Mirrors, Selfies, and Alephs: A Semiotics of Immobility Travelogues

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Abstract: The article focuses on past epidemics and previous confinements, looking for the art of journeying through immobility. It rekindles the plague that ravaged the city of Turin in the 1630s, as well as Xavier de Maistre who, confined in the military citadel in 1790, wrote the *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, perhaps the first example of modern 'anodeporics', a neologism to designate immobility travelogues. The essay then explores other pandemics and subsequent attempts at imitating De Maistre. First, it concentrates on Wilkie Collins, the author of the 1852 short story "A Terribly Strange Bed", who remained stranded with his father William, the painter, at the frontier of the Kingdom of Piedmont because of the cholera that broke out there in 1836. Second, it bears on Almeida Garrett, who resisted the siege of typhus-struck Oporto in 1832-3 and, ten years later, penned another classic of 'anodeporics', *Viagens na minha terra*, also inspired by De Maistre. After consideration, from the perspective of semiotics, of what is needed to "journeying throughout immobility", the essay ends with a study of the most famous anodeporic tale in world literature, also containing ironic quotes by De Maistre: Jorge Luis Borges' *El Aleph*, named after a fictional device for mystical travel confined in a basement of 1940s Buenos Aires. The conclusion of this semiotic exploration through pandemics, lockdowns, and immobility travelogues is simple: in case of forced immobility, the practice of exploring space through time can be replaced by the alternative practice of exploring time through space.
Keywords: travel literature; immobility; pandemics; lockdown; semiotics.

"Macte nova virtute, puer, sic itur ad astra".[1]
(Virgil, *Aeneid*, IX, 641)

1. SUBTLE THREADS: THE "SIGNS OF THE PLAGUE" IN 1630 TURIN

In these days of pandemic and forced immobility, subtle threads link the present and the past. As also the 2020 COVID-19 epidemic, so the 1630 plague ravaged Turin, in Northern Italy. Piedmont doctor Giovanni Francesco (Gianfrancesco) Fiochetto[2] left a vivid chronicle of it in *Trattato*

della peste, et pestifero contagio di Torino [Treatise of the Plague, and Pestiferous Contagion of Turin],[3] first published by the City Hall of Turin in 1631 (Fiochetto 1631).[4] In the 1630s, Fiochetto played a key-role in fighting the plague, an accomplishment that earned him the nickname of "medico della peste" [doctor of the plague]. A graduate of the Sorbonne, he established a rigorous sanitization system that set a standard, and was subsequently adopted during the plague that hit Marseille in 1720-22, when Fiochetto's work was republished with the title *Trattato della peste, o sia contagio di Torino dell'anno 1630* (Fiochetto 1720).

The treatise is still essential not only for the purposes of virology, but for those of a story of social attitudes towards epidemics. The second chapter ("Secondo trattato"), "Delle cagioni della peste" [On the Causes of the Plague], expounds on the infamous plague-spreaders (that is, those who were accused — mostly with no fundament — of spreading the plague throughout the city, for instance through smearing door handles with infected ointment) and the punishments they would be inflicted during the early-modern Piedmont epidemics. The contemporary reader will be shocked by the horrible stories of discrimination and persecution impassibly told by the narrative (indeed, the treatise contains several narrative passages). For instance, the story of Margarita Torselina, a young Turin girl whom Fiochetto describes as "semplice" and "semi-fatua" (that is, mentally impaired), who was accused of purposefully infecting the doors of the city. The young girl's confessions led to the gallows her supposed mandators, that is, the sharpshooter Francesco Giugulier — who was then burned alive in Piazza Castello, Turin's main square, despite his being already ill with the plague — as well as Torselina's parents. She then accused herself too, but was not executed because of her mental illness; she was condemned, instead, to be jailed and flogged twice a week for the rest of her life. Alessandro Manzoni, the Italian national novelist, turned an analogous case, which happened in Milan, into the novel *Storia della colonna infame* (1840) [Story of the Infamous Column], a now classic denunciation of conspiracy thought generated by ignorance during epidemics.

In Fiochetto's treatise, semiotics and semeiotics (that is, the science of medical signs, known as symptoms) often blur, as well as medical diagnosis and literary ekphrasis. For example, this is how Fiochetto, aka "Doctor of

the Plague" describes the signs of the plague (as he calls them in Italian, "segni della peste") in the third chapter of the book:

> Some of the prognostic signs of the plague can be signs and causes at the same time, for instance, if the Year is calm and damp; if it is rainy with predominance of Austral winds, flooding of rivers, comets, lightnings, and running nocturnal fires; if subterraneous animals flee their abodes and come up to the surface of the earth, for they cannot survive in the extreme putrefaction that is their mother — animals like worms, snakes, and toads — and, being on top of the earth, they die, and become, then, a cause for infection; if earthquakes have happened earlier, causing openings and abysses in the earth; if the Year is abundant with animals, born from putrefaction, like flies, mosquitos, locusts, and she-cats, which eat from the fruits of the earth and deprive the trees and the vines of their leaves, sprouts, and foliage. If country birds flee, and there are many cases of pernicious fevers with pustules and petechiae, that is, boils, pimples, blisters, and similia.[5]

Several passages in the book reveal the talent of a novelist, for instance, when Fiochetto extols the heroism of the then Turin mayor Giovanni Francesco Bellezia,[6] who, unlike most noblemen of the city — including the royal family — did not abandon Turin during the plague of 1630, but remained there stoically, eventually falling sick, yet still governing the city from his sickbed: "[…] Under a pergola offering shelter from the sun, one could see him in a bed in a low room, where he would lie ill, this notwithstanding still giving advice, until God wished to restore his health".[7]

2. INVISIBLE THREADS: THE CONFINEMENT OF XAVIER DE MAISTRE IN TURIN IN 1794

Bellezia survived and lived a reasonably long life.[8] At his death, he was buried in Turin, in the 16th-century Jesuit "Church of the Saint Martyrs" [Chiesa dei Santi Martiri], in via Garibaldi, at the corner with via Botero. The remains of a much more famous protagonist of Turin history are also kept in the same church, those of the philosopher Joseph de Maistre.[9] Another subtle thread links his name to the present condition of the city. Like him, his younger brother Xavier de Maistre[10] spent several periods of his life in Turin.[11] In 1790, when he was serving as a young soldier in the city, he illegally engaged in a duel against the Piedmont officer Patono de Meïran, defeating him. As a consequence, Xavier De Maistre was sentenced forty-two days of confinement in his own room at the Cittadella

of Turin (the military citadel). There he wrote his most famous book, the *Voyage autour de ma chambre* [Journey Around my Room], first published in Turin in 1794 (De Maistre 1794).[12]

The content of the book is known: De Maistre made the most of his confinement. He reversed the rationale of travel literature into a radical innovation. Concentrating on his room — but looking at it with the eyes of a traveler — he wrote what is maybe the first masterpiece in the history of 'anodeporics', that is, the literary and philosophical description of a journey through immobility, within a confined space. Some of the passages in the *Voyage* are interesting also as regards a study of the face in travel literature. Indeed, since De Maistre was alone in his room, meeting no one else, the only visages he would lay his eye on were those in the prints hanging from the walls, like "l'œil fixe et hagard, le visage immobile" ["the fixed and haggard eye, the motionless face"] of Count Ugolino in a Dantesque illustration decorating one of the room's walls.

The most interesting passage of the De Maistre's *Voyage* on the face is, however, that in which he describes, with usual irony, the most beautiful image a room-traveler could come across:

> My engravings, and the paintings of which I have spoken, fade away into nothing at the first glance bestowed upon the next picture. The immortal works of Raphael and Correggio, and the whole Italian school, are not to be compared to it. Hence it is that when I accord to an amateur the pleasure of travelling with me, I always keep this until the last as a special luxury, and ever since I first exhibited this sublime picture to connoisseurs and to ignorant, to men of the world, to artists, to women, to children, to animals even, I have always found the spectators, whoever they might be, show, each in his own way, signs of pleasure and surprise, so admirably is nature rendered therein.[13]

Yet the 'painting' De Maistre is alluding to is not a real one but a mirror, a reflection of the beholder that is "un tableau parfait auquel il n'y a rien à redire" (79) ["a perfect picture with nothing to complain about" (79)]. It would be interesting to ask De Maistre's opinions about the selfie, a form of representation that — through the technology of the front-camera — seems to have accomplished the dream of "this sublime painting". In a selfie, indeed, what matters is not what the traveler sees, like landscapes, buildings, artworks, and the faces of other people — both in real life and in artistic representations — but one's face as the ultimate work of art, the

face that the digital mirror systematically superimposes on whatever background. De Maistre's philosophical notes stigmatize vanity, yet they also reflect on what a mirror becomes in the course of a non-journey, in "journeying round one's room". On the one hand, the enthusiasm by which everyone, in De Maistre's account, seems to rejoice in one's image in the mirror is ridiculous; on the other hand, though, were the mirror really considered as an image to explore, it would become, then, a wonderful device for self-perception and scrutiny. When traveling in immobility, indeed, one would be able to look into the mirror not as a body, but as a soul.

The dialectics between these two principles, permeates the entire *Voyage* and leads De Maistre to dreaming of a "moral mirror", a device of both optical and psychological self-reflection. The dream is doomed to be shattered, though: in De Maistre's consideration, people cannot recognize their physical ugliness in a mirror, let alone the moral one; not even philosophers would oblige: "Peu de monde y jetterait les yeux, et personne ne s'y reconnaîtrait, excepté les philosophes. — J'en doute même un peu" (82) ["Few people would look at it, and no one would recognize himself. None save philosophers would spend their time examining themselves, — I even have my doubts about the philosophers" (82)].

During the pandemic, selfies have seemed to decline. People could not take the usual care of their faces, buy cosmetics, get a haircut, trim their facial hair. But there was also a second, most fundamental motive: selfies are a digital mirror, yet they require a frame, and their frame is the world. They need to visually state that the face deserves the foreground in relation to what stays in the background, be it artworks or famous people. In confinement, there is no chance to come across any extraordinary background; the selfie, then, loses its reason for being. Nevertheless, in accordance with De Maistre, one might wonder about the possibility of a "moral selfie", a digital representation of one's face whose purpose would be allowing one to evaluate one's soul, and to do so philosophically, through a gaze that is alert to moral ugliness.

Shall we be able, during the lockdown, to turn both our old mirrors and our new selfies into surfaces for moral traveling and exploration? The small apartment I have rented through Airbnb in La Rochelle during the lockdown has two rooms, a living room and a bedroom. In the living room, no paintings hang from the walls, but only four mirrors of different sizes and shapes. In the pre-pandemic world, travelers would like to see

local paintings hanging from the walls of their rented apartments; it would give them a feeling of authenticity and local aesthetic flair. They would like even more, however, to see the walls of the rented apartments decorated with mirrored images of themselves. From this point of view, the furniture aesthetics of such rentals parallel that of selfies: I travel in space and through time, but what eventually I really want to come across is myself, actually an image of myself beautified by what De Maistre would call "l'amour propre" [self love].

The aesthetic spatio-temporal variety of traveling was instrumental to confirm, through decorative mirrors and selfies, a self-empowered and self-beautified image of oneself — to be further multiplied through social networks. But what is the purpose of these mirrors and selfies now? Now that we are deprived of such market of variety and obliged by the pandemic to stay home? To observe only the space that is near us, in a time that stretches indefinitely identical to itself day after day with no news but that received through the media about the pandemic condition itself? Is this, perhaps, the occasion for another "journey around one's room", for a new way of looking at mirrors and selfies as devices for moral reflection more than as apparatuses for self-aggrandizing?

3. DARK THREADS: THE QUARANTINE OF W.W. COLLINS IN 1830S NORTHERN ITALY

Unfortunately, there is a problem with De Maistre's method of traveling through immobility. It was soon realized by the English novelist William Wilkie Collins,[14] who, in 1852, contributed with a short story entitled "A Terribly Strange Bed" to *Household Worlds*, a magazine edited by Charles Dickens (Collins 1852), a story then republished in 1856 in a series of six called *After Dark* (Collins 1856). In Collins' stories too, sight deprivation and painting are both central. Inspired by the painter William Salter Herrick,[15] who is acknowledged in the preface, The series' protagonist is William Kerby, a traveling-painter whose journeying and art must come to a stop because he is in danger of losing his sight and his doctor prohibits him to keep on painting. Reputed as a good storyteller, though, he is encouraged by his wife to write down and publish his traveling stories. The whole series, therefore, is about a traveler-painter who stops traveling,

seeing, and painting, and becomes an immobile and non-visual storyteller of the past.

The short story "A Terribly Strange Bed" itself revolves, in a way, about immobility and visual deprivation. Faulkner, the protagonist and narrator (within Kerby's narration), is in Paris. Having completed his college education, he explores the city and, one night, decides to visit a gambling house. He plays with old soldiers in the squalid room and wins so much that he breaks the bank. An old soldier urges him not to venture out and to protect his winnings from night robberies. Faulkner is served strong coffee, but feels strangely giddy. He is invited to spend the night in the bedroom upstairs. That is exactly when the limits of De Maistre's method manifest themselves. Nervous out of fear of being robbed and too much caffeine, Faulkner cannot sleep. He recalls, therefore, having read De Maistre's *Voyage autour de ma chambre* and tries to imitate the French essayist:

> I raised myself on my elbow, and looked about the room — which was brightened by a lovely moonlight pouring straight through the window — to see if it contained any pictures or ornaments that I could at all clearly distinguish. While my eyes wandered from wall to wall, a remembrance of Le Maistre's delightful little book, "Voyage autour de ma Chambre," occurred to me. I resolved to imitate the French author, and find occupation and amusement enough to relieve the tedium of my wakefulness, by making a mental inventory of every article of furniture I could see, and by following up to their sources the multitude of associations which even a chair, a table, or a wash-hand stand may be made to call forth. (Collins 1852: 133)

But exactly here De Maistre's method proves complicated to apply. Faulkner is able to inventory the items in his room, but his immobile journey cannot really set off, for he is so nervous and unsettled that the objects all around him do not make sense to him as they would do to De Maistre. On the contrary, he realizes that the canopy of his bed is slowly descending and will eventually suffocate him. He understands, then, that he has been poisoned, yet he manages to escape, call the police, denounce the gambling house, and contribute to uncover and punish a long series of murders committed in that same room under the killing canopy bed.

During the confinement that has been imposed to most citizens of the world because of the pandemic, De Maistre's *Voyage autour de ma chambre* has often been invoked as an example of spiritually escaping from the physical constrictions of the quarantine so as to gain a new philosophical

grasp over the world. W.W. Collins' quotation and his character's failed imitation of De Maistre reminds readers that such élan of self-reflection is unviable through anguish. Whereas the Savoyard writer, still a youngster, knew that he would exit his bedroom after an isolation of forty-two days and find the world outside mostly unchanged, Faulkner is mentally paralyzed by poison, too strong coffee, and, above all, fear, confined in a room that he does not know, under a canopy bed that is slowly and threateningly reducing his living space, and eventually will crash him. The story "A Terribly Strange Bed", then, told by a traveling painter who is going blind and cannot either travel or paint anymore, becomes the narrative metaphor for those who see their conditions of life and experience suddenly shrinking, to the point that fear of suffocation and instinct to escape prevail.

Wilkie W. Collins too had experienced an epidemic and the ensuing quarantine; accidentally, this experience of his took place at the frontiers of Northern Italy. The facts are narrated by the writer himself in the second volume of *The Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.,* published in 1848, one year after William Collins', Wilkie father's, death on 16 February 1847 (Collins 1848). It was the first book ever published by the English writer, while he was still at work on his novel *Antonina,* also set in Italy. As William Collins, the father, had noted down in his own notebook, himself and the family left England through Dover on 19 September 1836, traveled through France, but then had to stop in Villafranca, near Nice:

> At this important part of his tour, however, where he had thought but to make a passing sojourn, he suffered great disappointment, and incurred unexpected delay, by the news that the cholera had broken out in Italy, and that further progress was for the present impracticable. (Collins 1848, 2: 77)

But was it really a surprising coincidence? As exceptional the 2020 pandemic might seem to those who have happened to suffer from it, epidemics and even pandemics recur cyclically in the history of humanity, with striking similarities. For example, the 1830s cholera pandemic had spread from the Indian subcontinent to Europe because of increased contacts between the two areas of the world due to the British military and commercial initiatives in India and to the introduction of steam engine transportation, accelerating the amount, speed, and rhythm of people and goods traveling across the world. Modern metropolises, moreover, were

an ideal setting for the spreading of epidemics. When William Collins, the father of the author of "A Terrible Strange Bed", arrived with his wife and eleven-year son Wilkie at the frontier between France and the Kingdom of Sardinia, cholera had already spread in Marseille, Nice, and Villafranca; the Italian sovereigns had reacted consequently, adopting a strategy that had been employed during the already mentioned 1630s and 1720s plagues: the duchy of Parma ordered the disinfection of all parcels with provenance from France whereas Carlo Alberto, King of Sardinia, instituted a cordon sanitaire between Sanremo and Ventimiglia, and between Cuneo and Nice. Genoa, Livorno, and Venice resisted the imposition of such measures, which would threaten their commerce, and supported medical theories explaining the epidemic of cholera as based on bad hygiene rather than on contact among people; history indeed repeats itself.

In the biography, Wilkie Collins reconstructs the six weeks that his father spent in Villafranca during the quarantine by reading his father's notebook and the letters he sent during that period to Sir David Wilkie, as well as by observing the paintings executed during the sojourn: they were mostly landscapes, since local women would refuse to pose for him, a protestant painter, "without the permission of their priest" (Collins 1848, 2: 79). As the quarantine was lifted, the painter and his family resumed their courageous journey through Italy. They sojourned in Genoa, Florence, Rome, but as they reached Naples, the cholera flared up again, killing as many as four hundred people in twenty-four hours. William Collins took refuge with the family in delightful Sorrento, where he started sketching frantically, ignoring the advice of the locals who would warn him about the heat of summer and the need to take a siesta through the torrid afternoons of Southern Italy. One day, he returned home exhausted and ill:

> Violent rheumatic pains attacked his right hand, arm, and shoulder, his left knee and ankle, and even his eyes; and he found himself, at the commencement of the brilliant Italian autumn, confined in a state of helpless suffering to the limits of a sickroom. (*Ibid.*: 112)

A painter losing his health and sight, confined in a sickroom: that sounds like a familiar setting, which must have offered biographical inspiration for the composition of "A Terribly Strange Bed". After seeking solace from his illness in Ischia, William Collins continued to recover in Naples, where he resumed painting. Yet he would do so with extreme

fatigue, holding his right hand with his left one, and sketching exclusively from his room — a pictorial version of De Maistre — observing and depicting passersby or the scenery of the nearby Castello dell'Ovo, constantly changing under variable weather.

4. PARALLEL THREADS: THE SIEGE OF ALMEIDA GARRETT IN 1830S OPORTO

The cholera that forced Wilkie Collins's father to precipitously leave Naples, exhausting himself thereafter through journeying and painting in Sorrento, ending up as a sick man in Ischia, then painstakingly sketching drawings from the window of a Naples apartment, also spread through Portugal in those same years. That was a turbulent time in Portuguese history, with the outbreak of the pandemic mixing its course with that of political upheavals and struggles. From this point of view too, history repeats itself. On June 1, 1833, William Lardner, a doctor, published an article in *The Lancet* entitled "The Malignant Cholera in Oporto in 1833" (Lardner 1833). In it, he exposed his theory about the spreading of cholera throughout the Portuguese city, brought there by the *London Merchant*, a steamer, with four-hundred veterans belonging to the disbanded Belgic battalion. Nine or ten of them had already died of cholera aboard, fifteen were heavily sick. From there, the disease spread to the village of Foz, where the soldiers had been hospitalized, and then to Oporto, where the cholera broke out while the city was under siege. In Oporto, indeed, from July 1832 till August 1833, the liberals backing Dom Pedro were besieged by the absolutists supporting Dom Miguel. The former eventually prevailed, leading to a period of liberal rule in Portugal. Among those who were fighting with the liberals in Oporto besieged by both the absolutists and the epidemics of cholera and typhus was also Almeida Garrett,[16] who had participated in the landing of the liberal forces in Oporto on 8 July 1832 and who was to become the most accomplished writer of Portuguese romantism.

As Xavier de Maistre before him, and as the fictional traveling painter that Wilkie Collins modeled after his father, Almeida Garrett too decided to undertake a non-journey, describing it in another classic of "anodeporics" (a neologism to designate travel literature that explores immobility): *Viagens na minha terra* (translated in English as *Travels in my*

Homeland). Although a section of it was presented as a theatrical play entitled "Frei Luìs de Sousa" on May 6, 1843 (in the Conservatório Nacional, which Almeida Garrett himself had helped to establish a few years earlier), *As Viagens* were then published as a complete work in the *Revista universal lisbonense* from 1843 to 1845, then republished in volume in 1846 (Almeida Garrett 1846). Cholera is mentioned in this work too, yet in this case it is not the infectious disease that Almeida Garrett had faced during the siege of Oporto, but rather a metaphoric epidemic, which Garrett explicitly evokes in a passage of his literary masterpiece: "São a molestia d'este seculo; são elles, não os jesuitas, a cholera-morbus da sociedade actual, os barões" ["they are the annoyance of this century; they are them, not the Jesuits, the cholera-morbus of today's society, the barons"; my trans.] (Almeida Garrett 1846, 1: 125). Those were, indeed, years of disillusion for the Portuguese writer and politician who, just a few years earlier, in 1841, had vehemently criticized the Cabralist minister António José d'Ávila[17] for his project of establishing a new fiscal law, "A lei da décima" [the law of the tenth part].

If *As Viagens* stems from Almeida Garrett's need to cast an estranged eye to his own land, infected with the cholera of political corruption, the stylistic inspiration of the work explicitly comes, once again, from De Maistre's *Voyage autour de ma chambre*. Yet the debt of imitation is acknowledged with irony: Almeida Garrett justifies his decision to travel to Santarém and its surrounding valley, along the Tagus River — approximately fifty miles northeast of Lisbon — because the climate there, he writes, was warmer than those of Turin — where De Maistre was imprisoned — and Saint Petersburg — where he ended his life.

Almeida Garrett first quotes De Maistre in an epigraph at the beginning of the novel, invoking him as a forerunner: "Qu'il est glorieux d'ouvrir une nouvelle carrière, et de paraître tout-à-coup dans le monde savant un livre de découvertes à la main, comme une comète inattendue étincelle dans l'espace!" ["How glorious it is to open a new path, and to suddenly appear in the world of literati with a book of discoveries in one's hand, like an unexpected comet sparkling in the sky!" (my trans. Almeida Garrett 1846, 1: 1). Subsequently, and always with reference to De Maistre, the Portuguese writer ironically states the argument of *As Viagens*' first chapter: "De como o auctor d'este erudito livro se resolveu a viajar na sua terra, depois de ter viajado no seu quarto; e como resolveu immortalizarse

escrevendo éstas suas viagens. Parte para Santarem" (*ibidem*) ["How the author of this learned book decided to travel to his homeland, after having traveled in his room; and how he decided to immortalize himself by writing about his travels. He leaves for Santarem"; my trans.]. Finally, the first paragraph of the first chapter is devoted to explain the reasons for the imperfect imitation of De Maistre:

> It is understandable that someone travels around his room being on the edge of the Alps, in winter, in Turin, which is almost as cold as Saint Petersburg. But with this climate, with this air that God gave us, where the orange grows in the garden, and the bush is myrtle, Xavier de Maistre himself, had he been writing here, would have gone at least to the yard.[18]

The reference to De Maistre is explicit, but veiled by irony. Almeida Garrett journeys near, but not as near as De Maistre, and motivates this choice for climatic reasons: after all, Portugal is not as cold as Turin! But, then, the Portuguese writer gives a second reason: his pen is ambitious — as he contends with further irony — thus he cannot content himself with looking at a corner of the Tagus river from his window, as William Collins had done it from his Naples' sickroom during his convalescence. Almeida Garrett wants to undertake a broader mission, that of journeying to Santarem, for there is a lot to be seen, described and written about!

> I often, on these suffocated nights of summer, travel to my window to see a glimpse of the Tagus that is at the end of the street, and indulge in the green of the trees that vegetate there their laborious childhood in the coves of Caes-do-Sodré. And I have never written about these travels of mine or their impressions: but there was a lot to be seen! My pen has always been ambitious: poor and superb, it wants a broader subject. Well, I'll give it one. I am going to Santarem, no less: and I affirm that I shall write a chronicle of what I shall see and hear, think and feel.[19]

5. SEMIOTIC THREADS: THE ESTRANGED HOME-TRAVELER

The originality and irony of such a statement cannot be measured in relation to the current semantics of the world "travel" ("voyage" in French; "viagem" in Portuguese). It must be appreciated, instead, in contrast with the semantic aura that the word would have between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, when "traveling" became connoted with expectations of long journeys to remote lands, with discoveries, there, of what was unfamiliar in terms of language, customs,

arts, and civilization.[20] At the same time as the European continent was reshaping its frontiers around nationalist ideals, travel was being reconfigured as an activity devoted to the disclosure of the nationally unknown, in terms of culture, but also in those of nature and landscape. It was this kind of existential experience that William Collins had in mind when, together with his family, left England to undertake a perilous *grand tour* through Italy during the outbreak of cholera.

The novelty of De Maistre's travelogue is to be measured in relation to such cultural background: in a time of explorations and journeys across frontiers, he proposes to apply the same estranged gaze to an intimate and normally familiar setting: his own room. There are, therefore, two implications to this proxemic rhetoric: on the one hand, the idea that what makes the novelty of a journey is not only and maybe not as much what is seen but the disposition through which it is seen. If one adopts the aptitude of a traveler — De Maistre suggests — then everything around, even the most banal, known, and apparently insignificant object will turn into the door of a fabulous new journey into novelty and significance. The second implication is eminently semiotic: if we have the impression that we can journey only faraway, and if the plan of a journey around our own room seems preposterous, that is the case because our semiotic habits — those through which we look at reality — are so consolidated that they are experienced as unshakable. If, however, through a semiotic operation of self-estrangement, we seek to forget for one moment ourselves and our habits of interpretation, then a marvelous new world opens up for us, starting from the prints that hang at our room's walls.

De Maistre was not a semiotician, of course, yet he realized, by his sensibility made more acute by the confinement, that we do not really look anymore at what surrounds us in our intimate space, perhaps because we are too engrossed in the dream of long-distance and adventurous journeying. De Maistre reversed the cliché: what if the real adventure were nearby, not far away? And what if, on the opposite, a bundle of stereotypes hid in the dreaming and practice of remote journeying? What results from such reversal is a rhetorical appeal to intimate discovery, starting from what is more familiar to us, that is, the paintings at the walls of our room — those that we only seldom observe — but also from the more familiar of paintings, that face of ours in the mirror that we seem to know but that,

in reality, constantly escapes both our vision and our introspection. We are so used to our face that we neglect to inspect it carefully.

An introspective look, on the opposite, is what Walter Collins, the painter and traveler, seems to completely lack. Wilkie, his son, depicts him as a reckless traveler, exposing his family to tremendous risks while journeying, but also as a frantic painter, devouring everything that is there to be seen, but also always desirous of more, and forgetful of his own limits to the point of exhausting himself. He ends up worn out, with a poor sight and an uncertain hand, yet still sketching the views outside, uninterested in the only genre that, on the opposite, would have mattered in those circumstances: the self-portrait, able to investigate and pictorially render his own face. The main character of "A Terribly Strange Bed" seems to inherit this inability: confined in his bedroom, he cannot imitate De Maistre, for the simple reason that what surrounds him is not his own bedroom, but a mysterious, treacherous room where he has been lured into upon venturing to a gambling place.

Almeida Garrett, instead, models his journey after that of De Maistre, but enlarges his focus. A disillusioned politician, what interests him is not to describe and promote an intimate journey, the constitution of a "moral mirror" for the individual face, but to stimulate his readers' self-reflection about their own country, Portugal, and offer them, thus, a collective self-portrait, a restitution of the nation's countenance. The proxemic and semiotic operation is, in any case, analogous in all but scale to that of De Maistre: by journeying with the eyes and the attitude of a traveler through the proximities of one's home, one shall discover what had been forgotten for excess of familiarity; the hidden thread of a country's life.

In the terms of a semiotic theory of interpretation, Xavier de Maistre and his emulator Almeida Garrett accomplish the same operation. Thanks to the frame of literary invention, they manage to unsettle the established habits of interpretations. According to Peirce's semiotics, habits are indispensable to make objects into signs. Yet habits eventually also turn signs into objects, meaning that interpretive familiarity with signs makes them invisible, uncapable of offering new meaning. As soon as they are seen from a different angle, though, their nature of objectified signs is shaken, hence they can become signs again, albeit from a different perspective. Various mental operations can lead to such result. De Maistre, and then Almeida Garrett after him, propose to discomfit the confortable

patterns of signification through adopting the forma mentis of the traveler, interiorly disposed to see all that is around with fresh eyes.

The task of proper travelers, however, is relatively easy: everything around them is, indeed, new: roads, cities, monuments, people. Yet De Maistre, a mighty traveler himself, finds that such effect of novelty can be made independent from its actual object and entirely related to the process of signification that interprets it. What changes, in De Maistre's as well as in Almeida Garrett's journeys, is not what they see, but how they see it. In semiotic terms, it could be said, with semiotician Charles S. Peirce, that what is changed is the slant through which the object is made a ground for signification (MS 318, "Pragmatism"). It is evident that such signification cannot express the object entirely, but only "under some respects and capacities". It could also be added, with semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas, that what is altered is the particular aspectuality of vision (Greimas and Courtès 1979: 21), the way in which objects in one's room are enunciated in temporal and spatial times. Indeed, De Maistre and the followers of his 'method' operate a spatial de-contextualization of objects that contributes to reactivate the semiosis of their interpretation. Paintings, for instance, are not looked at any longer as it is usually done at home, that is, in passing, as a mere background of the scene of everyday life, in blurry conjunction with other paintings and objects in relation to which these paintings become hardly distinguishable; they are looked at, instead, through detaching them from their quotidian context, by enunciating them by means of a new mental framework, which isolates them not only in space, but also, decisively, in time. What changes in their individuation, indeed, is also the tempo through which they are observed: no longer through a distracted gaze, but by a way of looking that takes the time of indulging on details, and pondering objects long enough for them to return to their original condition of signifying entities, prior to the consolidation of interpretive habits: as though recovering the gaze through which they were seen for the first time.

Yet such gaze is not a forgetful one. It cannot be an oblivious gaze. Objects can be turned into triggers of specific memories by appropriate mnemotechnics, but the opposite is cognitively impossible: there is no art of obliviousness (Eco 1988). The gaze that rediscovers the object cannot, as a consequence, be enchanted by it exactly in the same way in which that happened when the object was seen for the first time, when the painting

was first admired and bought, or when the partner was first encountered and it was love at first sight. The proximity traveler must, instead, reenchant the object by a gaze that — disrupting the usual spatial and temporal framework of distracted enunciation — isolates it from the context, indulges on its observation, and, through a re-discovery of its singularity, reenchant it by contemplation.

The face itself may turn into a perfect object for such semiotic procedure. Distractedly looked at in the mirror, it does not yield anything but a somnolent meaning; yet, once a gaze of mental traveler is cast at it, it becomes the point of departure of an infinite chain of interpretive associations, an adventurous semiotic journey. The proximity traveler, then, ceases to move along the coordinates of latitude and longitude and starts traveling along that of depth, diving into the semiotic ocean that hides behind every familiar object. Infinite semiosis is reactivated at each corner of the room, and innumerous journeys depart from each and every one of its objects.

6. INFINITE THREADS; THE BASEMENT OF JORGE LUIS BORGES IN 1945 BUENOS AIRES

"O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a King of infinite space". This is a quotation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II. The line perfectly summarizes the idea that infinity can mysteriously be enshrined within a minute receptacle, although how that might happen escapes the human comprehension and refers to the essence of human signification and language itself, to the human capability for tapping ever new meaning into the inexhaustible well of semiosis. Hamlet's quote would have suited De Maistre, but appears as epigraph at the beginning of another story, one that perhaps goes farther than any other in exploring the infinite journey that is humanly possible to undertake departing from the finitude of language:

> 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.[21] (Borges 1945: 52)

That is the beginning of *El Aleph*, a short story famously published by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges[22] in 1945 in the journal *Sur*. It opens with a bitterly melancholic consideration about the slipperiness of time. As soon as Beatriz Viterbo, the narrator's friend, dies, glimpses of the world start to recede from her grasp, changing. The story then hints at two different 'styles of aspectuality' through the contrast between the allure of the girl, "había en su andar (si el oxymoron es tolerable) una como graciosa torpeza, un principio de éxtasis" ["in her walk there was (if the oxymoron may be allowed), a kind of uncertain grace, a hint of expectancy"] (*ibid.*: 53, my trans.) and that of his brother, Carlos Argentino Daneri, characterized by a "copiosa gesticulación italiana" ["demonstrative Italian gestures"] (*ibid.,* my trans.) and a mental activity that is "continua, apasionada, versátil y del todo insignificante" ["continuous, deeply felt, far-ranging, and — all in all — meaningless"] (*ibid.,* my trans.). Such dialectics between the ecstatic laziness of Beatriz, for which the term itself of "andar" ("allure", but also "to go") appears as an oxymoronic figure of mystical immobility, and Carlos, the source of an incessant yet insignificant activity, is further specified in the way in which, during a later conversation that the narrator has with the latter in 1941, Carlos describes the "modern man" as someone who must not travel anymore; this unnecessity of journeying, however, is not evoked by him in the terms of De Maistre, but through a surprising anticipation of the technologically hyperconnected individual:

> "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..."
> He 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.[23] (*Ibid.*, my trans.)

Subsequently, Carlos reveals to the narrator that he is secretively working on a long poem entitled "La tierra" ("The Earth"), a few lines of which he starts to recite upon the insistence of the narrator:

> My eyes, as did the Greek's, have known men's towns and fame,
> The works, the days in light that fades to amber;
> I do not change a fact or falsify a name —
> The voyage I set down is... *autour de ma chambre*.[24] (*Ibid.*: 54, my trans.)

The reference to De Maistre could not be clearer: in the pompous lines of his poem, Carlos claims to have seen, like the Greek (Homer, Hesiod), the cities of men, their works, their days, but he prefers to narrate, like a novel De Maistre, the journey around his own room. The silly irony that the narrator attributes to his interlocutor is made explicit in the dialogue that follows, when Carlos reveals that his intention was to quote the Savoyard writer: "la tercera la bagatela inmortal que nos depararan los ocios de la pluma del saboyano" ["and third to the immortal bagatelle bequathed us by the frolicking pen of the Savoyard, Xavier de Maistre"] (*ibid., my trans.*). The narrator keeps ironizing on Carlos' long and clumsy didactic poem, until he receives from him an agitated call: the owners of his house, which was also his sister Beatriz's house, are going to demolish it so as to make more space for their pastry shop. But that is impossible, exclaims Carlos, for in the basement of the house there is an Aleph!:

"It's in the cellar under the dining room," he went on, so overcome by his worries now that he forgot to be pompous. "It's mine — mine. I discovered it when I was a child, all by myself. The cellar stairway is so steep that my aunt and uncle forbade my using it, but I'd heard someone say there was a world down there. I found out later they meant an old-fashioned globe of the world, but at the time I thought they were referring to the world itself. One day when no one was home I started down in secret, but I stumbled and fell. When I opened my eyes, I saw the Aleph."[25] (*Ibid.*: 58, my trans.)

The Aleph, the point in space where all spaces from all angles can be seen, enters a new dialectics with the inevitable partial images of Beatriz that the narrator recalls, as well as the partial representations of her that he comes across in her house. As he is about to descend in the basement to admire the Aleph, the narrator reveals his own name, Borges, in front of a painting depicting the deceased: "Beatriz, Beatriz Elena, Beatriz Elena Viterbo, Beatriz querida, Beatriz perdida para siempre, soy yo, soy Borges" ["Beatriz, Beatriz Elena, Beatriz Elena Viterbo, darling Beatriz, Beatriz now gone forever, it's me, it's Borges"] (*ibid.,* my trans.). This partiality of memory and representation triggered by the contemplation of a single object is in sharp contrast with the miracle of the Aleph that the narrator is about to witness; Carlos urges him: "Baja; muy en breve podrás entablar un diálogo con todas las imágenes de Beatriz" ["Now, down you go. In a short while you can babble with all of Beatriz' images"] (*ibid.*, my trans.).

Not without apprehension the narrator follows his excited interlocutor's instructions and descends in the dark basement, staring at the point of it (the nineteenth step) where he is instructed to. After a moment of hesitation, in which he fears to be the victim of a mad assassin, he finally sees the Aleph. Here, through those rhetorical figures (mostly paradoxes, oxymorons, and contradictions) by means of which the mystics of the past had sought to evoke the sight of infinitude, the narrator endeavors to describe the totality of possible visions that he simultaneously saw in the Aleph. In a passage of Borges' masterly description, he relates that "vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo, vi todos los espejos del planeta y ninguno me reflejó" ["I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me"] (*ibid.*: 59, my trans.).

Carlos, one of the main characters of the short story *El Aleph*, quotes De Maistre, yet this quotation is ironized upon, exactly so as to stress that the former, a pompous verse-writer, does not actually understand what poetry is, and does not understand De Maistre either. In the second part of the story, which introduces and describes the Aleph, the reason for this incomprehension is given: Carlos cannot be a true poet, and cannot understand De Maistre's intentions in depth, because he is addicted to the Aleph, a mystical device that contained "all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me" (*ibid.:* 59, my trans.); but what are mirrors, if they cannot reflect one's face? How different this image is from that of the "moral mirror" devised by De Maistre! The Aleph exudes with the same utopia of totality that Carlos had already extolled in his imagination of the modern, hyperconnected man, an ideal of exhaustivity that reaches its mystical apex in Borges's encounter with the fabulous device.

But is it really mystical? And why is it placed in the topologically and metaphorically inferior space of the basement? Is it to underline even more the incapacity of such utopia for self-reflexivity and poetry, suggesting that seeing everything at the same time prevents one from enjoying the nostalgic partiality that is indispensable for both philosophizing and poetry? Is Borges suggesting that seeing it all at the same time in the utopia of a mystical journey is tantamount to losing the subjectivity but also the singularity of the gaze? In any case, nothing could be farther than the Aleph from De Maistre's ideal of traveling around one's room. In De Maistre, the adoption of a traveler's attitude allows him

to estrange the gaze, to defamiliarize entrenched semiotic habits in order to reenchant the obvious; in Borges, on the contrary, the product of the mystical panopticon is nothing but obtuseness, the childish dream of an all-encompassing gaze; it is not a case that, in describing it, Borges sees his own bedroom but "sin nadie", with no one in it, and that further mirrors occur in the mystical evocation yet, again, they do not reflect a face: "en un gabinete de Alkmaar un globo terráqueo entre dos espejos que lo multiplican sin fin" ["I saw in a closet in Alkmaar a terrestrial globe between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly"] (*ibid.,* my trans.). Exhaustiveness of vision, the story seems to implicitly suggest, does not lead to self-knowledge but, on the contrary, hampers it. That is clearly declared at the end of the story:

> Out on the street, going down the stairways inside Constitution Station, riding the subway, every one of the faces seemed familiar to me. 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.[26] (*Ibid.*: 60, my trans.)

In other texts Borges narratively reflects on the paralyzing effects of exhaustiveness, for instance, when he imagines an individual endowed with infallible memory (*Funés el memorioso*); here he seems to suggest that poetic, literary, and philosophical sensibility requires one not to be able to see everything from every possible angle, but to cultivate, instead, the erotic art of partiality: so as to reenchant a lover's face, one cannot pretend not to know it, or to see it as for the first time, but can, instead, revel into the idea of its inexhaustible depth. On the contrary, what allows us to see everything at the same time, like the mystical device of the Aleph, but also like the hyper-connectivity of the modern metropolis or the post-modern frenzy of traveling everywhere at every moment, condemns us to an eternal déjà-vu, to be forever unsurprised.

The story ends by narratively staging a post-datum written in March 1943, which provides an erudite list of literary mentions of all-encompassing optical and mystical devices. The epilogue confirms, however, the epistemological and moral lesson of the tale: perhaps the Aleph that was shown to Borges was not the real one. Perhaps the only real one is in the column of an ancient mosque, in the "intimate interior of a stone" (*ibid.*, 62, my trans.). If that is the case, there is no alternative

to accepting the partiality of our vision, the fallibility of our memory, and to concluding that only the struggle against the threat of oblivion justifies poetry, as it does the story *El Aleph* itself, which manages to immortalize the name of Beatriz Viterbo, while her features fade away. And what is this name, "Beatriz", reminiscent of, after all, if not of the name of Dante's Beatrice, his guide to the infinity of beatitude in Paradise, together with Viterbo, the Italian city that is famous especially for the very deep well constructed therein by Antonio da Sangallo il Giovane? Isn't memory a bottomless well sinking into darkness, and isn't poetry, the poetry of love, the only means to "see the stars again"?

7. CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic made traveling very difficult or impossible throughout the world. Other pandemics in the past did the same. Travel literature is usually about describing journeys. It is about reflecting on them. That is technically called "odeporics". In previous pandemics, a different kind of travel literature arose. It might be called, with a neologism, "anodeporics". It consists in describing immobility. In reflecting on it. Even though external conditions make movement and travel very difficult or impossible, the journey can continue in a different way. Even one's bedroom can become the space of an adventure. That requires a shifting in the traveler's gaze. The present article has sought to describe such shifting through several examples. That might be useful for re-thinking travel and immobility also through the present pandemic.

Notes

[1] "Congratulations on the new power, child, so we go to the stars" (trans. mine); indeed, new powers are needed in these difficult times.

[2] Vigone, 1564 – Turin, 9 October 1642.

[3] Unless differently specified, translations in the article are by the author.

[4] See Trompeo 1867; Claretta 1869; and Reineri 2010.

[5] "I segni pronostici della peste, alcuni possono essere segni, e cause insieme, come se l'Anno è calmo, ed umido, se è piovoso con predominio de' venti Australi, inondazion de' fiumi, comete, lampi, fuochi notturni scorrenti; Se gli animali sotteranei fuggono loro stanze, e vengono sopra la terra, non potendo vivere nell'estrema putrefazione loro madre, quali sono vermi, serpi, rospi, topi, e stando

sopra la terra mojono, che poi sono causa d'infezione. Se anno preceduto terremoti con aperture, e voragini della terra. Se l'Anno è abbondante d'animali, nati da putrefazione, come di mosche, zanzare, locuste, e gatte, che mangiano i frutti della terra, spogliano gli arbori, e le viti di foglie, germogli, e pampini. Se gli uccelli paesani fuggono, se sono molte febbri maligne con varole, petecchie, o sia senespioni, furonculi, carboncelli, e simili" (Fiochetto 1720: 33; my trans.).

[6] Turin, 26 November 1602 – 13 March 1672.

[7] "Sotto una pergola per difesa del sole, di dove si vedeva in letto in una sala bassa, nel qual esso giaceva infermo, che con tutto ciò non lasciava di dire il suo parere, sin che piacque a Dio restituirgli la sanità" (Fiochetto 1720: 49).

[8] See Castronovo 1970 and Caffaratto 1972.

[9] Chambéry (Savoy, then Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia), 1 April 1753 – Turin (Savoy, then Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia), 26 February 1821.

[10] Chambéry (Savoy, then Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia) 10 October 1763 - Saint Petersburg (then Russian Empire), 12 June 1852.

[11] See Berthier 1918; Pellissier 2001; Izzi 2006.

[12] See De Maistre 1987 and 1999 for updated bibliographies on this work; De Maistre would later return on the topic of confinement with the novel *Le Lépreux de la Cité d'Aoste*, first published in Saint Petersburg in 1811, where he narrated the conversations that he had with the leper Pier Bernardo Guasco, confined in the Tour de la Frayeur, or Tour du Lépreux, in Aosta, the last survivor of a family exterminated by the disease. De Maistre then wrote, in 1825, a nocturnal 'sequel' of his best seller, *Expédition nocturne autour de ma chambre* (1825).

[13] "Les estampes et les tableaux dont je viens de parler pâlissent et disparaissent au premier coup d'œil qu'on jette sur le tableau vivant: les ouvrages immortels de Raphaël, de Corrège et de toute l'école d'Italie ne soutiendraient pas le parallèle. Aussi, je le garde toujours pour le dernier morceau, pour la pièce de réserve, lorsque je procure à quelques curieux le plaisir de voyager avec moi; et je puis assurer que, depuis que je fais voir ce tableau sublime aux connaisseurs et aux ignorants, aux gens du monde, aux artisans, aux femmes et aux enfants, aux animaux mêmes, j'ai toujours vu les spectateurs quelconques donner, chacun à sa manière, des signes de plaisir et d'étonnement : tant la nature y est admirablement rendue !" (De Maistre 1796: 77-78; engl. trans. De Maistre 1871: 78-9).

[14] Marylebone, London, 8 January 1824 – London, 23 September 1889; on his life, see Lycett 2013; for an introduction to his work, see Taylor 2006.

[15] 1807 – 1891.

[16] Joo Baptista da Silva Leitão de Almeida Garrett; Porto, 4 February 1799 - Lisbon, 9 December 1854; for an introduction to his life and works, see the two volumes of Paiva Monteiro and Santana 1999.

[17] Matriz, Horta (Azores Islands); 8 March 1807 – Lisbon, 3 May 1881.

[18] "Que viage á roda do seu quarto quem está á beira dos Alpes, de hynverno, em Turim, que é quasi tam frio como San Petersburgo—intende-se. Mas com este clima,

com este ar que Deus nos deu, onde a laranjeira cresce na horta, e o mato é de murta, o proprio Xavier de Maistre, que aqui escrevesse, ao menos ia até o quintal" (Almeida Garrett 1846, 1: 1-2).

[19] "Eu muitas vezes, n'estas suffocadas noites d'estio, viajo até à minha janella para ver uma nesguita de Tejo que está no fim da rua, e me inganar com uns verdes de árvores que alli vegetam sua laboriosa infancia nos intulhos do Cais do Sodré. É nunca escrevi estas minhas viagens nem as suas impressões: pois tinham muito que ver! Foi sempre ambiciosa a minha penna: pobre e suberba, quer assumpto mais largo. Pois hei-de dar-lh'o. Vou nada menos que a Santarém: e protesto que de quanto vir e ouvir, de quanto eu pensar e sentir se hade fazer crónica." (*Ibid.*, 1: 2).

[20] See the statistics of the World Tourism Organization for 2019: contemporary traveling is mostly for leisure and mostly short.

[21] "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 qué aviso de cigarrillos 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" (Engl. trans. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, in collaboration with the autor, available at https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/borgesaleph.pdf).

[22] Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges Acevedo (Buenos Aires, 24 August 1899 – Geneva, 14 June 1986).

[23] "Lo evoco — 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...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".

[24] "He visto, como el griego, las urbes de los hombres, los trabajos, los días de varia luz, el hambre; no corrijo los hechos, no falseo los nombres, pero el voyage que narro, es...*autour de ma chambre".*

[25] "Está en el sótano del comedor explicó, aligerada su dicción por la angustia-. Es mío, es mío: yo lo descubrí en la niñez, antes de la edad escolar. La escalera del sótano es empinada, mis tíos me tenían prohibido el descenso, pero alguien dijo que había un mundo en el sótano. Se refería, lo supe después, a un baúl, pero yo entendí que había un mundo. Bajé secretamente, rodé por la escalera vedada, caí. Al abrir los ojos, vi el Aleph".

[26] "En la calle, en las escaleras de Constitución, en el subterráneo, me parecieron familiares todas las caras. 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".

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