



## Was Callimachus a postmodernist?

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### ABSTRACT

At the beginning, we should present and highlight the *causa movens* to which this paper owes its creation. More generally, this was the long millennial incarnation of the book as an eternal conversation among chronologies, ideas, meanings and symbols. Having taken a closer look, this incarnation of thought posed the following question: What would happen if the Argentinian Borges assumed the patrician position of the Alexandrian Callimachus, who did not perceive literature as a fossil with all of its possibilities exhausted, but as challenging space of allegory. The answer to this question offered a curious analogy of affinities between the founder of the School of Muses and the Mage of Latin American literature, and then led to the brave question – Was Callimachus a true Postmodernist?

*Key words: Callimachus, Alexandria, Borges, Antiquity, Postmodernism*

The attractiveness of Alexandrism as a template for a certain type of authorial writing in contemporary literature (where Borges assumes the patrician position of Callimachus), and its cosmopolitan tendencies, supported by the intuitive potential of the planetary conscience/consciousness, elevates literature to an act of heroic fame. It feeds from two seemingly linked elements: the *Library* that symbolizes the mutuality of the contemporary spiritual efforts with those of the predecessors and the *loneliness* of the *reader/interpreter*, who, with his/her comments (in a room dedicated and protected from the numerousness and authority of the Book liberated from living people), defends his/her fragile individual survival. Borges, almost blind, protected himself from the bloody quotidian of his agitated fatherland Ar-

gentina with impenetrable walls made out of thousands of books. Callimachus, the founder the 'School of Muses', empress Arsinoe's favourite, wrote his encyclopedic 'pinakes' in the silence of the Library. They are both impressive not only because of their eclectic skill to merge and cross diverse segments of spiritual legacies in a unique mosaic in which their powerful curiosity is propped by skepticism and mysticism, but also because of their human choice: to use their physical exile for the immeasurable delight of the vertical journeying.

Alexandrisim is a shining example of how to elevate a geographical and chronological causation through artistic freedom. Inherent to the imperial city of Alexandria since its birth, Alexandrisim as a literary and cultural phenomenon has nestled itself in different later periods and spaces. As a floating signifier, Alexandrisim marks the literature of the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC in the slim, but spatially present, layer of Hellenistic empires, for the noblemen of spirit, the connoisseurs of Ancient Greek literature and often philosophers. The apocrypha, elaboration of mythological details, quotation, mystification, or the endearing treatise about the poetic form – all these wonderful exercises of talent, imagination and use of knowledge were secured by the purity of space (library) and language, which, in the case of Callimachus, and all the recluses related to him, is essentially different from the language in everyday use. After the death of Alexander, in the monarchies that emerged after the dissolution of his unique Empire, the hybrid multilingual population with most diverse origins mixed their languages, culture and lack of more profound education. The world resembled a cosmopolitan village, and just as the citizens of the world today are satisfied with only skimming over the surface of information, so were the erstwhile subjects of the Ptolemaic, Seleucid and Antigonid dynasties more than happy to engage in the numerous material pastimes offered in their realms. The Hellenistic epoch undermined the ethical-political cosmos of the polis without much effort despite the tragicomic resistance of the successors of Demosthenes. As early as the scenes depicted on Achilles' shield, engraved in the metal by the lame god, and forged in verses by the rhapsodic genius, community was considered a necessity, essential for personal development. In Homer, we find the cosmos of the polis already formed: battlefield and assembly – a constitution of honour and power, education of youth, public life, in which wise orations and heroic deeds go hand in hand, but always in harmony with the principles of the order of the City. When someone transgressed and breached them, however, like Oedipus or Alcibiades, the individual was always guilty and had to pay. The polis was faultless, even when its vengeance was bloody. Hence the exceptional familiarity of the citizen of the polis with the myth. In it, an anthropomorphous Olympus presided by Zeus warned the humans, as insignificant as blades of grass, that every rebellion, everyone's hubris had to be punished, be it an immortal's or mortal's (which was a praiseworthy undertaking for the latter, because

of their fragility and transience). The dynastic struggle for the heavenly throne led to a final and symbolic victory of mind over instinct, of meaningful light over blind deluge. Wisdom (Zeus's foremost attribute) overpowered cunning (Cronus's asset as a 'swallower of children') and the humanized apotheosis could start with the envisaging of a world fit for humans.

The characters and people in the works written by Euripides and Aristophanes, as well as Socrates's fate and Plato's duality, tried to convince us that the faith in the ethical and political authority of the polis had already been seriously weakened. The invincible Macedonian only finished something that had started long ago. Thus, the formal protection of the polis crumbled into pieces faced with the emperors' phalanxes. In the Oriental cities established by him and his successors, the fundamental ideal of *koinè* implied movement, flow, mixing and mutuality. Alexandria, the shining example of Hellenism, was an amalgam of people: the Lagid monarchy of a Greek-Macedonian origin favoured mainly Macedonians and Greeks, who were not only the ruling, but also the cultural elite, but it also stimulated other peoples – Jews primarily (whose colony consisted of about a thousand citizens), as well as Egyptians. Despite the forceful propaganda of Hellenization and the receptivity of the educated non-Greek citizens when adopting Ancient Greek (the Bible was translated into Attic as early as the rule of Ptolemy Philadelphus), and despite the syncretic cosmopolitan spirit of the city, these peoples jealously preserved their language, customs and faith. There is a partial similarity with Buenos Aires: Spaniards, Italians, Jews, Slavs and a few Creoles, Mulattoes, and Indians in a city with a large National Library (more than 650 000 titles).

The language in which the Alexandrians wrote was an adapted Attic *koinè glossa*, which was the closest to Plato's Athenian. All Ancient Greek literature prior to Alexandria was written in dialects distributed evenly across the literary genres: the dialogue in tragedies was in Athenian, while the chorus and its lyric were in Doric, the epics used Ionic, lyrical poetry Aeolic, or Ionic, and melic songs Aeolic. Callimachus and his contemporaries from the 'Alexandrian Pleiad', Alexander Aetolus of Pleuron, Dionysiades, Lycophron, Sositheus, and their successors on the court of Ptolemy Euergetes, Apollonius of Rhodes, Conon of Samos, Dositheus of Pelusium, Eratosthenes, Lacydes of Cyrene, were favourably backed by their rulers, like noble literary aristocrats, in their detailed studies of the lexical possibilities of the language. In their own poetic vocabulary, they introduced many old words and expressions, with which their contemporaries were often not familiar. It is possible that they used folkloric poetic and story-telling sources unknown to us. The Hellenistic Ancient Greek differed from the Attic speech used in Athens, and it adopted some peculiarities of the old Greek spoken languages, especially Ionian. It also used some 'exotic' Barbarian words. Not unlike Borgesian language, the language of Callimachus,

saturated with erudition, elevated as 'abstract' in relation to the spoken vernacular, was a language of a poeta doctus, of a refined mannerist, who had achieved crystal baroque style through a refined Game. Alexandrians often experimented with the lexical material. They used metaphors that were like real conundrums sometimes, while some were refined to the level of 'figurative poetry'. The order of the verses created a certain visual context that required a 'key' to be understood. Yet, despite their exclusivity and dedication to the craft, Alexandrians never suppressed the importance of exultation, and certainly not in the sense of Horace's condemnation of 'drunk poets'. Their veneration of form did not push them to underestimate the inspirational driving force, especially if this inspiration was located in the power to upgrade certain experiences into a new whole, in the crystallization of the ability for active spiritual quest. Callimachus related to Homer in a similar manner as Borges related to Dante. The Olympians had long been just literary characters, and the time of the Great Accord had long been just an irreversible nostalgia. Mythological plots could inspire as a starting point for the noble Game, but the main, central and primary characters did not have the advantage to act powerfully as patterns of inviolable faith in the cosmic justice, and instead, the focus was on the mythological details, unknown episodes, poeticized histories of various urban or familial fortunes, and local, often bizarre motifs. The articles Callimachus wrote about birds or his glosae about the titles of different localities can remind us of Borgesian zoology through free associations. Callimachus' catalogue can be perceived as a skeleton for a personal history of literature – Callimachus accompanied the biography and bibliography of every writer with his own evaluations and notes. The extensiveness of the material is a sufficient testimony to Callimachus' erudition (the first part of the catalogue 'processed' the epic, iambic and melic poets, the tragedians and comedigraphers, while the second part was dedicated to the writers of prose, historians, orators and scientific writings). He moved among minds obsessed with language. Zenodotus assembled a Homeric dictionary, Aristophanes of Byzantium a theory of 'analogy' and the diacritics used in all Alexandrian editions, while Aristarchus studied types of words and substantiated the values of the analogies... Among Callimachus' friends and colleagues, however, there were no literary theoreticians and linguists. If Athens had retained its pre-eminence in philosophy, many researchers in Alexandria were obsessed with systematizing and shaping all that knowledge into disciplines. Among the physicist and mathematicians, Euclid established a geometry academy and Archimedes of Syracuse was studying there at the same time when Callimachus was writing his first catalogue. Geographers and geometers (starting with the Indian expedition of Alexander's Nearchus) were always part of every conquering monarch's entourage. Doctors and anatomists, such as Herophilus of Chalcedon and his younger contemporary, Erasistratus of Ceos, perceived the human organism as a sum of the mutual function-

ality of its organs and classified some of the interactions. The statement ascribed to Callimachus – ‘Nothing unattested do I sing’ does not only confirm his respect for erudition, but also affirms his individual curiosity, his passion to penetrate the most hidden corridors of the Labyrinth. In opposition to the collective ethical themes, the individual experience was more attractive, albeit often episodic, or bizarre. Only one longer work survived to the present day, the epic *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes, and only in Latin translation, owing to the interest of Roman poets. The other preserved works are either shorter (epyllion, elegy, epigram, mime) or hybrid forms (idyll, sentimental short story). The structure of *Argonautica*, nonetheless, was also disjointed by various interpolated episodes, out of which the most convincing artistically were the ones capturing the tides and ebbs of individual psyche – Medea’s passion, for instance, whose depiction by Apollonius would later serve as a model for Vergil’s Fourth Book of *Aeneid*. Alexandrian literature is excessively prone to mixing genres and improved their cooperation. Poetry was often written in iambic meter, which was the meter previously typical for drama. A dramatic work, such as Lycophron’s *Alexandra*, could greatly resemble a poem (in which the prophecies of Cassandra, the daughter of the ill-fated Priam and wife of self-accused Agamemnon, were replete with metaphors and other stylistic bravados, and the work was justly dubbed an ‘exercise book for grammarians’). The publication of scientific poems, especially those of a ‘prognosticating’ character in the field of astrology, such as Eudoxus’ *Predictions*, not only indicated obsession with the cosmos of a horoscopic type, but also penetrated the twilight zone, where the connections among the stars were as powerful and inviolable as in the astronomic observations. During the Alexandrian period, astronomy came to most synthesizing results in Aristarchus and Seleucus’ heliocentric theory, and later on in the astronomic researches of Apollonius of Perga, and especially Hipparchus, who used different instruments to identify more than 850 stars and determine their coordinates and size).

Astrological impulses emitted from the ancient Babylonian towers were readily received in the cities of the Hellenistic monarchies, one after another, because their curious citizens yearned to self-confirm in the cosmic laws.

It seems that the vision of Callimachus and Borges as prisoners of desire, securing their private and creative mastery in the exile of the Library is an idealization. The very nature of their protean activity, nourished with encyclopedias, catalogues, and lexicons, implies a necessary amount of sociability, synergy with similar individual energies. The enormous influence Callimachus had on the Roman neoterics, Propertius or Ovid, and Borges’s obvious paternity in the cases of many important writers from the second half of the 20th century, does not annul their active (dis)agreement with their contemporaries. Callimachus’ polemics with Apollonius, ennobled in the literary production with two representative works of the Alexandrian literature – *Ibis*

and Hecale, implies that the escape of Callimachus' most talented student to Rhodes was a result of the straightforward power of learnedness, of the direct influence that Callimachus exercised over the future writers. Borges's creative tide, in his cooperation with Casares and Magarita Guerero, as well as in his secret and constant polemics with his two compatriots, the literary greats Sabato and Cortasar, tells us the same thing – the wise man needs the Library as a treasury of arguments that strengthens his game. Callimachus and Borges were both high eclectics, artists-gatherers. Eclecticism's adversaries list the lack of deeper conviction as one of its great weaknesses and that absence, unlike the works with a 'clean' style, manifests in the malignity of the contact tissue. The eclectic's eccentricity is the opposite of the tested and proven logic in the construction of the shape, immanent to the works of the classical artist. This is not an unfounded disagreement, and it manifests itself in the interpreting and managing of the process of composition, according to which the eclectic game with the fragments is judged insufficient and superficial. In opposition to the principle of harmoniousness (derived from the model of a healthy human body) is the principle of unpredictable vegetative growth.

Indeed, the postmodernist space in literature, just like in architecture, is predictable in its unpredictability.

Let us go back to Alexandria once again. The gruesome sacrifice of the Library and, a little later, the suicide of the 'snaky' loser Queen Cleopatra, do not mark the fall of the city. In 30 BC, Rome under Augustus would finally conquer the shaken empire of the Ptolemaic dynasty, which could not be saved by the title of the 'Saviour' either. Roman Alexandria, however, would shine again at the time of some tempestuous dogmatic disputes that caused a rift in the old Christian church. The Patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril, with Rome's blessing, condemned the teachings of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius as heretical, and Alexandria became the head of the Eastern Church. This short-lived rule was overthrown as early as the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, when the Alexandrian doctrine of Monophysitism was condemned as heretical. Almost 15 centuries later, the reborn Alexandria of Cavafy and Durrell is equally enticing and unique. While admiring the limitless Atlantis-like mysteriousness of the City, we still cannot avoid the fact that its conception was artificial, following the will of an almighty Conqueror, not the natural laws of the soil. This calls attention to Spengler's definition of the 'world-city', the mega-polis that "...absorbs all the content of history, reducing the entire land of culture to the rank of a province, which in turn feeds the world-city with the remnants of its higher citizenry... Instead, a world-city, a single point where the entire life of distant lands gathers, while everything else dries up: not like a people united with the soil, this is a new nomad, a citizen of the great city, clean, non-religious, intelligent, infertile, deeply repulsed by the peasantry (and by its highest form, rural nobility),

that is to say, a huge step towards the un-organic, to the end.” Like Rome, or Paris much later, at the turn of the centuries, or New York today, Alexandria propagated its political and cultural egoism mercilessly. Unlike the megalopolises of the future, the mono-centrism of Hellenic Alexandria had no past, or its own history.

The royal city of Alexandria, built following the plans of the skillful fantasist Hippodamus, was a city with luxurious palaces and Greek temples, with its own constitution and specific government and privileges. That unique Alexandria was one of the seventy cities that the magnificent conqueror Alexander established with a decree. ‘Synoecism’, that is, to amalgamate several separate settlements into a new city, or to transfer the entire city elsewhere, or to found an entirely new city – were all specialties of the great Macedonian. His successors followed his example. Among the Diadochi, Seleucus founded 11 Antioch, 9 Seleucia, 5 Laodicea, 4 Apamea and 1 Stratonicea, naming them all after members of his family. Another Alexandria – in Troas, was named so by Lysimachus in honour of his leader. The city was previously called Antigonía (after Antigonos) and came into being via synoecism. Similarly, Lysimachus’s wife Amastris founded a city in Pontis by uniting four smaller settlements and named it after herself, while Cassander founded Thessalonica by uniting 26 former settlements.

When Callimachus was born, the city of Alexandria was already twenty years old. The thirty-year-old writer witnessed the construction of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World – the Lighthouse on the island of Pharos in 280 BC. Callimachus still lived in a city under construction, in a City with no immediate memory, with no nostalgia, spared the fateful impact of obstructive tradition (like the already spent Athens). While in Alexandria, the new City, literature and science blossomed, in the now artistically sterile Athens only new and powerful philosophical schools sprouted: the Stoic (although its most eminent acolytes were Semites or Hellenized Orientals: Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus), Epicurean and Sceptic. Although, among these philosophers, there were also people of talent who could write well, like the peripatetic Theophrastus, the author of ‘The Characters’, or Epicurus himself, or the sceptic Timon of Phlius, the finest works of literature on the Peninsula had been written a long time ago. Refined and melancholic Menander, the only great writer among the late Athenians, who loved his home city so much to refuse to leave it and go to Alexandria, was not held in high esteem by his Athenian compatriots. Did spatial distance make Callimachus’ self-confident critique of Homer easier? Immune to the weight of the patina, lyrical and skeptical at the same time, in a fanatic search for the perfect form and brazenly negating the longer forms (the epic and the tragedy) as obsolete at last, Callimachus was a citizen of a City under construction and a Library dweller. He was a summa summarum of one perfect culture, aware that he had arrived ‘after’, but not burdened by ‘from afar’. With the Book as a testimony,

but also as an encouragement for renewed reading, Callimachus the Alexandrian, understood literature, not as a fossil with its possibilities exhausted, but as a challenging space of allegory. A possible analogy: while metalingual caretakers roamed the cultural archives of Europe in the West, in the distant literary 'colony', Argentina, the indirect European imbued the Eros of the literary text with a unique and necessary learning passion. Could we, then, proclaim Callimachus, that 'proto-Borgesian', a true postmodernist?

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