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## **Derridean Meaning in Arthur Rimbaud's Vowels and Borges' Compass: A Poststructuralist Study**

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### **Abstract**

*In the poststructuralist discourse, the site of one's logos has ontological fissures. The simulation of singularity and stability is interrupted, resulting in the vacuum being filled with signifiers that celebrate the plurality of logocentric identity. At a time when the semblance of coherence has dissipated from the logos and what remains is an unstable, incoherent and ambiguous space between the words, the discourse of Arthur Rimbaud in his poem 'Vowels' and Jorge Luis Borges in 'Compass' subvert the one-ness of episteme creating a centerless text. In the postmodernist search, we need to realize that the identity of the poet and the self are diluted in their praxis. I want to show in this paper how Arthur Rimbaud uses symbols to sever the attachment of meaning with words in his poem 'Vowels', and Jorge Luis Borges writes the poem 'Compass' to destabilize the hegemonic use of words and the phenomenological utility of truthful existence. Arthur Rimbaud is one of the earliest in this respect who questions our inability to understand poly-grammatological episteme. Following Derridan's code, we see how Rimbaud, decades before Derrida, successfully reveals that "istoria and episteme (and not only etymologically or philosophically) as detours for the purpose of the reappropriation of presence." On the other hand, Borges begins the circuitous journey from the allocated encoding of inheritance of power to words to the collocated decoding of the anxiety of logocentrism in the post-truth age. He begins the poem 'Compass' (published in Buenos Aires on 18th August 1969) with '[e]very single thing becomes a word' (Borges 1999), producing what Derrida claims as 'centerless' centrality of words 'outside the totality' of meaning.*

**Keywords:** Ontology, Logocentric, Episteme, Deconstruction, Grammatological, Signifier, Signified

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## Introduction

“...the concept of writing...no longer designating the exterior surface, the insubstantial double of a major signifier, *the signifier of the signifier* – is beginning to go beyond the extension of language. In all senses of the word, writing thus comprehends language. Not that the word ‘writing’ has ceased to designate the signifier of the signifier, but it appears, strange as it may seem that ‘signifier of the signifier’ no longer defines accidental doubling and fallen secondarily.” (Derrida 1994)

As Derrida dissolves the structurality of the structure in the process of writing, he gave birth to the postmodern idea of the “signifier of the signifier” (Derrida 1994) and this is the coordinate I set for constructing my paper of Arthur Rimbaud in his poem ‘Vowels’ and Jorge Luis Borges in ‘Compass’. Here I shall try and put forward how both these poets have destroyed “the concept of ‘sign’ and its entire logic” (Derrida 1994) following the Derridean code.

In the poststructuralist discourse, the site of one’s logos has ontological fissures and the simulation of singularity and stability is interrupted, resulting in the vacuum being filled with signifiers that celebrate the plurality of logocentric identity (Morve 2014). At a time when the semblance of coherence has dissipated from the logos and what remains is an unstable, incoherent and ambiguous space between the words, the discourse of Arthur Rimbaud in his poem ‘Vowels’ and Jorge Luis Borges in ‘Compass’, subvert the one-ness of episteme creating a centerless text. In the postmodernist search, we need to realize the identity of the poet as well as the self is diluted in its praxis. I want to show in my paper that how Arthur Rimbaud uses symbols to sever the attachment of meaning with words in his poem ‘Vowels’ and Jorge Luis Borges writes the poem ‘Compass’ to destabilize the hegemonic use of words and the phenomenological utility of truthful existence.

## Vowels

The sense of grammatological linearity is one of the things that the postmodernist moved away from. We are launched into the holocaust of sequential grammatology and as Derrida has created the apparatus of non-linear literature we are at once asked the question that time as a linear function is as much in jeopardy as the grammar in itself. Arthur Rimbaud is one of the earliest in this respect who questions our inability to understand poly-grammatological episteme.

Following the Derridan code, we see how Rimbaud decades before Derrida successfully reveals that “*istoria and episteme* (and not only etymologically or philosophically) as detours for the purpose of the reappropriation of presence.” (Derrida 1994) As ontology is delimited, we need to locate our multiple self selves in the multiplicity of words. Identity of self and words has also become polymorphic launching us into a space outside of logocentrism. Arthur Rimbaud cartographies the dislocation of grammatical hegemony of alphabets in his sonnet ‘Vowels’ published in Paul Verlaine’s *Les Poètes maudits* in 1884. It is the time when the symbolist movement di-localized signs from the topography of language.

The *Symbolist Movement* in Literature creates the performative space of symbolism where the apparatus is the urban decadence and Arthur Rimbaud finds this challenge worth utilizing in his oeuvres. He cognitively read what Arthur Symons wrote in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*:

“Symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man, as he named every living thing; or before them, in heaven, when God named the world into being. And we see, in these beginnings, precisely what Symbolism in literature really is: a form of expression, at the best but approximate, essentially but arbitrary, until it has obtained the force of a convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness. It is sometimes permitted to us to hope that our convention is indeed the reflection rather than merely the sign of that unseen reality. We have done much if we have found a recognizable sign.” (Symons 1945)

And in this Rimbaud finds his quantum field for his poems. What he learns from the above quote is the unreasonableness of linear thinking when it comes to creating symbols and imagery and discovers the vectors which enable him to create a geometric punctum for his poems.

Symbolism has a hegemonic hold on the use of words, though not their meaning, Rimbaud (in his poem ‘Voyelles’) makes an effort to create the de-sovereignty over the singularity of meaning traditionally associated with a word, thereby creating a simulated meaning for the word, which is the

domain of postmodernism. So he writes: ‘A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles...’ (Rimbaud 2004). There is no bonding of meaning to be associated between vowels and the colors, and the arbitrariness of such associations delimits the scope of an alphabet. The disassociation of meaningful bonds between the vowels and the colors creates epistemic violence against the coherence of word-with-meaning (Imran et al. 2019). The symbolic association of ‘a’, ‘e’, ‘i’, ‘u’, and ‘o’ with black, white, red, green, and blue respectively is a simulated truth where there is no true copy of identifiable meaningfulness of such association.

The vowels are not the signifier and the colors, are signified. Rather both the vowels and the colors are signifiers creating no signified. The center of the vowel is not the center here, nor is the poem about alphabets, grammar, or epistemes. But they all are in the central positions. This is what Derrida later talks about when he delimits Ontology, therefore questioning the imprisonment of the essence of the things inside the structure of reason. “The rationality” according to Derrida “no longer issues from a logos. Further, it inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of truth.” (Derrida 1994)

The poem thus provides us the ‘free play’ of Derridian’s ‘non-locus’ as the vowels are neither the reduplicated Paris nor a hegemonic one and Rimbaud encodes it as ‘sign-substitution.’ Such a foregrounding makes us read Rimbaud’s poem as a signification of synaesthesia, where the identity of each individual alphabet is the signifier. For Rimbaud, the alphabets comprising the vowels are not simple alphabets but present that literary space where paradigmatic social changes vis-à-vis the types of cultural trajectories can be measured with the watermark of politics as their discourse.

The line ‘I shall speak one day of your hidden origins’ is an encrypted attack on the polished surface of a Parisian salon and his vowel ‘A’ is going to debunk the pomposity of ‘black fur-corset’ that makes the cogito of Parisian cultural ethos. The ‘cruel stink’ of social order is non-hegemonized in its representational value. Rimbaud uses his vowels as tools to deploy the conceptual baggage of the society and the contours of ‘darkness’, ‘blood’, and ‘gyrations’ intersect with the ontological coordinates of ‘divine’, ‘pastures’, and ‘white king’ to reveal the histography presence of ‘silent wastes of Worlds and Angels’ in the ‘Omega’ of existence. So, the encoding of Rimbaud is performative to the poststructuralist movement. His symbols are the ‘doing’ of literature in the cartography of delimited ontology. This is what Derrida means when he writes in his essay *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* in the book *Writing and Difference*:

“Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” (Derrida 1978)

If infinity is mathematically symbolized as ‘∞’ then we can say that the poem is a ‘∞ text’ with respect to the infinitely delimited ontological functionality of words. In terms of quantum physics, the poem, exhibits ‘Quantum entanglement’ represented by ‘ $\sim 9\% [10]$ ’, and the different particles [in this case themes] are inseparable even when they are far apart. Rimbaud’s intention is, therefore, not to create a telos-centric poem, but rather to go on and build a circular movement of theme and structure in ‘Vowels’, where we enter into a cyclical entanglement. In the case of ‘Quantum entanglement,’ the probability of finding a point in the ‘E-infinity’ space is  $f_3$ , the inverse of  $4 + f_3$ , the Hausdorff dimension of ‘E-infinity’ space-time. And we are in a similar dimension of ‘E-infinity’ space-time in the poem ‘Compass’ by Borges. Both the poems show that the words (particles) of exact positionality and value along with the momentum follow the EPR which is as Manjit Kumar writes:

“EPR argued that they had proved that ... [particle] B can have simultaneously exact values of position and momentum. ... Particle B has a position that is real and a momentum that is real. EPR appeared to have contrived a means to establish the exact values of either the momentum or the position of B due to measurements made on particle A, without the slightest possibility of particle B being physically disturbed.” (Manjit 2021)

Both poems in their essence belong to the quantum world and is different from the large-scale world of our physical intuition. It hints that the fundamental nature of reality may not be physical at all, and

this is exactly what Borges and Rimbaud reveal in their poems, where they follow the famous EPR (Einstein, Boris Podolsky, Nathan Rosen) model which says

“...in order to abandon the assumption of realism we had to abandon the concept of locality. The locality is the idea that each bit of the universe only acts on its immediate surroundings. EPR paradox introduces the idea of Quantum Entanglement In both poems the two particles interact briefly like the words and meaning with the identity of the same. They influence each other so that their properties are somehow connected and yet we refrain from measuring these properties to preserve quantum uncertainty. Quantum mechanics requires that we describe the particle pair with a single combined wave function that encompasses all possible states of both particles. We call such particles an entangled pair. Here the meaning and identity is the entangled pair” (Robinson 2018)

### 1. Compass

Borges begins the circuitous journey from the allocated encoding of inheritance of power to words to the collocated decoding of the anxiety of logocentrism in the post-truth age. He begins the poem ‘Compass’ (published in Buenos Aires on 18th August 1969) with ‘[e]very single thing becomes a word’ (Borges 1999) producing what Derrida claims as ‘centerless’ centrality of words ‘outside the totality’ of meaning. Thus ‘[t]he centers is not the center’ Derrida 1978) ‘in a language’ (Borges 1999) but the existence of arranged alphabets producing the action of dissidence to the hegemony of meaning ascribed to the words. Both ‘Someone’ and ‘Something’ suggests defragmentation to the coherent individuality and the function of words and phrases. The phrase ‘infinite babble’ suggests the poet’s distancing of selfhood with linguistic expressionism and thereby delimiting the ontological cartography to the polyphony of voices that Bakhtin calls ‘heteroglossia’.

History according to the poet is another amalgamation of de-soluble facts and sedimentation of fractured timelines comprising fragmented meaning in a spatiotemporal plane. Thus, Rome and Carthage in the second stanza bring geographical, historical, and topographical violence to the compacted embryo of ‘randomness’. The riddle of history is not the chronological time ethos but the relationship of historiographically assimilated ideas. Thus, we see in Borges what Derrida writes “History and knowledge, *istoria* and *episteme* (and not only etymologically or philosophically) as detours for the purpose of the reappropriation of presence.” (Derrida 1994) Myth is not history and therefore Babel is neither a historic nor universal phenomenon, but rather a mosaic of significations that shifts in the kaleidoscopic cocktail of religion and folklore and so we find ‘all the discordant languages of Babel’ (Borges 1999) in the box of ‘enigma, accident and puzzle’ (Borges 1999).

The third stanza develops the collateral damage created by the epistemological ascriptions of names whose shadow is a negative mass with Einsteinium valuation: ‘[b]ehind each name lies that which has no name’. Today I felt its nameless shadow tremble’ (Borges 1999). The flickering or ‘trembling’ of post-human cybernetic ‘I’ in the creation through the ‘blue needle’ of the pen is the post-Anthropocene challenge to the ‘I’ of the Renaissance poets. The color blue is affixed to the needle suggesting the apparent dislocation of objectified color with the essence of stitching a tapestry of metaphoric signs.

The final stanza encodes three essential phenomena – ‘influence’, ‘clock’, and dream. Bloom works out six movements by which some great poets are able to be creative and original despite the anxiety of influence: ‘Clinamen’, ‘tessera’, ‘kenosis’, ‘demonization’, ‘askesis’ and ‘apophrades’. Bloom writes: “the largest truth of literary influence is that it is an irresistible anxiety” (Bloom, Preface, xviii). With Borges, influence is the ‘rule [which] extends as far as the far sees’ (177). Thus, in the structure of Bloomian’s ‘anxiety of influence’, he finds ‘Clinamen’ as the only way to be free from history. Bloom’s ‘Clinamen’ reads:

“A poet swerves away from his precursor’s ...this appears as a corrective movement in his poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves.”(Bloom 1997)

The ‘clock’ is meant to rupture the influence of the archetype and disrupt the space of temporal existence as the ‘dream’ will take us to the fifth dimension and time will curve with the force of gravity. In this we are reminded of ‘The Persistence of Memory which was painted by Salvador Dalí in 1931 (fig1):

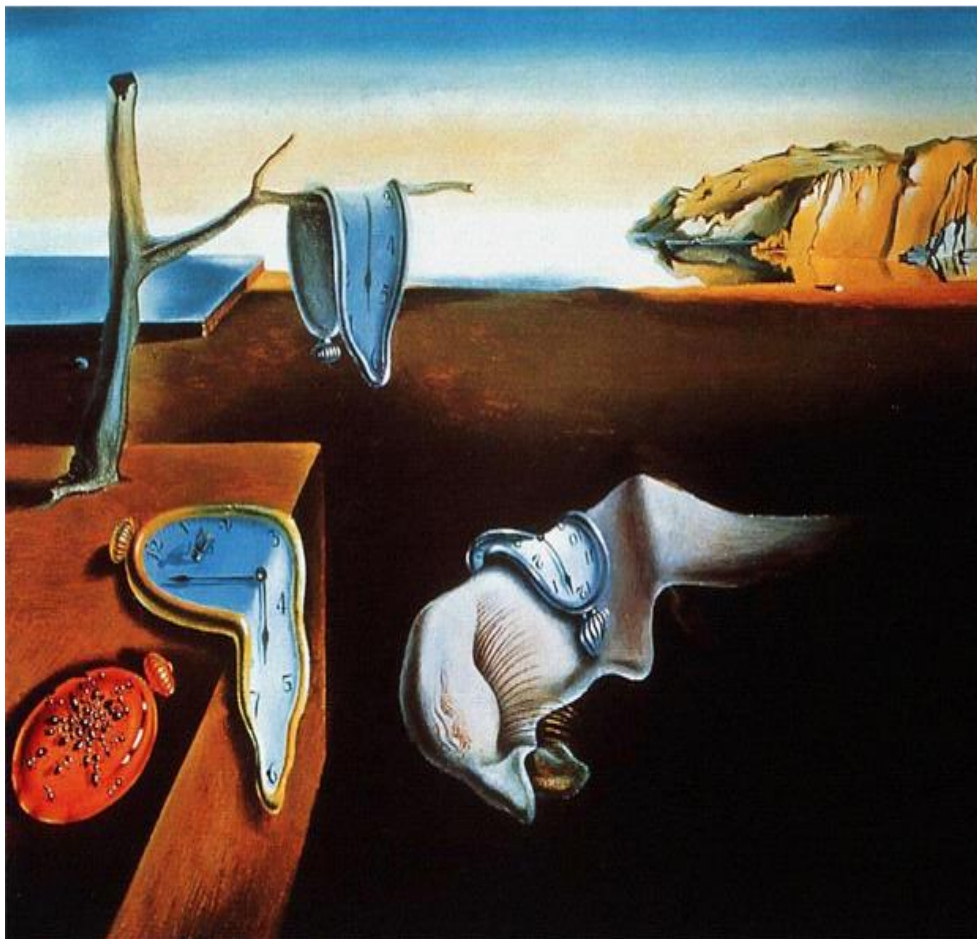


Figure 1. 'The Persistence of Memory': in the MoMA Online Collection

Time is the theme here, from the melting watches to the decay implied by the swarming ants. Mastering what he called 'the usual paralyzing tricks of eye-fooling', Dalí painted this work with 'the most imperialist fury of precision,' but only, he said, 'to systematize confusion and thus to help discredit completely the world of reality.' Similarly, Borges finds time as non-hegemonic as words. He provides us diegetically a poem with a mass of images, texts, and voices without logical sequence 'something like a clock glimpsed in a dream' (Borges 1999). Thus, the poet dismantles the syntagmatic analysis of history, much like Dalí's painting, 'The Persistence of Memory', to a paradigmatic plurality. Writing for Borges is the persistence of memory and 'The Persistence of Memory' for Dalí is an act of writing the text of fractured time. Blanchot writes more elaborately:

"The absence of time is not a purely negative mode. It is the time in which nothing begins, in which initiative is not possible, where before the affirmation there is already the recurrence of the affirmation. Rather than a purely negative mode, it is a time without negation without decision, when there is also nowhere when each thing withdraws into its image and the "I" that "we" recognize itself as it sinks into the neutrality of a faceless "he." The time of the absence of time is without a present, without a presence. This "without a present" however, does not refer to a past." (Blanchot 1999)

'The absence of time' (Blanchot 1999) is Borges' chief argument in relation to history and logos. Both show that 'The time of the absence of time is not dialectical' (Blanchot 1999). Thus, both Dalí and Borges use the Kairos timing to make the Kronos time dissolve and soluble. According to Derrida, 'theoretical mathematics' explains the relation of time to memory in a precise way without creating endless signifiers. Derrida writes in Introduction to Origin of Geometry

"The mathematical object seems to be the privileged example and most permanent thread guiding Husserl's reflection. This is because the mathematical object is ideal. It's being is thoroughly transparent and exhausted by its phenomenality. Absolutely objective, i.e., totally rid of empirical subjectivity, it nevertheless is only what it appears to be. Therefore, it

is always already reduced to its phenomenal sense, and its being is, from the outset, to be an object [etre-objet] for pure consciousness.” (Derrida 1989)

Mathematical logic is not a Kantian critique of reason, it provides a more spatial power to perform the details of space within the space of truth. What comes forth is an objective analysis of time and space This can be done in stages as I have pointed out in my paper “Eliot And The Mathematics Of Prufrock’s Post-Humanist Hell”:

“R is a one-one correspondence between Fs and Gs,  $C(R, F, G)$  iff 1. R is a one-one correspondence, i.e.  $\forall x\forall y\forall z((Rxy \ \& \ Rxz \Rightarrow y \Rightarrow z) \ \& \ (Rxy \ \& \ Rzy \Rightarrow x = z))$  2. Every F is R-related to some G and vice versa, i.e.  $\neg\exists x(Fx \ \& \ \neg\exists y(Rxy \ \& \ Gy)) \ \& \ \neg\exists y(Gy \ \& \ \neg\exists x(Rxy \ \& \ Fx))$  the number of Fs = the number of Gs iff  $\exists RC(R, F, G)$ .” (Dan 2021)

In relation to time and space, Borges uses Clock(R) in relation to ‘logarithmic time’(F) and ‘linear time’ (G), and “something like a clock” (Borgess 2000) is “ $\forall x\forall y\forall z((Rxy \ \& \ Rxz \Rightarrow y \Rightarrow z)$ ” and the clock which is “glimpsed in a dream/ or a bird that stirs suddenly in its sleep”(Borgess 2000) is  $(Rxy \ \& \ Rzy \Rightarrow x = z)$  2. So, every logarithmic time is clock related to some linear time and vice versa.

Writing is an employment of the memory of things, of the images that things have left behind in their absence. If there were not this absence, the memories could not have been coined as recollections, images could not have been conceived. For Borges, as for Blanchot, the image is the embodiment of distancing produced by the history of the ‘thing’ (Blanchot, 1999). In this very distance produced by the thing’s absence, its ‘ungraspab[ility]’ is made manifest the ‘unique heart of the thing’ (Blanchot 1999). Therefore the ‘bird’ here signifies the flight of Eros (in the form of narrative) away from Gaia (meaning).

We, as readers stand as the static force, the ‘still life’ looking from the Archimedean vantage point, and are faced with the spherical mirror of the narratives and this brings me to the sketch of Escher (See fig.2.).

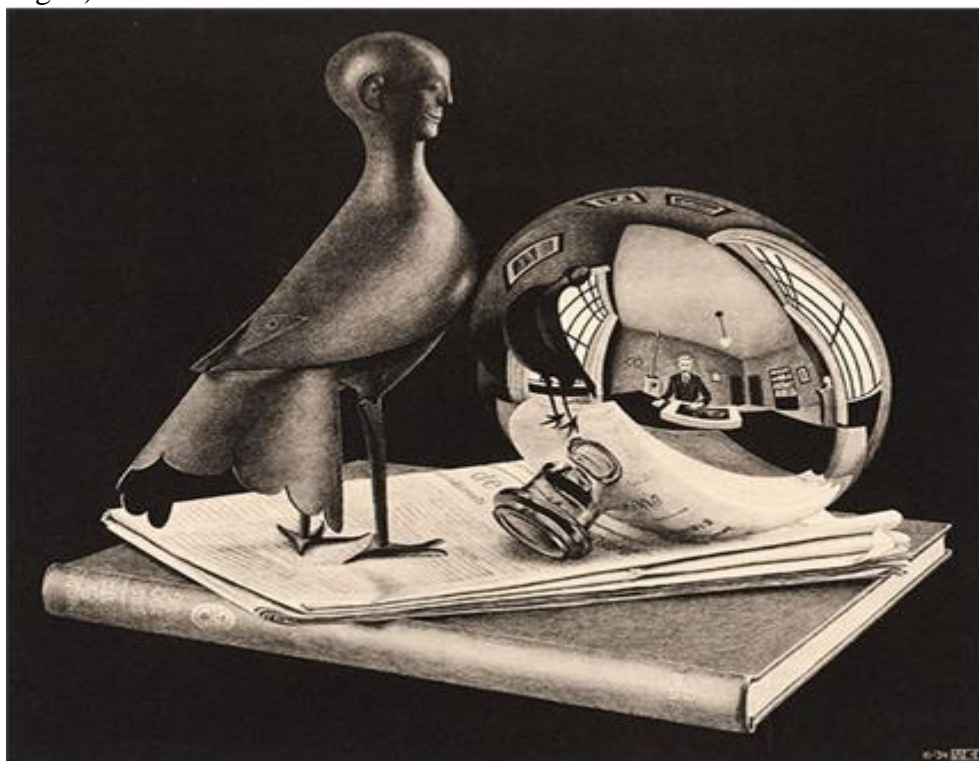


Figure 2. ‘Still Life with Spherical Mirror’ by M.C.Escher, © Cordon Art-Baarn-the Netherlands. 1936. Lithograph.

The metal sculpture of the bird with a human face occupies the unique position called ‘Punctum Archimedis’ and we are asked to take this position as readers. Thus, we are at a hypothetical vantage point outside the totality of the poem ‘Compass’ and we are never given the scope to get inside the center, as the novel is centerless. If we want to probe into the poem, we are given two choices, either to be the Archimedean observer, perceiving the novel objectively, or remove ourselves from our ‘a

priori’ and ‘a posteriori’ position and look at the novel from a different ontological plane outside the plane of the novel. So, Borges’s bird like Escher’s gives us ‘a god’s-eye view—of ourselves and our world’, removing the authority from the author and transferring it in a way to us. Coming back to Escher’s ‘Still Life with Spherical Mirror’, this sketch is a brilliant example of our role as the observer, the metal sculpture of a bird with a human face seated atop a newspaper and a book (symbolizing may be the book of postmodern theories), simply gazing at the poem, where words merge with the existence of author’s identity and even the bird and we slip through each of the meanings of the words. There can be no strict hierarchical ordering of these narratives because each is as ‘real’ as the other. Or, to be more precise, each is as fictional as the other – Borges is openly toying with the desire to see reality as anything but a fictional construct.

In the poem, the ‘bird that stirs suddenly in its sleep’ is both the music of polyphony that finds itself caged in reason and meaning as well as the bard (used as a pun) who unleashed the folkloric freedom of oral tradition. So, the poet towards the end feels a sense of freedom from the politics of the written word. The poem is therefore not situated in the logocentric topography and its dislocation from the equation of words plus words equal to meaningful sentence, gives it the power of postmodernist and post-structural existence, removing the aura from the Cartesian halo-centric cogito and the grammar of history.

While I discussed the novel *Pale Fire* through quantum dynamics, I made an observation that is equally appropriate while looking at these two poems; “the space-time relationship revealed through polymorphic symbols” (Dan 2016) in the poem:

“...is in a kind of quantum foam. Therefore, the essence of the poem has a qualitative description of subatomic space-time turbulence at extremely small distances. At such small scales of time and space, the uncertainty principle allows the energy of narration to briefly decay into particles and antiparticles of narrative logos, and then the structure of the plot is annihilated without violating physical conservation laws.” (Dan 2016)

As the scale of time and space being discussed shrinks, the energy of the virtual particles of narratives increases. According to Einstein’s theory of general relativity, energy curves space-time. This suggests that—at sufficiently small scales—the energy of these fluctuations would be large enough to cause significant departures from the smooth space-time seen at larger scales, giving space-time a “foamy” character. So, the ‘eidós’, ‘ousia’ and temporal presence in this poem have a “foamy” character, which in terms of quantum physics can be called a kind of quantum foam.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Metric of an elementary static zero-mode of the Einstein action. Inside the radius  $r_{ext}$  (region I) the  $g_{00}$  component is constant, and the  $g_{rr}$  component goes to zero. On the outside (region II) both components have the form of a Schwarzschild solution with negative mass. Now we can look for metrics close to (9), but with scalar curvature not identically zero. For large  $M$  and small  $L$ , the last term in eq. (7) is a small perturbation. Since  $\square$  never diverges and  $\square^{-1}$  does not appear in the equation, the perturbed solution is not very different from (7). For values of  $M$  of order 1 or smaller, the equation can be integrated numerically. If we choose a function  $L(s)$  with null integral on the interval  $(0,1)$ , we obtain a metric that is a zero-mode of the action but not of the lagrangian density. One can take, for instance,  $L(s)=L_0\sin(2\pi ns)$ , with  $n$  integer.

<sup>2</sup>using the conjugate, frequency shift, and linearity properties and writing  $Y(f) = -2X*[-(f - f_0)]$ , we obtain  $y(t) = -2x*(t)e^{j2\pi f_0 t}$