

A FEW RUMINATIONS ON BORGES' NOTIONS
OF LIBRARY AND METAPHOR



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It will be the purpose of this brief yet winding discourse to elucidate upon Borges' use of library and metaphor as corresponding unities, cross-fertilized with contributions by Derrida and Lacan. Despite the tendency towards engaging in an exercise that would appear too overly sympathetic to the deconstructionist enterprise, there will be several textual intermezzos that will be of a strong structuralist import. It is not my purpose to re-enact an old battle between two schools, but to reveal a passage that may aid in our understanding of Borges' library and metaphor; therefore, this examination will not be a vehicle for my philosophical inclinations, whatever they may be, nor will it serve as a means of betraying or supporting any school by privileging one over another. What I hope to do is create a passage that will aid in or revealing of the Borgesian library, to create a kind of key that can be used again and again in other texts. In a sense, I am using the Library of Babel as a kind of Rosetta Stone to decipher the subtext of other Borgesian moments. Moreover, as a kind of irony, I will employ a quasi-Barthesian strategy as found in his opus, *S/Z*.

Codeme 1: Borges and us are both textually substantiated and negated in the Library of Babel. We are negated by literal commentaries that demonstrate the impossibility of our existence or by way of a non-literal exclusion (characterized by an absence) or by our portrayal as mere mythical beasts long ago discredited as having any actuality. It would be arrogant of us to crown the contents of the library as nonsensical, gibberish, inchoate and disparate fragments produced by an aphasic mind, for this would preempt us from the possibility of considering the content of these texts as perhaps beyond our understanding (for the moment, and perhaps for all time—including a possible protochrony when it might have been understood). We will, for lack of having the arrogance of overdetermining the texts housed in this enormous library with our significations, our chains of formed versus arbitrary signifiers, or by way of instaurating some transcendental signifying phallus in the Lacanian sense, call them oblique—conditionally so, as a kind of “slipping from” our sense of understanding (which, in due part, requires the heavy hand of interpretation to carve out so-called sensible meanings out of text, by way of exegesis or otherwise). We will instigate the use of ellipses as a placeholder for the moment (and indeed the ellipses are part of the available orthographic sequence as the thrice repeated period, and which may call up a lateral question: who is the champion of the ellipses between Celine and Lacan?). Recall that Borges’ library has 25 orthographic marks: 22 letters (most likely the Hebrew alphabet for obvious reasons which can be traced to Borges’ sympathy for the Kabbalah), a space (and this notion of space calls to mind the notion of J. Hillis Miller’s abyss and Derrida’s two spatial qualities of difference), the comma, and the period (could we read period as the temporal aspect of difference as deferral?).

Codeme 2: The texts will neither surrender or withdraw their meaning. They will not veil or disclose, but will rather remain as a deposit or a residue of some imprint. Who was the initial imprinter? Perhaps this is the wrong question. We should go elsewhere...Besides, what use is the revealed identity of the author(s)? “Look to the books for a mention of the author(s)” it could be said. But of what value is this turning toward texts for the viable solution when the texts will name everyone and no one?

Codeme 3: There is no "outside"; the entire contents of the library is the container of the reality. All deeds are pre- and post-scripted. Since all is text, the "outside" is figured in the sense of a more Derridean explanation; that is, any so called dialectical limits, where the disjunctive *vel* leads to the production of an undecidable which transgresses the originating opposition, is housed alongside the transgressive element that appears to posit itself as an outside. However, this outside is illusory and deceptive. By interpretation, we could somehow formulate the alluring argument that there is another tropological and topological layer to the library-universe metaphor, that all is text without outside. It is also, by some stretch of the mind, a Deleuzian "event", or, that which is the two-dimensional horizon between proposition and denotation.

Codeme 4: Borges' reading plan is more reminiscent of, at times, a hermeneutic enterprise (which has its roots in the Heidegger of *Being and Time*) rather than a deconstructive program (the Heidegger of poetics). Yet he appears to straddle or incorporate both strategies. As wandering hermeneut, Borges acknowledges frequent misreadings. As rhapsodic deconstructor, Borges acknowledges an act of permutative play that produces the existing text(s). However, even this kind of acknowledgement is marked by a hermeneutic inflection in that he poses interpretation (as search for Meaning) as potentially possible, finite—or does he? The ambiguity of the text alludes to its richness, and will allow a fertile space to be opened up where we may come to entertain a host of competing strategies in terms of there being meaning or no. Does Borges put Being in the service of the text, or vice versa? Both positions are tried, and both seem to be maintained by the variety of both librarians and text(s). But in terms of meaning, Lacanian analysis suggests that we can only know and understand this (non)essential(ist) metaphor in its contingent contexts, i.e., space, time, language. But there appears to be no bearing, direction, or reliable ground to this library and its text(s). No known origin. Built into the text(s) are the means of subverting any conclusive act of deriving meaning, and so the library and its text(s) are suspended from full understanding (*Verstehen*).

Apart from the well-known contentions between destructive hermeneuts and deconstructivists, Borges is not waging a war on

the field of language; rather, language, metaphor, signifying and metonymic chains, and text all figure within the enclosure of his meta-metaphor: the library (which also figures as a micro-metaphor housed in the refutations and justifications of its texts). Perhaps language is waging a war against Borges, for we are familiar with his statement, “languages construct realities” (Verbiage for a Poem). We have felt his anxiety before the aleph, and we have felt the barrage of the realities in which we live that we attempt to master through acts of language...Though such attempts are failures from the get-go, for even the realities that we construct and carve out from the manifold of sense have within them the flaws of their undoing—or, in the terminology of J. Hillis Miller, the (inter)text of our realities have already deconstructed themselves. If there could be a transcendental signifier imputed so rudely to Borges’ text(s), it would be the figurality of the library as metaphor...An allegory? A deposit-point of all his other works? A means to achieve meaning? The truth of the failure of meaning? What we do know is that this library, as enclosure, contains the orchestration of graphematical play *and* attempts of all stripes toward a unified and disclosing interpretation. In this sense, the enterprises of the competing schools of thought we so briefly mentioned are not even elements of necessary contradiction, for the library contains all this attempts.

Codeme 5: A hasty, yet necessary misreading reveals that possessing, or having access to, all Truth is useless. Without a reliable measure to determine truth and falsehood (and even falsehood is a kind of truth when determined in context or irony), we are no better off than the librarians who wander the labyrinthine galleries. What the library lacks for truth-seekers is a kind of Rosetta Stone to decode the text(s). Too much information is no information (or misinformation). What results is a kind of paralysis, an overwhelming, an impotence. The Lacanian phallus is lost, for it cannot affix any reliable meaning to the seemingly random chain of metonymous elements housed in the text(s).

Codeme 6: The library does not –as far as we can comprehend– privilege literature, science, logic, or politics, and so we cannot be rest assured that any of these trajectories of thought can aid us in producing the meaning of the library. There are no “authors” (since

they have been lost to us) that can be raised as a final signified, to be Barthesian. Neither is it the elite subjectivity of a free play of signifiers in an act of dissemination: "for every sensible line of straightforward statement, there are leagues of senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles and incoherences" (Borges "Library" 53). In this sense, the deconstructionist is painted as an elite hysteric who creates meaning through unlimited play, which may be considered useless and infinitesimal. On the flipside, maniacal revisionism is also a flawed librarian's trick, for it can only produce meaning by a *reductio ad absurdum* practice.

Codeme 7: If there are an astronomical number of permutations of letters, then this would suggest an equally enormous array of grammars. What these grammars are, we can only venture to guess—for the moment, and perhaps interminably. Within whatever divine orthographic generator machine there must also be implicitly derived from this production esoteric grammars that weave and play among the orthographical marks. Do these grammars leave traces? The character of these grammars remains a speculative wonder...Bifurcating interpretations and duplicitous commentaries that inevitably fold in on themselves...A truly collapsible hermeneutics. What if, as one possibility of decoding, the titles of the books (themselves taken together as a text of 410 pages in length) were the legend of this grammar? Now we begin to muse on reading directions...

With the number of permutations, it matters not if the reader is accustomed to reading from left to right, right to left, up to down, down to up, diagonally, or even with the use of Kabbalistic squares. For there are many possibilities that two people with differing reading directions could read the same textual fragment in differing text(s).

Codeme 8: The form of the library: we are thinking both after and according to Borges. Surely this library has our thoughts on this matter recorded somewhere. But Borges is after and according to whom? Leibniz? Plato? Cavalieri? Is there an infinite regress or a pure bifurcatory discord? Could we lose the mark of the trace along the way, or come across it in its literal or figural form as an orthographical sequence of marks in text(s) that portray the very diverse genealogy at play here? There is us, and there is Borges before us (in the double sense), but who came before him? In terms of the library,

everyone, someone, or no one. Who comes after? Perhaps even this is written, and contradicted.

Borges makes a point of suggesting that the words were black marks on white pages. Now, supposing a tower structure where there is one "blank" hexagon acting as the core and the other hexagons spooling around this core and getting larger as we approach the "ground"...Could there be an exact inverse? A mirror tower where the white marks appear on black pages? A negative world which, if superimposed upon the so-called positive, would produce the equilibrium of nothingness? Cancellation? An abyss? A Derridean undecidable? An aporia?

Codeme 9: Is there an origin to be found in these vast writings? Certainly there are the polarities of truths and falsehoods, not to mention the entire gradated spectrum in between. Could one mark represent the origin (represent in the sense that we are given to believe that all the text(s) were pressed simultaneously)? Is the origin mark that precedes or proceeds a displacement, a permutation? A substitution? A secret key? A red herring?

A form of the library is incomplete without authors and readers—or is it? "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 148). This is one of the means in which we trump the final signified and delimit interpretations. It is in the next codeme where we will open up the typology of these newborn readers...

Codeme 10: The library itself is a (non)living, (non)breathing example of an aporia...A polyglot of Gongorian interpretations, a polyamorous style of reading. But to call it an aporia is to ascribe a determinate meaning, even if the term itself denotes the impossibility of meaning (the paradox of naming). What we do know is that the library is the source of the fundamental problem, the aporia the librarians have attempted to overcome. Borges depicts the history of the librarian's comportment toward text(s) in a way that partially mimics the history of our own attempts: from Platonism to Christian inquisition, from immanentist Spinozism to German Idealism, from Saussurean notions of the arbitrary signifier to the deconstructive puissance of disorder. Perhaps, as another wild and off course interpretation is formulated for our judgement (but how can we judge what we are inextricably bound up in, inhering and subsisting, to use

the Stoic terms?), this parallel with our own history is meant to convey that the fundamental motor and question of the world is text(s); the world is text(s). One solid statement: text precedes Being, and will remain even after Being is extinguished (Borges "Library" 58).

Following Barthes typology of the reader, we find a fecund cross pollination of intertext, corresponding Borgesian fragments that fuel yet another conjectural interpretation.

The obsessive: classical readers who are axiomatic. "The Library is a sphere whose exact center is only one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible" (Borges "Library" 52). Recall here the Greek notion of sphere=perfection Note the emphasis on center, which acts as a kind of rationalist ground in a non-rational setting. This center acts as a kind of ordering mechanism essential to traditional metaphysics. This seeking of universals is the constructivist stage of the reader...

The fetishist: idealist readers who fetishize things-in-themselves. They believe the text(s) themselves (as appearances) signify nothing without some ordering principle of Reason and Understanding. "...[A]ccidental and that the books signify nothing in themselves" ("Library" 53). This is a very choppy and minute fragment, yet appears to suggest a different kind of constructivist reader: the categorical kind.

The paranoid reader: derivationist readers who carve out protective borders to limit the sense of free play and unlimited metonymy which threatens to undermine their feeling of unification and safety. "For a long time it was believed that these impenetrable books corresponded to past or remote languages" ("Library" 53). What is so foreboding and impenetrable about the text(s)? In Deleuzian terms, the impenetrable aspect is the notion of sense (Deleuze 21). Also in Deleuzian terms, the paranoid is figured by the tendency to hanker after borders and logocentric stories (genesis and telos), and to defend these borders with zeal and fear (Deleuze and Guattari 366)

The hysteric reader: deconstructive readers. "Others thought of cryptographs; generally, this conjecture has been accepted, though not in the sense in which it was formulated by its originators" ("Library" 54). This may very well parallel the emergence and eventual codification of deconstruction as Deconstruction-polluted mean-

ing...Though, according to deconstructivists, is there such a thing? In Deleuzian terms again, the hysteric is aptly played by the schizo (Deleuze and Guattari 131).

Codeme 11: A Derridean moment: "To speak is to fall into tautology" (Borges "Library" 57) and "the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder" (58). This is to say that the disorder which becomes codified in some archia dredges up the fear of deconstructors that deconstruction becomes enclosed in the establishment as Deconstruction.

Codeme 12: If we cannot perform interpretations from some narrow analytic viewpoint or by some meta-reading, what we are left with is the possibility of endless misinterpretations. An analytic reading would miss "the point" by getting bogged down in logocentric particulars, whereas a meta-reading would assume the almost godlike stance of the reader as judge. Interpretation as aporia creates the labyrinth of misreadings. The librarians are tragic figures who continue in their quest, for they feel in themselves the promise of a truth that will one day be revealed. It is this mania that spurs them. "Misreading is not an incorrect reading, but the erring or deviation of every reading" (Riddel 20:242).

Codeme 13: We are deliberately ignoring the Biblical narrative, for this would prove constricting and far too superficial, despite the historical relevance of the Bible acting as "the Text", essentially the only text from which all others emerged (to take the narrow Western view). The Library of Babel is not simply, as the familiar parable suggests, the impossibility of (unified) language. It is more the impossibility of comprehending the absolute text-or, Text(s).

Structural Point: We cannot evade the empirical data Borges offers us. I have here condensed these figures for our ease, and have derived the results of said data.

- 1a. 6 sides per hexagon.
- 1b. 4 of which have shelves; 2 which sport an ingress/egress.
2. 20 shelves per hexagon.
3. 35 books per shelf (multiple of 7).
4. 700 books per hexagon (multiple of 7).
5. 280 000 pages per hexagon (multiple of 7).
6. 11 480 000 lines per hexagon (multiple of 7).

7. 918 400 000 orthographical marks per hexagon (multiple of 7).
8. Number of books in library = 25 to the power of 1 312 000. This figure derived by the permutative factor of possible orthographical marks for each book.
9. Number of hexagons in library = number of books divided by 700 (number of books per hexagon). Though it would be a herculean task, we could conceivably recreate and construct this library.

Addendum figures:

- a) 1 book = 410pp = 16400 lines = 1 312 000 orthographical marks.
- b) 25 orthographical marks; 22 letters, space, period, and comma.

What is the significance of the library's divisibility by 7? This would imply that Borges was not providing these numbers arbitrarily, but that there was a structured design. Needless to say, the number seven is saturated with significance: seven stories, seven sins, seven days of creation, seven sisters, seven stars...We do not claim to exhaust the list here, but it behooves us to mention—to conjecture—that perhaps the reader or the librarian (one and the same) stands in for the hexagon's "seventh side". Moreover, Borges tells of a text that is composed of repeating MCVs. Read numerically, MCV=1105, which, when added together as separate numerals (1+1+0+5) equals seven. Doubtless there is more to be derived from the numerical data, but I will leave this to more capable mathematical minds. What I have just presented in this exercise is yet another form of (mis)reading.

Corollary: What we do know about the permutative function in Borges' library is that each mark has a bonding capacity of 25; that is, it can "bond" with 24 other marks or it can be itself inert. We can derive various permutations as to types of work, for example: the chance of coming across a text that has the same orthographical mark repeated is astronomically high, yet we know that there would be 25 of them in existence. What would be the purpose of seeking out these particular texts? To my mind, these texts would hold a

symbolic value in that they would represent the 25 elemental texts of the library. The text of "M" would be the pure manifestation of that mark repeated 1 312 000 times throughout the text. These texts would form a kind of "orthodoxal" table. This would open up a space for a kind of chemico-linguistics...Indeed, it would also beget chemicotexts, chemi-grammars, chemi-syntax, chemi-syntagmatics, chemi-pragmatics, orthochemigraphics, chemi-narratives, and so forth. If the library is the universe, the single substance, we may postulate further and devise other related metaphorical relations such as books to molecules, orthographical marks to atoms, and permutations to bonding capacities. Following this analogy, the absolute stable "molecule", or molecular text, rests at 1 312 000; the entire substance at 25 to the power of 1 312 000. A secondary analogy compares the library with a labyrinth, where each text is a micro-labyrinth.

The analogy of chemistry to language acts as the extended analogical metaphor of library to universe. To wit: library is to letters as universe is to atoms. Moreover, nothing prevents our eagerness from constructing a Saussurean chemistry where we replace the familiar S over s with some orthographical mark (in its purest and most transcendental signifier) over the small orthographical mark. In Lacanian terms, big Phi over little phi.

Codeme 14: The text structures are not necessarily genetic or biological, for biological diversity is not diminished as we proceed down the genealogical line. The books are (al)chemical, for the number of permutations dramatically decrease as we proceed to enumerate each text.

Codeme 14: Interpretation and meaning are both tied up in the notion of finitude, death. For Borges, death "...makes men precious and pathetic. They are moving because of their phantom condition..." ("Immortal" 115). Every attempt at an isolating meaning is an act of tedious death, not to mention a result whose perpetuum mobile (an impossible object) remains elusive.

Codeme 16: "The most fleeting thought obeys an invisible design and can crown, or inaugurate, a secret form" ("Immortal" 114). Substitute thought here for sign, signifier, idea, interpretation, vindication, explication, meaning, and then we see the justification of every mark and trace in the library—even to the extent of the librarians'

reading styles (which are, to be sure, prefigured in the library's holdings).

Code me 17: Are these text(s), as Borges may possibly allude elsewhere in "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal", dictated by Thoth? Fitting if they were. According to the mythology, Thoth invented writing. Could this be our genesis story or another red herring? We also obtain a version of this story in Plato's *Cratylus*, a seeming point of departure for Derrida to prove how metaphysics have been dominated by phonocentrism and logocentrism.—Speech privileged over writing; memory over record.

Code me 18: "When the end draws near, there no longer remain any remembered images; only words remain" ("Immortal" 118).

Code me 19: For the purposes of the collector who wishes to obtain various anomalous text(s) from this library, we can suggest a few antiquated peculiarities created by permutations: The Book of the Repeating Alphabet, The Book of Ellipsis, and The Book of Space (the space mark repeated 1 312 000 times). No doubt we could locate several grammar manuals...

Code me 20: "Let your enormous Library be justified" ("Library" 57). One can almost relate to the pathos of this statement, this grand and cathartic outburst from this mise-en-abyme. At the threshold between frustration and madness, thinking Being screeches its existential lament across the unremitting Ur-Text(s). Let it be justifiable, according to some patterned logic; a standardization comprehensible to the toiling mind, or so the refrain may (re)sound. Let there be reward for the punishment of not knowing! But alas, the text(s) remain silent across the void—the silence of the text(s): white noise where the interpretations act as the filtering act to produce isolated, cohesive sounds. But this always falls short of the Gestalt. White noise is the sound and silence of the text(s), forever resistant to meaning. In these text(s) even the spaces offer up this din of silence. The question returns to the inquisitor—boomerang—yet nothing is elucidated, revealed, disclosed. The inquisitor is only face-to-face with his own question, but now from an agonizingly reflective distance. The question is dented by its collision with the impregnable text(s). Sense cannot be extracted. And each time the question is launched back into the void, the more it regresses from the speaker. Particularly, definitely, the question loses all sense and

Particularly, definitely, the question loses all sense and referentiality. The impermeability of the text(s) strengthens its aegis upon each interpretive assault. But not all is lost: with each return of the question emerges a new pattern of reading which is enjoyable, occupying, puzzles for the mind. That is a pleasure of the text, to be Barthesian. The question becomes the interminable phoenix, it grows a new body. Soon, new spaces and ruptures in the question are opened up, new possibilities. What is text? If I know myself, will I know text? The questions multiply...They, in that typically beautiful Borgesian poetic, bifurcate.

Codeme 21: In an oblique way, the text(s) are an aleph, Leibniz's monad, Hegel's Absolute Knowing, Derrida's Khora, the medievalist's sphere, the Christian God, the complete Catalogue...Does Borges offer any conjecture as to the cause of this library, the genesis of the text(s), the *raison d'être* of the librarians? He offers several, but they are not all housed in the microcosm, this one sample of text. Does he not give clues elsewhere? He offers several. One tantalizing fragment comes to mind: "...one thing, or an infinite number of things, dies in every final agony, unless there is a universal memory as the theosophists have conjectured" (Borges "Witness" 243). Or in "Parable of Cervantes and the Quixote", which I spy on the preceding page: "For in the beginning of literature is the myth, and in the end as well" (242). Again, in "The Mirror of the Enigmas": "It is doubtful that the world has a meaning..." (212), a statement that playfully undermines his statements elsewhere, yet is somehow in accord. Borges is, among the panoply of things, an ironist.

We (are) readers of Borges, and even that matter is not settled. In his dry humour, he playfully mocks us. His text(s) alert us to the fact that there will be new readings *ad infinitum*. He plagues us eternally with his text(s) machine(s), always withholding the Final reward for our exhausting labours. The text(s) are filled with gorgeous chimeras who languish about, taunting us, dangling illusory truths before us, driving us to peel back each tantalizing layer until we reach the end of the text(s). What then? In the artful Borgesian circularity, we begin again at the first layer, the outermost surface, page one.

Codeme 22: A summary of all the preceding codemes compels me to make one lasting statement: *Texts are the footprints of Myths.*

I have done very little in presenting a sacred truth about this library. Instead, my capacity has been more as a guide; I have merely uncovered and indicated ever more aporias. Somehow, even with this negative result—the production of aporias—I have granted a kind of justification to this enormous library.

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