a pronounced didacticism—with Maso seemingly advocating for her marginalized views on feminism and the importance of alternative art forms—which actually seems at odds with the kind of non-moralistic art she desires to make.

Borges’s “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”

As Donald L. Shaw explains, Borges’s “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” “The Garden of Forking Paths” employs a central “framing device,” wherein a dominant linear narrative—“a detective story”—provides a frame for a less conventional narrative
approach—“an abstract, quasi-metaphysical notion” (61). In the dominant linear narrative, Borges focuses upon the protagonist, Dr. Yu Tsun, a Chinese doctor working as a German spy in England during World War II, who uncovers knowledge of a British artillery park in Albert, France. Aware that a British agent, Captain Richard Madden, is trailing Tsun in order to kill him, Tsun embarks on a mission to first murder a man by the last name of Albert—Dr. Stephen Albert—in order to signal to his employers the artillery park’s location. Importantly, even as Borges ostensibly presents this linear plotline as Realist in nature, he goes to lengths to undercut its reliability, shining a light on Realism’s inability to live up to its pretense to offer narrative completion. As this detective story unfolds, Borges frames within it a ‘metafictional’ discussion of an ‘infinite novel’ (named El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan The Garden of Forking Paths) written by Tsun’s deceased great-grandfather, Ts’ui Pên. Only Albert, who by astonishing coincidence has not only heard of Tsun’s great-grandfather but is actually the leading expert on his novel, discovers that Pên’s supposedly dual intentions upon retiring to write a novel and build a labyrinth were actually one and the same: as Albert explains, Pên attempted to write a labyrinthine novel, in which every event in the storyline forks into infinite possible outcomes for the reader to choose from, thus permitting every possible storyline to be narrated. While Pên’s ‘infinite novel’ would at first seem an antidote to the Realist narrative, by providing the narrative certainty and closure which Realism cannot, it becomes, in Borges’s hands, a parody of Realism, highlighting the need for new fictional forms, more welcoming to the unknowable nature of reality.
As he does in “El Aleph,” Borges presents “El jardín de senderos que se *bifurcan*” as if it were a true story, carrying the Realist imperative to persuade the reader that the story “could have happened” (Wood 238) to a comic extreme. He fashions the story as a statement dictated by Tsun from prison after his arrest for Dr. Albert’s murder. As “El jardín” begins, an unnamed speaker briefly addresses the reader, explaining that he will be presenting Tsun’s dictation to her in order to shed light on the postponement of a British offensive, planned for July 24, 1916, until July 29. As the narrator explains, Liddle Hart, on page 242 of his Historia de la Guerra Europea *History of the World War*, presents the delay as a consequence of heavy rainstorms, but Tsun’s dictation suggests an alternate explanation. In fact, this British offensive did occur, though earlier in July than the narrator claims, and Hart’s book does make reference to this delay, though on page 315 (Chibka 110). While a typical reader would not likely know whether or not Borges had his facts straight, the experience of being barraged by an author with highly abstruse, seemingly irrelevant information in a short fiction is inherently unsettling, precisely because it is such a dominating way of approaching the reader; as a result, the author obtains from the reader (at least, from this one) a sense of distrusting trust, like offering a stranger one’s hand, but continually pulling it back in hesitation.

Indeed, as Borges shows, the reader is correct to be hesitant about him, as Borges calls attention to the unreliability of the entire narrative which he presents before her. For example, in an unusual move in a fictional piece, Borges offers a footnote to one of Tsun’s claims—that the presence of Captain Richard Madden in the Prussian spy, Viktor Runeberg’s office meant that Runeberg had been arrested or murdered—with the narrator interrupting Tsun’s dictation to contradict it:
Hipótesis odiosa y estrafalaria. El espía prusiano Hans Rabener alias Viktor Runeberg agredió con una pistola automatic al portador de la orden de arresto, capitán Richard Madden. Éste, en defense propia, le causó heridas que determinaron su muerte. (Nota del Editor.) (101)

A malicious and outlandish statement. In point of fact, Captain Richard Madden had been attacked by the Prussian spy Hans Rabener, alias Viktor Runeberg, who drew an automatic pistol when Madden appeared with orders for the spy’s arrest. Madden, in self defense, had inflicted wounds of which the spy later died. –Note by the manuscript editor. (Emecé 89)

In this way, Borges highlights how the past lies open to competing claims and interpretations, while denying the reader access to the ‘accurate interpretation.’ Beyond that, the narrator alerts the reader that the first two pages of Tsun’s dictation have gone missing; as it turns out, the remaining document begins mid-sentence: “…y colgué el tubo” (100) (ellipsis points in the original) “… and I hung up the phone” (Emecé 89) (ellipsis points in the original). And similarly, Albert explains that he only managed to discover a fragment of a letter Pên wrote to the future readers of his novel. In this way, Borges highlights the incompleteness of the reader’s comprehension of the story, as these two documents have not been fully read. Moreover, Borges taunts the reader by having Tsun discover within his pockets, while preparing to leave to find Dr. Albert, “una carta que resolví destruir inmediatamente (y que no destruí)” (103) “a letter that I resolved to destroy immediately (and that I did not destroy)” (Emecé 92). In this way, Borges reminds the reader that a story can always be opened out further, that complete narrative comprehension would be impossible. To this end, he deconstructs the Realist presentation of certainty and closure.

Within the context of this critique of Realism, Borges’s fantastic proposal of Pên’s ‘infinite novel’ becomes a locus for consideration of the merit of other narrative
strategies. If Realism attempts to offer the reader a presentation of ‘what actually happened,’ and yet can never adequately do so, Pen’s narrative strategy offers comedic resolution to this internal conflict, by insisting from the outset that all possibilities ‘actually happened,’ offering the reader the narrative certainty which Realism attempts but fails to provide. As Paul de Man eloquently puts it, Tsun’s novel, like the Aleph, becomes a “point[] or domain[] of total vision” which “symbolize[s] the entirely successful and deceiving outcome of the poet’s irrepresible urge for order” (60). By exalting the ‘infinite novel’ in such a manner, Borges positions it well to parody the Realist narrative’s lofty claims to authenticity and truth, and to imply the need for more disordered, rather than ordered forms.

Of course, by proposing the concept of an ‘infinite novel,’ with a plural view of time, in which infinite plotlines occur simultaneously across infinite dimensions, Borges encourages the reader to wonder if he means to endorse such a non-conventional view of time. In fact, just as in “El Aleph,” Borges invites readings of the Aleph as both a genuinely objective projection of the world and as the Realist writer’s false claim to an objective projection of the world, Borges here invites the reader to remain uncertain as to whether “El jardín” advocates for Pên’s plural conception of time or not. Notably, Borges’s inclusion of several astounding happenstances in the narrative—including, as already mentioned, that the man Tsun selects to murder happens to be an expert on Tsun’s great-grandfather—certainly becomes more palatable to the reader if she supposes that Borges shares Pên’s plural view of time; after all, by Pên’s theory, coincidences need not be marveled at, as even the most ‘unlikely’ occurrences will assuredly occur along some branch of time. Nonetheless, even if the conventional
singular conception of time is accurate, coincidences can still be expected to occur; as
the mathematician John Allen Paulos once said, “In reality, the most astonishingly
incredible coincidence imaginable would be the complete absence of all coincidences”
(Neimark 1). To this end, “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” seems to neither
advocate for nor reject its suggestion of the possibility of a plural conception of time,
and instead allows the reader the freedom that emerges from her uncertainty.

In the story’s culminating scene, Borges draws into relief this conflict between the
two philosophical conceptions of time, as Tsun prepares to murder Albert in Albert’s
library. When Albert has finished explaining to Tsun the narrative strategy of Pên’s
‘infinite novel,’ Albert tells Tsun, with unknowing prescience, “El tiempo se bifurca
perpetuamente hacia innumerables futuros. En uno de ellos soy su enemigo” (117)
“Time is forever dividing itself toward innumerable futures and in one of them I am your
enemy” (Emecé 101). As if Albert’s comment serves to remind Tsun of what he had
come to accomplish, Tsun then turns to look out at the garden, and seems to see the
scene sprouting into its infinite number of possible outcomes: “Volví a sentir [una]
pululación… Me pareció que el húmedo jardín que rodeaba la casa estaba saturado
hasta lo infinito de invisibles personas. Esas personas eran Albert y yo, secretos,
atareados y multiformes en otras dimensiones de tiempo” (117) “Once again I sensed
[a] pullulation…It seemed to me that the dew-damp garden surrounding the house was
infinitely saturated with invisible people. All were Albert and myself, secretive, busy and
multiform in other dimensions of time” (Emecé 100–1). To this end, Borges seems to
portray his story through the lens of Pên’s plural conception of time. Yet, as Robert
Chibka points out, Tsun’s vision of the garden, with its infinite number of characters,
quickly narrows into a single person (115): “Alcé los ojos y la tenue pesadilla se disipó. En el … jardín había un solo hombre; pero ese hombre era fuerte como una estatua, pero ese hombre avanzaba por el sendero y era el capitán Richard Madden” (117) “I lifted my eyes and the short nightmare disappeared. In the … garden there was only a single man, but this man was as strong as a statue and this man was walking up the path and he was Captain Richard Madden” (Emecé 101). In this way, Borges seems to conversely portray the story through a conventional conception of time. With the striking image of Madden marching down the garden, which was only moments before overly populated and now utterly desolate, Borges dramatizes how, in a conventional conception of time, the future, with its endless possibilities, suddenly rapidly gives away to the present, with its singular and finalized event. And indeed, just a moment after observing Madden, Tsun aims his revolver at Albert and shoots. With this gun shot, Albert dies, and Tsun remains forever bound to—what he terms at the end of his dictation—his “innumerable contrición y cansancio” (118) “infinite penitence and sickness of the heart” (Emecé 101).

Centrally, the story’s dramatic conclusion raises questions about what the Realist narrative strategy tends to imply about human agency. Of course, in a conventional Realist narration of the murder scene, Tsun would be presented as simply shooting Albert, while the infinite other choices he opted not to make would be suppressed from the reader’s view. To this end, Realism encourages the reader to view the story’s events as a logical outcome of the events which came before, creating a false veneer of inevitability to how the story unfolds. Notably, Tsun himself advises anyone who must commit an act against his own conscience to adopt such a view of life’s events as
inevitable: “El ejecutor de una empresa atroz debe imaginar que ya la ha cumplido, debe imponerse un porvenir que sea irrevocable como el pasado” (105) “Whosoever would undertake some atrocious enterprise should act as if it were already accomplished, should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past” (Emecé 93). Given Tsun’s profound remorse for having killed Albert, he would seem to offer this advice both to help the person in question bring himself to commit the dreaded act as well as to avoid feelings of personal shame at a later date. Yet, ironically, as “El jardín” seems to point out, a view of life’s events as inevitable implies a plural conception of time, in which all possible sequences emerge; under a conventional singular conception of time, the future remains open. In this way, “El jardín” comically implies that the Realist writer perhaps might be best understood as presuming a plural conception of time, crafting her story along a single branch within it. If, however, a writer presumes a conventional singular conception of time, and wishes to more closely portray the protagonist’s experience of the present, by highlighting the infinite possibilities which await her in the future, she would seem to then need to consider other fictional strategies: the strategies of neither the Realist writer nor Pên accomplish this task.

Maso’s AVA

If Borges, in “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” [“The Garden of Forking Paths”], proposes the fantastic concept of an ‘infinite novel’ to emphasize through parody how Realism tends to drain life of mystery through its assurances of certainty and closure, Carole Maso, in AVA, seems to accept and move beyond Borges’s critique of Realism, by adopting and reconfiguring Borges’s concept of an ‘infinite novel’ to create a novel of infinite imaginative possibility, which eludes closure at every turn.
Structured over the course of a single day, Maso’s *AVA* portrays the final day of its protagonist, Ava Klein’s life. Lying in a hospital bed, dying from a rare blood disease, Ava finds herself flooded with memories from her lifetime, presented to the reader in lyrical fragments, interchanged with typographical blanks, representing textual silences. Centrally, Maso frames the novel by devoting the first page to the words, “August 15,” and then dividing the novel into three sections: “Morning,” “Afternoon,” “Evening.” To this end, Maso seems to privilege the role of chronology in the novel. And yet, the three sections maintain no discernible distinctions, in style or subject matter: throughout each section, Ava’s thoughts and memories are arranged in a seemingly unsystematic fashion, casting the novel, as Maso once notably put it, as “a book that could be written forever, added to or subtracted from in a kind of Borgesian infinity” (“Precious” 64–5). In this way, Maso frustrates the reader’s expectation for narrative ‘development,’ conversely turning the reader’s attention to the ‘present moment,’ with all its questions about the past and uncertainty about the future. As Maso interweaves within these fragments metafictional, nearly essayistic reflections upon the purpose of experimental art, the novel itself becomes a meditation on how literature can offer a field of solace, even joy, when the conventional narrative rod—with its logical development of a beginning, middle, and ending—has been broken.

Central to Maso’s aesthetic strategy is to stress the beauty of the ‘unfinished story,’ by crafting a novel as potentially ‘plural’ and open as the one conceived by Ts’ui Pên. To accomplish this, Maso relies on *suggestion*, rather than concrete explication, as a dominant narrative device to elude closure. For example, in the following passage from the text, a representative sample taken from the “Afternoon” section, one can see
how Maso employs suggestion to hint at bits of ‘story,’ without rendering those stories complete:

But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance.

He was swallowing special pills and light.

We dressed as the planets. Wore solar meteorites around our necks and charms. (193)

In these brief fragments, Maso seems to allude in only the barest terms to Ava’s thoughts or experiences, inviting the reader to wonder how the lyrical fragments might develop if she were to offer more information. Of course, while fiction writers have long worked to build suspense into their stories, prodding their audience to continue reading to learn ‘what happens next,’ Maso transforms this convention, by inciting her reader’s curiosity, without then going on to satisfy it. Notably, as Courtney Holden points out, Maso does frequently allow the fragments to congeal into a sharper image; as the novel develops, the reader can piece together many of Ava’s seemingly disparate thoughts to obtain a more vivid picture of the specific memory to which they refer (20). And yet, even so, these memories (such as the one Holden cites: Ava’s former husband, Francesco’s marriage proposal on the “sea-soaked steps”) seem so disconnected, so independent of one another, that they contribute little to creating a coherent plotline in the novel. In this way, Maso crafts a very ‘open’ aesthetic, which focuses the reader’s attention upon her own confusion about the story’s development, about how it begins and ends, thus forcing her to focus on her position of uncertainty in the ‘present moment.’ To this end, in Maso's hands, the ‘present moment’ becomes a location of great bewilderment and vulnerability, but also great possibility: without access to a
greater authorial design, the reader is suddenly freed to form her own connections between the fragments, and invent a storyline (or multiple storylines) of his own.

Through her blurred plotline, and carefully caressed brushstrokes/lyrics, Maso, in *AVA*, can be fruitfully seen as drawing from 19th-century French Impressionistic painting—an observation first hinted at by *The New York Times Book Review* upon *AVA*’s publication (Smith 1). Indeed, recalling such visual artists as Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Paul Cézanne, Maso instills movement into the ‘present moment’ in her novel, as she continually shifts between disparate narrative speakers (and presumptive addressees) from fragment to fragment, without clearly signaling to the reader who should be presumed as speaking, nor to whom. At the same time, Maso notably offers no clear demarcations between Ava’s private thoughts and the conversations and events occurring around Ava in the ‘present moment’ as she lies in the hospital bed. By rejecting conventional fictional techniques for establishing narrative voice as well as for demarcating interior and exterior experience, Maso evokes a highly fluid conception of the relationship between personal/subjective impression and public/objective ‘truth.’ At the same time, this allows her to emphasize how the past, present, and future elide in the ‘present moment,’ as these concepts emerge in Ava’s thoughts, through Ava’s memories, observations, plans.

To see how Maso’s ‘impressionistic’ narrative approach operates, one might consider the following passage, taken from the “Morning” section:
Nine A.M.: time for a treatment, Ava Klein.

Yvette Poisson in a fuzzy pale sweater, returned now, at this desolate moment, as the nurse wheels me up the cold hall—and the ease at which I arrive at this: Yvette Poisson dancing.

You were wearing a dress without straps. You were quite burned by the sun.

Tell me again the story of your love affair with Philip. Start with the way his hair caught the light.

I can try to complete it in my head.

That perfect purring comfort. To do when I get out: feline leukemia shots for everyone.

Bend your arm, Ava Klein, for the nurse. (49)

As in the rest of the novel, Ava clearly stands in this passage as the central figure, whom the story revolves around. And yet, the narrative speaker (and presumptive addressee) continually fluctuates, with the first line presumably being spoken by Ava’s nurse to Ava, the final line perhaps voiced by one of Ava’s hospital visitors to Ava, and the middle lines perhaps being spoken either by Ava or to Ava, either internally in Ava’s memory, or in the present moment there as Ava is wheeled from one hospital room to another for treatment. This perpetual shifting from one uncertain dialogue to another transforms a perhaps lazy-minded view of the ‘present moment’ as consisting in stasis, as dull, to evoke a view of the ‘present moment’ as dynamic, as flickering. Whereas Euro-American fiction since James Joyce—and Euro-American poetry since William Wordsworth—has valorized the ‘epiphany,’ that culminating moment of clarity when the events of the past are finally comprehended in their entirety (Langbaum 336), Maso suggests that the ‘present moment’ is always a moment of flux. In Maso’s hands, the ‘present moment’ can never be restful, because the human mind never alights upon a
final interpretation of events, but instead perpetually flutters like a butterfly from perception to perception, memory to memory, interpretation to interpretation.

Importantly, because Maso’s novel rejects narrative development and closure as artistic impetus, her work crucially begs the question as to what her novel thus serves to accomplish, what the reader should hope to gain from her experience within the pages of *AVA*. Like Impressionistic painting, the novel seems to maintain an insistent focus upon the ordinary, the everyday. As can be seen in the passage cited in the above paragraph, Maso stresses the beauty of the ‘everyday,’ by inviting the reader to relish in descriptions of ostensibly trivial material: “fuzzy pale sweater,” “dress without straps,” “perfect purring comfort” (49). Yet, in a seeming contradiction, even as Maso asks the reader to focus upon the novel’s descriptions rather than plotline, she keeps her descriptions profoundly understated. Instead of dominating the reader by carving out a fully rendered image, Maso offers her reader only the barest hint of an image, and then immediately steps back, allowing her the imaginative space to flesh out the image on her own. Perhaps Maso can be viewed as explaining her minimalist aesthetic strategy, when she has her (unidentified) narrative speaker request (of his/her unidentified addressee), “Tell me again the story of your love affair with Philip. Start with the way his hair caught the light. // I can try to complete it in my head” (49). The narrative speaker’s longing to hear the love story, desire for the little details like how Philip’s hair looked in the light, yet subsequent contention that he/she can complete the story in his/her mind, suggests that narrative completion—and the ‘concrete’ understanding it affects to provide—is not always necessary, nor even desirable. By implication, Maso does not intend to use her novel as a tool for making the world comprehensible for the
reader, but rather as a location for providing her imaginative freedom. It is crucially in this way that Maso severs the link between AVA and the concrete world. In Maso’s hands, the text converts into a consciously aesthetic realm, composed of language, of sounds, in which the reader—freed from a controlling Realist projection of reality—finds herself immersed in what might be described as a garden for imaginative recreation/re-creation.

Notably, while Maso’s potentially ‘infinite’ narrative form might seem baffling to the reader at first, Maso offers the reader suggestions as to how she might productively enter into the text, through the protagonist, Ava’s frequent nearly essayistic comments upon the value and possibilities of experimental art. In other words, Maso successfully articulates her designs for AVA, through Ava’s descriptions of what she imagines an ‘ideal literature’ might look like and accomplish. To this end, as Victoria Frenkel Harris observes, AVA is “both text and metatext, a narrator’s story and the story of a narration committed to interactive multiplicity” (176). Maso characterizes Ava, a former comparative literature professor who specialized in experimental writings, as deeply enamored of her work:

I was a good teacher, once.

Professor of comparative literature.

The imperceptible of the text, the unconscious dimension that escapes the writer, the reader.

Confetti.

My students and I celebrating the death of plot. For one thing. (161)

As this passage suggests, Ava seemed to use her classroom as a forum for teaching and sharing her passion for nonconventional literature. By placing the words
“celebrating” and “confetti” into close proximity to one another, Maso evokes a festive classroom setting indeed. At the same time, because Maso indicates that this merry atmosphere arose in glee over “the death of plot,” she implies a sharp hostility between Ava and her students (the ‘experimental camp’) and the plot-obsessed literary culture (the ‘Realist mainstream’). Meanwhile, the third line, “The imperceptible of the text, the unconscious dimension that escapes the writer, the reader” (161), suggests what Ava and her students conceive of as truly valuable in literature, what they believe that ‘plot’ obscures or even represses. With this line, Maso/Ava undoubtedly alludes to French Deconstruction theory, perhaps to Jacques Derrida’s concept of “structure,” or system of knowledge. In Derrida’s view, all structures rely upon a “center,” or constitutive interpretive framework, which forbids “the permutation or the transformation of elements” in order to maintain the structure’s intelligibility (84–5). Because, for Derrida, the phallogocentric order itself is a structure, which relies upon formalized modes of communication to sustain itself, Maso/Ava seem to dream of a novel which might employ alternate linguistic modes in order to undermine the structure and open into the ‘unintelligible’ realm that it precludes.

Importantly, Maso/Ava’s allusion to Derridean theory aligns AVA’s construction with Hélène Cixous’s concept of écriture féminine (311). Indeed, Maso seems to invite the reader to conceive of AVA as representative of écriture féminine, by evoking Cixous’s ideas throughout the novel. In this way, Maso introduces the novel into discussions about the nature of female experimental writing and raises questions about the link between experimental stylistics and female expression. In a seeming reference to Cixous’s ideas, Maso writes, “Feminine can be read as the living, as something that
continues to escape all boundaries, that cannot be pinned down, controlled or even conceptualized. // Cannot be arrested, and which remains— // Elusive” (160), and then later clarifies that she intends this reading of the ‘feminine’ to be applicable to literature, stating, “A feminine text” (163) (Quinn 97–8). In this way, Maso employs the term, ‘feminine,’ as it is used in post-structuralism, to evoke the elusive, or that which lives outside the realm of meaning and intelligibility. At the same time, Maso signals her endorsement of Cixous’s view that an elusive/‘feminine’ literary style is more suited for expressing specifically female experience: Maso writes, “Language for women is closely linked with sexuality for Cixous. She believes that because women are endowed with a more passive and consequently more receptive sexuality, not centered on the penis, they are more open than men to create liberated forms of discourse” (51). In this way, Maso attaches the ‘feminine’ to a (specific type of) feminist conception of how women experience reality.

Apart from Ava’s discussions of Deconstruction theory and écriture féminine, Maso further delineates her aesthetic strategy in AVA for the reader, by frequently incorporating quotations of other artists into the text, seemingly presented as comments upon art that Ava either admires or identifies with. By incorporating into AVA the voices of such anti-mimetic artists as Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, Vladimir Nabokov, Jean-Luc Godard, John Ashberry, Joseph Cornell, Rosmarie Waldrop, and, significantly, Jorge Luis Borges, Maso establishes and aligns her novel with a current of artistic irreverence for conventional techniques of representation. Notably, while Maso employs quotations which address art from a range of angles, they tend to cluster
around the struggles that truly original artists face in a conformist and philistine culture.

For example, she writes:

Danilo [one of Ava's three ex-husbands] quotes Nabokov: Not a single magazine has found fit to buy or indeed to understand (and this refers also to the *New Yorker*) my last story, and as I have no intention whatever to come down to "human interest" stuff, I shall have to remain in the realm of what fools call "experimental literature" and face the consequences. (105)

By incorporating this quote, Maso seems to present Nabokov as a model of the subversive spirit, for refusing to capitulate to the cultural pressure for artistic conformity, even as he knows his resistance will frequently cost his writing access to publication. Along similar lines, Maso quotes Beckett, arguing that the non-conformist stance is not simply admirable in an artist; it is, in fact, integral to the production of true art: "Beckett in a tree: To be an artist is to fail, as no other dares fail. That failure is his world and to shrink from it is desertion, arts and crafts, good housekeeping ...." (67) (ellipsis points in the original). While Beckett's claim here may be read in a number of ways, I would argue that his conflation of the creation of artwork with failure implies a view of art as only meriting the name when it breaks conventions and thus 'fails' by all available criteria. For Beckett, for an artist to 'shrink from failure' is to attempt to succeed along established standards of artistic judgment, and thereby reduce his work to triviality: "arts and crafts, good housekeeping." As for Maso's references to Borges, she alludes to him ten times during the course of the novel, always between pages 138 and 142, offering passages from his *Atlas* (Berlin 16). In *Atlas*, Borges composed an unorthodox autobiography, describing his (both imagined and actual) adventures around the globe, through photographs and attached commentaries presented in a range of different prose and poetic styles. Maso's allusions to *Atlas* indicate her admiration for Borges's
radical piece, while also functioning to highlight how texts might live within one another. Importantly, Maso characterizes Ava as a participant in this experimental artistic tradition, certainly in her critical work, and probably in her creative work as well. (Without stating it explicitly, the novel frequently hints that Ava is not just a critic, but also a creative writer.) For example, when Maso portrays Ava as saying, “I had recently published an essay on contemporary American fiction entitled, ‘Good Housekeeping.’ // Not exactly a popular piece” (67), Ava can be presumed as having composed an essay sharply critical of the rampant conformity present in mainstream American fiction, given the allusion of the essay’s title to the above Beckett quote. Moreover, Maso has Ava say:

Accuse me again, if you like, of overreaching.

Of wanting too much.

I make no apologies…. (217) (final ellipsis points in the original)

With these lines, Ava conveys her sense of defensiveness about the way her writing tends to be received, while also insisting upon her own determination to continue down the path of most resistance in art, by refusing to express remorse. Of course, Ava here seems a thinly veiled stand-in for Maso, with Maso anticipating how mainstream readers are likely to respond to the formal innovations of AVA. By using her novel to both insist upon the existence of a subversive tradition and the importance of such a tradition, Maso works to both argue for the value of her own novel, as well as do her part to create a culture more accepting of non-conventional art.
Clearly, AVA’s meta-textual elements—with Maso’s discussion of Deconstruction, *écriture féminine*, and the non-conformist artistic ethic—play a crucial role in allowing this highly experimental novel to be simultaneously highly accessible to the reader. Whether or not a mainstream reader might be receptive to Maso’s approach, she would at least have a reasonable grasp on what Maso intended to accomplish. Meanwhile, one might recall that Ts’ui Pên left his novel’s design in the darkest obscurity, such that only his most dedicated specialist, Dr. Albert, succeeded in decoding its ‘infinite’ narrative strategy. To this end, Pên’s novel arguably overlaps more with the typically male-authored Modernist classics, such as Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* or Pound’s *The Cantos*, which are frequently considered as impenetrable without specialized training, than it does with Maso’s *AVA*. Notably, Maso repeats one Cixous quote several times in the novel, like a refrain, articulating Cixous’s vision for women’s writing: “The ideal, or the dream, Cixous writes, would be to arrive at a language that heals as much as it separates” (52). With this line, Cixous seems to posit an ideal that writing might simultaneously separate from dominant speech codes, in which hackneyed forms of perception narrow the reader’s imaginative domain, without leaving the reader simply bereft, alienated, but rather simultaneously offering her a sense of comfort from a new direction. Where such comfort may come from is a question left open, but in the absence of narrative development—in the intertwining of past, present, future—in the loss of the faith in representation—in the loss of the philosophy of determinacy, the text’s only option would seem to be to offer the reader comfort through beauty, rather than guidance. Like Caponegro, Maso transforms the text into a delightfully aesthetic realm, where the reader might find solace, even pleasure, as she
simultaneously becomes aware of her vulnerability in an infinitely remote world of which she can know almost nothing.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

In *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (1990), the post-structuralist American feminist, Rachel Blau DuPlessis offers her definition of a “female aesthetic”:

> the production of formal, epistemological, and thematic strategies by members of the group Woman, strategies born in struggle with much of already existing culture, and overdetermined by two elements of sexual difference—by women’s psychosocial experiences of gender asymmetry and by women’s historical status in an (ambiguously) nonhegemonic group (5).

By this definition, Caponegro and Maso might be categorized as composers of the “female aesthetic”; certainly, both of these writers highlight questions of gender inequity and ‘woman’s writing’ in their formally inventive fiction. And yet, Caponegro and Maso seem at odds in terms of how they *answer* such questions. In “The Star Café,” Caponegro shakes up, like a snow globe, all kinds of social sensitivities and proprieties surrounding gender—including issues of female objectification, rape, multiple orgasms, bathroom etiquette, and masturbation—and yet, she never displays to the reader where the snow settles. That is, she refuses to dominate the reader with an authorial message, and instead keeps the story as an open space for the reader to respond to and wrestle with its questions as she sees fit. In *AVA*, Maso takes a more direct approach, by seemingly endorsing her own feminist beliefs and particularly the literary movement of *écriture féminine* through her protagonist, Ava’s own thoughts, as well as Ava’s references to like-minded theorists/artists. To this end, Maso imbues her novel with a decidedly moralistic quality, which DuPlessis would likely admire; in DuPlessis’s view, “[i]n women’s writing, as in modernist, there is a didactic element, related to the project of cultural transformation, of establishing values” (17). And yet, by arguing for her marginalized perspective on feminism and *écriture féminine*, Maso seems to
contradict her own expressed desire “[n]ot to own or colonize or dominate” her reader (“Notes” 35), to divorce her work from the tradition of morally driven art.

However Caponegro and Maso’s complicated relationships to feminism might be best understood, I have tried to show in this paper that the critical preoccupation with this sociopolitical aspect of their writing, and that of contemporary female experimental writers in general, has functioned to conceal a more central emphasis in their work—that of the value of art for art’s sake, of the radical potential of literature which opens into the aesthetic dimension of language. Indeed, Caponegro explains her incorporation of gender issues into her fiction not as functioning to ‘establish values’ for the reader, but rather as simply a necessary step for her “to fully inhabit the unreal with all the aspects of [her] writerly consciousness, including gender” (Interview, Palleau-Papin). Instead, Caponegro seems far more fascinated by the stylistic properties of her writing: she says,

The virtuosic spontaneity and complexity—both temporal and harmonic—of jazz, is very much how I would love my own ‘music’ to be heard … I cherish beauty and complexity and strive to make clauses the equivalent of musical phrases—the daredevil syntactic leap—that kind of thing but controlled; it must be meticulously calibrated (Interview, Madera).

In this elegant passage, Caponegro makes clear the painstaking effort she employs to create her highly ornamented style, not to reinforce this or that message, but because the pursuit of beauty is itself a worthy goal. Meanwhile, Maso, with all of her ardor for écriture féminine, expresses (throughout AVA and elsewhere) an even stronger passion for experimental aesthetics generally, and continual shock and outrage by the culture’s disregard for original forms. At the same time, even as Maso does infuse her writing with didactic messages, she continually expresses her ambivalence about doing so.
Describing her relationship to her writing, she says, “At other times I feel like a composer. More than anything else I aspire to the state of music” (“Notes” 27). With this comment, Maso suggests that her deepest longing as a writer would be to strip language completely of its referential aspect, to transform it into pure sound, like music.

Importantly, Caponegro and Maso’s desire to erect a sheer aesthetic realm in their art must be understood as emerging within a greater philosophical shift among certain authors over the course of the twentieth century about their relationship to their work. As William Gass explains, such (anti-Realist) writers were suddenly “ceasing to pretend that [their] business is to render the world; [they] know[], more often now, that [their] business is to make one, and to make one from the only medium of which [they are] a master—language” (24). Borges, as one of the first practitioners of metafiction, must be acknowledged as fundamental to this philosophical shift. By deconstructing Realism, Borges demonstrated the impossibility of a ‘readable’ text. While some writers may have viewed Borges’s writing as suggesting the futility of writing, many others found within it an implicit challenge to write themselves out of the Realist labyrinth. Driven from mimesis, and the hope of understanding reality, such writers, including Caponegro and Maso, now seek to liberate the aesthetic dimension of language, to open up the reader to a safe haven for imaginative exploration and joy. “The allotted function of art is not, as if often assumed, to put across ideas, to propagate thoughts, to serve as example,” Maso quotes the groundbreaking Russian filmmaker, Andrei Tarkovsky, as saying, “The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good” (“Notes” 53). Literature, for
Caponegro and Maso, need not reflect upon nor offer false messages about an incomprehensible world. It is deliverance from the human condition.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Carolyn Collins Bradley was born in 1985 in Tallahassee, Florida to Robert Bernard Bradley and Carolyn Diane Herrington. The third of four children, she grew up in Tallahassee, Florida, graduating from the International Baccalaureate program at James S. Rickards High School in 2003. In college, she studied abroad for one semester in Florence, Italy, and wrote for several different newspapers. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English and a Correlate in quantitative economics from Vassar College in 2007.

After graduating from college, Carolyn spent a year working at home, before moving to Loja, Spain for two years, where she taught English at la Escuela Oficial de Idiomas. Then, she moved to Gainesville, Florida, where she received her Master of Arts degree in English. She hopes to become a college professor of comparative literature, focusing on the relationship between 20th/21st-century experimental writings in the United States and Spanish-speaking countries. She is the proud aunt of two children, Sebastian Robert Neel and Lisa Bradley.