

ABOMINABLE MIRRORS:
ON THE “MACABRE” HYPERFICTIONS OF JORGE LUIS BORGES



Ignacio Infante

Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it – It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action, as proven by science in its indestructibility of matter and of force, it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but – (Spring and All, William Carlos Williams)

INTRODUCTION

“**A** Philosopher of Poetry and a Poet of Philosophy”. This is what Borges seems to be, according to the academics behind the J.L. Borges Centre. Despite its resonance of overt simplicity, this definition suggests in fact a very interesting approach to the work of the Argentinian writer. As a good paradoxical proposition, it remains in your mind for that extra second, bringing forth some wider meaning that goes beyond the merely denotative value of the actual words. That definition locates Borges in an uncertain location somewhere in the realm of philosophical poetry and poetical philosophy. This use of a paradoxical proposition as a way of defining a writer of explicitly paradoxical fictions does point towards the right direction in the analysis of Borges’

work, generating an innumerable set of valid implications, but fails somehow to actually determine any of those wide implications.

Borges' fiction constitutes an openly paradoxical exploration of the conceptual voids inherent in any form of rationalisation of experience. However, a merely paradoxical definition seems to leave undefined the entity that was supposed to be defined. This paper is an attempt to find a theoretical account of Borges' work that escapes the usual paradoxical approach to his fiction as mere self-enclosed postmodern metafiction. Though Borges' fiction is undoubtedly paradoxical, I will argue that his conception of paradox as the fictional axis of his fiction is not an ultimate aim, but a means for the embodiment of a sense of extreme fictional uncertainty. This attempt to save Borges from the void power of paradoxes will be realised however, through a full immersion in Borges' uncertain world of paradoxical fictions.

The very diverse implications of Borges' work seem to keep on widening the more one tries to conceptualise any of them. The problem with interpreting Borges is that his work can absorb nearly any attempt of interpretation. Borges' fiction can be read as horror fiction, detective fiction, metafiction, and analysed in terms of epistemology, ontology, aesthetics, metaphysics, semiotic, postmodernism, *et cetera*.

However, Borges is usually considered to be a writer of fantastic fiction. The fantastic seems to be the only literary form wide enough to be able to embrace the powerful nature of Borges' conception of fiction. Borges short fictive worlds indeed contain a surprisingly wide and overtly baroque compendium of the most amazing conceptual entities ever developed by the creative imagination: white unicorns, an immortal Homer, infinitely heavy spheres, fictive encyclopaedias, a Chinese secret agent, lotteries of ultimate chance, transparent tigers, sexagesimal numerical systems, a tactile geometry, and the vague tremulous shade of pink seen with closed eyes, among many others.

His fiction definitely emerges from the exertion of a radical imagination working its way through experience, chopping up, melting and reshaping our "rational" forms, incessantly creating

new wholes of very ambiguous philosophical consequences. Borges' work can then be solidly located within fantastic fiction.

At the same time, Borges is an author powerfully rooted in the very core of Western literature, both in his conception and practice of fiction. The inclusion of Borges himself in the work *The Western Canon* by Harold Bloom reinforces the absolute "canonicity" of Borges, despite the questionable validity of the canon itself. There is no doubt that if there is an author who deserves to be in a book subtitled *The Books and School of the Ages*, it is Borges. Bloom's despotic judgement on the work of Borges goes as follows: "His best work lacks variety, even though it draws upon the entire Western Canon and more" (471).

Whatever Bloom means by this variety lacked by Borges is not very clear nor that relevant here. The essential point is that Borges has definitely won the critical recognition of his place among his most revered authors, namely Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Whitman. However, Borges always suggested that he was only developing his own take on the already written corpus of literature. Through his fiction, Borges seems to suggest that the basic narratives that constitute the realm of Literature had always been there, having emerged from an essential "sense of enigmatic parity" that is "translated in myth and symmetry" (PC 2: 151)¹. This indeterminate aesthetic form of "parity" would have led to the creation of a basic universal literary form, mythical in itself (let's say Homer's *Odyssey*), that can be seen as being re-written through the different ages. Borges' view on literary tradition can be seen to be somehow similar to Octavio Paz's, as put in the following words: "Throughout the ages, European poets- and now those of both halves of the American continent as well- have been writing the same poem in the different languages" (160).

If Borges is one of the most important writers of the 20th century, it is not only because he draws upon the "entire Western canon and more", but because of what he does with the material he draws upon. The critic John Sturrock has suggested that an analysis of Bor-

¹ The edition of the works of J.L. Borges used for this paper has been the *Prosa Completa* (PC, 1980), my own translations.

ges fiction would ultimately imply an analysis on the nature of fiction itself. "To study Borges is to study fiction as a genre" (3). What is implied here is that Borges' work is not only at the core of the Western literary tradition, but most importantly that it implies a sort of deconstruction of the literary act itself. Borges' fictions subliminally exert a sort of "defamiliarization" (Shklovsky 12) of the act of literary creation itself.

I will use the term "hyperfiction" as a way of defining Borges' fictions, following Floyd Merrel's use of the term. The notion of hyperfiction is extremely useful in this Borgesian context seems it denotes both the fictional character of all mental representations (fictions), and the metafictional nature of Borges' fictions as pure "radical mind realities" (20) devoid of any realistic illusion (hyperfiction).

The main problem then is to arrive at a single theoretical analysis able to assume all the radically diverse implications of Borges' work. Borges' fiction is generally interpreted as being a merely metafictional, fantastic and ludic re-take on "the few metaphors that constitute the history of the Universe" (PC 2: 134). Although he definitely develops a metafictional technique, I will argue in this paper that Borges' fiction ultimately implies a sort of deconstruction of the notion of fiction itself through the exploration of the basic narrative structure of fantastic fiction, which will be defined in this paper as a 'fantastic uncertainty'.

Through the development of a very complex process of literary composition, Borges manages to create a corpus of fiction that transcends the merely metafictional and opens up to a new dimension of experience that emerges in his attempt to consummate a conceptual destruction of Time. Borges' fictional refutation of absolute linear time, and the realm of being that this notion of time grounds, that is fully stated in his philosophical essay *A New Refutation of Time* (1952), will be treated as the conceptual basis for his highly elaborate fictional strategy as developed in the two seminal collections *Fictions* (1944) and *The Aleph* (1949).

My analysis of Borges' fiction will gravitate around the notion of uncertainty as developed in what is generally seen as his metafictional fictions. This notion of uncertainty will be treated mainly in its purely fictional implications -Tzvetan Todorov's idea of "hesita-

tion" (*Fantastic*) as the essence of fantastic fiction-, but it will also be connected to its more complex use in the field of Quantum Physics - Werner Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty.

The main argument of this paper will be that within the metafictional landscape developed by Borges there generally is a structural void that opens up the particular fiction to a wider fictional dimension. This fictional void is basically achieved by the paradoxical superposition within the same plot of different fictional worlds that are constructed as pure fantastic *simulacra* of each other. This paper will then be an exploration of the nature and the implications of Borges' paradoxical fictions. This analysis will be set against a wider discussion on the nature of fantastic fiction and its close relationship with contemporary physics in what can be seen as the same heroic attempt to find some form of meaning for human experience with the sole use of the creative imagination.

1. THE FANTASTIC UNCERTAINTY

Stephen King dedicates his book on the theory of horror fiction, *Danse Macabre*, to J.L. Borges among five other "great writers of the macabre". The fact that someone like Stephen King cites Borges as one of his major "macabre" references is, in a very ambiguous way, extremely significant. A big question arises here: What is Borges -the Philosopher of Poetry/Poet of Philosophy- actually doing in this B-movie notion of Horror?

King's *Danse Macabre* is something like an American B-Horror Canon. It is an overview of what he, as the King of Horror, considers to be the freakiest two hundred novels and films produced in the States in the second half of the 20th century. The American author tries to give the list some theoretical background by placing those works of horror fiction under the label "macabre", a term scary enough to ground his *definitio ex nihilo* of scary fictions. However, King fails to properly define the very "macabre" notion that seems to articulate his whole essay, although he tries, as when he talks about "*phobic pressure points*": "As both Albert Camus and Billy Joel have pointed out, the Stranger makes us nervous." (18)

The appearance of the name of Borges in the first page of this book is then surprisingly relevant. It basically shows both, the massive amplitude of what can be described as horror fiction, and the far-reaching implications of Borges' hyperfictions. What is implied here is that Borges' fiction surprisingly manages to connect with "the real terror"² that seems to be the main force behind King's notion of Horror:

The work of horror really is a dance- a moving, rhythmic search. And what is looking for is the place you, viewer or reader live at your most primitive level. (18)

So the macabre of Horror seems to be an exploring dance that finds the reader or viewer at their "most primitive level". The real *danse macabre* was originally a form of carnival that used to take place in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. It implied a brief and fictional subversion of the social order by a *mise en scène* of Death in life, and as a form of carnival it did have "deep roots in the primordial order and thinking of man" according to the Russian formalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin. (122)

I will use certain aspects of Bakhtin's notion of "carnivalised literature"³ as the basis for my analysis of the fantastic form. According to the Russian critic, a "carnival sense of the world" saturates every "serio-comical literary genre" as opposed to the "serious genres- the epic the tragedy, the history, classical rhetoric and the like" (107). This distinction between these two basic modes of fiction has been established since classical antiquity. It is basically an opposition between an Aristotelian notion of fiction as "mimesis" or "representation through imitation" (*Poetics*), against Longinus' notion of art as the "sublime" or "what transports us with wonder" (*Sublime* Chap. I).

² Full quotation "The Saturday matinee on that day when the real terror began was *Earth Vs. The Flying Saucers*" (15).

³Bakhtin in his study on Dostovesky's poetics widely discusses the influence of carnival in literary forms, in what he calls "carnivalized literature" (107). Bakhtin defines Dostovesky's "dialogic imagination" as taking part of the carnivalistic notion of "joyful relativity".

The modern genres of wonder, which can be labelled under the notions of horror and the fantastic, fully fit in Bakhtin's notion of carnivalised literature. Hereafter, I will treat horror and the fantastic as the same basic literary form following King's authority on the matter: "For properly speaking, fantasy is what is, the horror genre is only a subset of the larger set" (30).

Bakhtin defines the implications of the joyful relative carnival in the following terms:

Carnival is a syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort. As a form it is very complex and varied... (...) Because carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its *usual* route it is to some extent "life turned inside out", the reverse side of the world, (*monde à l'inverse*). (122)

The carnivalistic *danse macabre* implies primarily an inversion of the real through a simulacrum of death. The macabre of horror fiction in this way can be seen as a fully subversive form that questions or parodies positivistic conceptions of experience through a fictional exploration of the "real terror".

But what is it that generates this primal "real terror"? The "real terror" is felt when the full void of uncertainty penetrates consciousness with all its overwhelming power. The real terror is there, as soon as one penetrates the dimension in which rationality totally loses its ground and crumbles into nothingness. And here is where Borges' "macabre" appears.

Borges, as Stephen King has managed to acknowledge, is a master in the creation of scarily uncertain fantastic fictions in which the 'real' expands its rational boundaries into wider worlds that seem to contain each other *ad infinitum* creating a sense of awesome epistemological vertigo. Borges departs then from the same subverted reality or *monde à l'invers* inherent in the fantastic:

The fantastic traces the unsaid/unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent. (...) Its introduction of the unreal is set against the category of the real, a category which the fantastic interrogates by its difference. (Jackson 4)

Borges pushes this fantastic interrogation of the category of the real or fantastic uncertainty to its ultimate fictional consequences.

The ultimate way in which the 'real' can be put into question is by destroying the apparently essential condition in which that reality is grounded: the notion of linear time. However, before I delve into the implications of Borges' exploration of the fantastic uncertainty, I should first delineate the basic features and implications of that uncertainty.

The notion of uncertainty and its relationship with fantastic fiction was stated by Jentsch in relation to E.T.A Hoffmann's *The Sandman* as cited by Sigmund Freud's in *The Uncanny*. Jentsch's remarks of 1906 on the work of one of the classic authors of horror fiction are in my opinion, considerably more interesting than Freud's psychoanalytical reworking of Jentsch's analysis of the uncanny into the ever-present "fear of castration" (352). Jentsch ascribes the notion of the uncanny in fantastic fiction to the fictional suggestion of a sense of epistemological uncertainty within the plot:

In telling a story, one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to *leave the reader in uncertainty* as to whether a particular figure is a human being or an automaton, and to do it in such a way that his attention is not focussed directly upon his *uncertainty*, so that he may not be led to go into the matter and clear it up immediately. E.T.A. Hoffmann has repeatedly employed this psychological artifice with success in his fantastic narratives. (as quoted by Freud *Uncanny* 347, my italics)

One of the most quoted theorists of the fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov seems to remould Jentsch' uncertainty into his notion of "hesitation". According to Todorov, a fantastic fiction implies a special kind of hesitation:

The text must oblige the reader (...) to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. (...) At the same time that the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work." (33)

Following these two seminal accounts of the fantastic, we can arrive at the basic working strategy of the fantastic form, which I will describe here as a fantastic uncertainty. The fantastic text has to fluctuate between what can be stated as solid reality and that which

cannot. It must depart from a mimetic representation of experience, making the reader believe in the truth of what he is reading. The fantastic element (any floating trope- vampires, aliens, a genetically modified super-rat, etc...) will then appear introducing a threat to that mimesis of reality. This fantastic element ultimately generates a sense of uncertainty about the representation of reality that was previously assumed as the 'real'.

One of the main consequences of this uncertainty will be a revision of the notion of reality and the condition of truth on which that reality is grounded. This 'revision' of reality will be one of the key elements of the fiction itself. The fantastic fiction ultimately turns into a quest for an element of truth that will re-establish the order of the real. This element of fictional truth is found through a dialogic exploration of order from a fictional immersion in any form of chaos. In this way, the fantastic can be seen as a sublime or fantastic exploration of 'real' experience that usually leads into a newly restored stable representation of reality. This basic fantastic uncertainty can, however, be problematised if the final reality of the fiction is not a fully stable mimetic representation.

Bahktin, tracing the origins of carnivalised literature in the Menippean satire as the first "serio-comical" literary form, describes this quest for truth inherent in the fantastic form in the following way:

The fantastic here serves not for the positive embodiment of truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and, most important testing it. (...) The most unrestrained and fantastic adventures are present here in organic and indissoluble artistic unity with the philosophical idea. (114)

This notion of the fantastic uncertainty as implying a search for truth and a testing of a "philosophical idea" takes full shape in the work of the key author in the development of 20th century horror and fantastic fiction: Edgar Allan Poe. I will treat Poe's fiction to be part of a wider intellectual project that takes its most radical form in his pseudo-scientific treaty "Eureka" (1848). The ideas addressed by Poe in "Eureka" are in my opinion essential for a proper understanding of some key implications of the fantastic uncertainty that will be re-explored by Borges.

Each of Poe's horror/fantastic fictions can be generally analysed as the exploration of a basic 'philosophical idea', in which the denouement of the action emerges directly "springing out of the bosom of the thesis" (303). At the same time Poe's short stories can be interpreted as quests of the fictional selves into the unknown. In most of his fictions these characters show some sort of mental fragmentation, so the story ultimately deals with the impossibility of their going beyond the limitations of consciousness in that quest for knowledge due to the inexorable immanence of the self. The stories turn then into an exploration of the boundaries of consciousness, that can then be seen as Poe's main narrative "thesis". Stories like "William Wilson", "Ligeia", "The Fall of the House of Usher", and the whole C. Auguste Dupin cycle can all be interpreted in the light of this analysis.

The paramount centrality of "Eureka" within Poe's overall work has been unfortunately fully ignored in the tendency to treat Poe as a mere fabulist or "charlatan" (James). Although Poe's fiction is obviously fully rooted in what is generally analysed as the Romantic imagination, I will argue that Poe's "Eureka" was written and received in its time as a seriously poetic but nevertheless scientific work, as I will try to show here.

Poe departs from a post-Newtonian world-view and seems to have a solid knowledge of the basic physical theories dominant at his time, namely Newton's gravity, Kepler's elliptical astronomy, and Laplace's notions of electromagnetism. Based on the scientific paradigm generated by Newton's theory of gravitation, Poe conceives a Cosmos of an unprecedented cohesion, developing a theory of universal order based on the notions of wholeness and simplicity. Poe definitely considered the work as his most important contribution to mankind:

It is no use to reason with me now; I must die. I have no desire to live since I have done *Eureka*. I could accomplish nothing more.⁴

"Eureka" is primarily a criticism of modern logical thought and its two "practicable roads to Truth" (213): induction and deduction.

⁴ From a letter to Maria Clemm, 7th July 1849, included in the notes to *Eureka* (395).

According to Poe, these two forms of logic imply a “mental slavery” or an absolute repression of the imagination in favour of a so called “absolute certainty” that turns out to be a pure illusion.⁵

The inductive scientific method (observation, analysis, classification and hypothesis), originally developed by Francis Bacon, is regarded by Poe as a mere compilation of phenomena as scientific facts, exclusively grounded on the “*fact of their fact*” as their only condition of truth. Poe’s main refutation goes to the “transparent frivolity” (214) of deductive logic. Poe cites Aristotle as the Father of the logic of a priori axioms and describes how this form of logic is the basis for Euclidian geometry and Kantian idealism.

This rejection of deduction, or knowledge grounded on axioms implies then a criticism of a classical conception of space and time on which our actual notion of reality happens to be fully based. Poe refutes deduction through a relativistic interrogation of the validity of axioms as mere self-evident truths, “for no such thing as an axiom ever existed or can exist at all” (216), since self-evidence cannot be a principle for absolute truth. Poe’s *Cosmos* then emerges as a reaction to one of the basic logical arguments of modern rational thought as voiced by John Stuart Mill in his *Logic*: “Contradictions cannot both be true- that is cannot coexist in nature” (218).

The rest of “Eureka” can be seen as a cosmic refutation of Mill’s key logical proposition. Poe’s theoretical response to the “absolute certainty” of traditional Logic is the conception of intuition and imagination as the ultimate paths to truth. Poe argues that the actual source of real scientific discoveries, like the conception of gravitational theory, is rooted on a purely imaginative speculation. According to him, the basic notion prior to any theoretical formalisation had been achieved through the exclusive exertion of pure intuition in the exploration of what cannot be comprehended rationally:

It is but the conviction arising from those inductions and deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, or defy our capacity of expression. (227)

⁵ This same criticism of traditional logic can be seen as the main thesis behind the Dupin stories

Once he has managed to establish imagination as the only source of true, non- relational knowledge, Poe sets his own imagination free in the search for a poetically true and thus consistent vision of the Cosmos. Despite some evident scientific flaws, Poe's vision is surprisingly accurate when analysed in the view of certain notions of 20th century physics. Poe's main idea behind his theory of the Cosmos is a notion of universal wholeness as stated in his general proposition: "*In the general Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation.*" (211)

From this basic notion of wholeness as the main principle and essence of the Universe, Poe develops a full theoretical account of the Cosmos from atoms to planets. This notion of wholeness is very similar to the view of the Stoics who saw how "material events, including conglomerate matter as well as space between bodies, is made up of a continuous whole" (Sambursky 1). The "first unity of all things" takes the shape of an entity of extreme simplicity from which all that is derived. Poe seems to conceive this particle as preceding any of our rational notions of a "particle": "A particle without form and void- a particle positively a particle at all points." ("Eureka" 227) Once the original particle has been forced into the expansion of the many, the Universe adopts the shape of Pascal's sphere: "a sphere of which the centre is everywhere and, the circumference nowhere"⁶.

The elements of Poe's Cosmos relate to each other according to the two basic rules of energy: attraction and repulsion. Attraction takes the basic shape of the theory of gravitation that relates to the idea of universal collapse in the final "annihilation" of the cosmos. Repulsion, on the other hand, is a force linked to the diffusion of the primal fragmentation of the first particle. Both attraction and repulsion are the physical embodiments of matter.

One of the most relevant features of Poe's Cosmos is the existence of a *non physical* ether that occupies space and that seems to be the primal force of life:

⁶ Borges also makes reference to the same sphere in "Pascal's Sphere" in *Other Inquisitions*.

To this influence [Ether] I have referred the various phaenomena of electricity, heat, light, magnetism; and more- of vitality, consciousness, and thought- in a word, of spirituality. (...) It is merely in the development of this Ether, through heterogeneity, that particular masses of Matter become animate- sensitive- some reaching a degree of sensitiveness involving what we call *Thought* (...). (302)

This ether is also part of Stoic physics, in which the cosmos is filled up with an all pervading substratum called "pneuma": "For there is one spirit (pneuma) which pervades, like a soul, the whole universe, and which also makes us one with them"⁷. Whether Poe knew about Stoic physics is uncertain, however the similarity of their approaches is evident.⁸

In "Eureka", Poe conceives a Cosmos through the exclusive use of his imagination, transcending the rational boundaries of logic and categorisation imposed by the scientific paradigm of his age. What Poe does is to poetically fill with his notion of universal wholeness the voids of that scientific paradigm. Poe's universe, conceived beyond rationality, originated from a particle without form and void, it has as its form a sphere with its centre being everywhere and its circumference nowhere, and contains as its vital force or *elan vital* a non-physical ether that occupies space.

The fact that Poe ascribes "imparticularity" to the primal particle, a sphereless quality to the cosmic sphere, and non-matter as the origin of matter appears to be utter nonsense. Poe's cosmic principles are conveyed through the use of paradoxical propositions that both assert and negate the actual essence of the principle itself, in what seems to be an attempt to conceptualise what is beyond rational conceptualisation. The use of a paradoxical notion as the conceptual basis for the articulation of the universe, of our Universe, may seem to reflect a very uncertain universe indeed.

However, according to certain key principles of 20th century physics Poe's paradoxical universe is a pretty accurate vision of the ac-

⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Adv Math*, IX, from Sambursky 3.

⁸ This connection between the results of the exploration of the fantastic uncertainty and Stoic philosophy will show its relevance later in my analysis of Borges' use of paradox.

tual Cosmos. Poe's explanation of the creation of the universe totally resembles Hubble's theory of the Big Bang (circa. 1930). According to Hubble's theory:

(...) Spacetime and energy were initially combined in an infinitely dense and infinitely hot state. Under these conditions everything was extremely simple. (...) Energy and matter were interchangeable, and there were no measurable events. (Berstein)⁹

Even the notion of an ether as the vital force containing the basic structure of life and consciousness, that may seem quite a primitive physical notion, is in fact extremely similar to the physicist David Bohm's constituent element of his "implicate order". Bohm in another attempt to overcome the apparent fragmentation of the self tried to develop a new notion of wholeness based on the mathematical principles of Quantum Theory.

According to Bohm, matter exists in two different orders, implicate and explicate. The explicate order will be the state in which we generally perceive matter. The implicate order will be a dimension that contains as one of its multiple parts our sensorial experience of space and time. Bohm considers the basic form of the implicate order to be a movement he calls holomovement through which the derived explicate order of matter manifests itself: "the content or meaning that is enfolded and carried is primarily an order and a measure, permitting the development of a structure" (150). This movement, similar to both Poe's ether, and the pneuma of the Stoics, is the force behind the "the unbroken wholeness of the totality of existence as an undivided flowing movement without borders" (172).

One of the most impressive moments in "Eureka" is achieved in the final note of the 'Prose Poem'. Here Poe seems to try to state that the sole way the fragmented self (that as I suggested above, seems to be the mental condition of most of his fictional characters) can achieve a definite state of wholeness is through the full conception of the absolute wholeness of the universe within the individual

⁹ The notion of the interchangeable condition between matter and energy is also the basic notion behind Einstein's relativity *E: mc²*.

mind. Thus the individual identity will gradually merge into the universal consciousness:

The pain of the consideration that we shall lose our individual identity, cease at once when we further reflect that the process is neither more nor less that of the absorption, by each individual intelligence, of all other intelligences (that is, of the Universe) into its own. That God may be all in all, that each must become God. (309)

In this analysis of "Eureka", I have attempted to demonstrate how Poe, by a fictional exploration of an idea of wholeness with his full creative imagination manages to generate a poetic picture of the Cosmos that happens to be extremely similar to the scientific one offered by 20th century physics. The fact that Poe considered "Eureka" to be purely a prose poem, and that at the same time, it was in his opinion his most transcendental work, denotes that Poe had absolute confidence in the real epistemological implications of the aesthetic creation achieved through an unshackled imagination. It is something quite outstanding that Poe is capable of devising such a vision of the Universe in 1848. As I have briefly tried to show here the implications of his poetic conception are huge, bearing clear links to certain aspects of Eastern philosophy and of the physical theories of relativity and quantum mechanics.

Poe simply leaves his vision there, painfully confident that his poetic truth will be eventually unveiled in the uncertain future, sure that everything that is will eventually blend into the original one:

We need so a rapid revolution of all things about the central point of sight that while the minutae vanish altogether, even the more conspicuous objects become blended into one. (...) A man in this view becomes Mankind; Mankind a member of the cosmical family of Intelligences. (213)

Or a man becoming mankind, and mankind becoming part of the Universal intelligence, or man becoming Homer, and Homer becoming universal man, and Shakespeare becoming no one, and God become many:

Me, that I have been so many men, want in vane to be one and myself. The voice of God answered him from a whirlwind: Neither I am myself; I

dreamt the world the same way you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms of my dream you are, who as myself are many and no one. (PC 2: 342)

Borges seems to retake the fantastic uncertainty at a point very close to where Poe left it. As I said above, Borges' fiction implies an ultimate interrogation of the realm of the real by a radical exploration of the fantastic uncertainty. He, like Poe, departs from an attempt to overcome traditional logical thought in the representation of experience. Borges turns his exploration of the fantastic uncertainty into an awesome interrogation of the reality of absolute time. The structure on which the essentiality of time sustains itself seems to be the construct of ideas or fictions. According to the philosopher Hans Vaihinger, any logical conceptualisation of experience cannot be interpreted as substance¹⁰ but as a pure fiction:

The whole world of ideas is an instrument to enable us to *orientate* ourselves in the real world, but *it is not a copy* of that world. The logical functions are integral part of the cosmic process, but not a copy of it. Within the world of ideas logic distinguishes again between relatively objective ideational constructs and those which are subjective or fictional -Pure fictions and half-fictions. (xi)

Borges' exploration of the fantastic uncertainty implies primarily and exploration of the fictiveness of fictions, of both "half" and "pure". Borges' approach to the exploration of the fantastic uncertainty is seriously paradoxical, in the sense that it "entails a suppression of the basic rules of logic, of the most basic rules of denotation and signification, creating a deep sense of uncertainty" (Merrel 18).

So far I have tried to show how a notion of uncertainty is the basic structural element of horror and fantastic fiction. This fantastic uncertainty contains in its form an apparent epistemological power. The fantastic uncertainty can be seen as being the basic fictional articulation of a non-rational or 'beyond-rational' thought that lies at

¹⁰ I will use the term substance in it is purely philosophical sense as "that which underlies phenomena; the permanent substratum of things; that which receives modifications and is not itself a mode; that in which accidents or attributes inhere" from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

the core of every sublime conception. It is basically an imaginative exploration of the processes of thought that escape rationalisation and, in this way, it happens to connect with the necessary 'sublime' speculation prior to scientific formalisation.

The epistemological implications of this fantastic uncertainty are surprisingly enlightening when seen in the light of 20th century physics. The importance of this imaginative approach to fiction is that by emerging as the fantastic exploration of what is uncertain, it directly connects with that which is uncertain. And what seems to be extremely uncertain is our physical Universe.

According to Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, the behaviour of matter is strictly uncertain, i.e. indeterminate in respect to duration, continuance, or occurrence. Heisenberg established this principle while trying to measure the position and momentum (mass times velocity) of a particle at a quantum level. He discovered that: "The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant and vice versa." ("Paper").

The implications of Heisenberg's uncertainty and of quantum mechanics in general seriously challenge the very basis for a classical determinate conception of experience: causality and linear time. These two philosophical notions are the same notions that Borges seems to be eager to refute in his fiction. I will go back to a more detailed analysis of quantum mechanics at the end of this paper. First we have to discuss abominable mirrors.

2. ABOMINABLE MIRRORS: BEYOND METAFICTION

The notion of a 'mirror' as a structure reflecting an asymmetric image of reality has been used by some critics, like Jaime Alazraki, John Barth and Paul de Man as a model for dealing with Borges' stories. The reason for this is quite obvious. Borges' work is full of mirrors, and his fictions can be interpreted as asymmetric reflections of experience. However, although absolutely valid, this approach needs some further exploration, mainly into the actual nature of the 'reflected' fictional image.

Alazraki in his *Inversiones, Reversiones* argues in a very semiotic way that the structural model behind Borges stories can be compared to the reflective nature of mirrors:

All his stories are structured in a similar way: as a secondary relation, that inverts or reverts the first relation, presented from the 'fable' (*fabula*)¹¹ or sintagmatic level in the manner of a mirror; a structure that widens and corrects the first version. (128, my translation)

I will argue here that Borges' fictions are not only structured upon the idea of a mirror as Alazraki argues, but can be seen as being mirrors themselves, although merely fictional or conceptual mirrors. Borges' short stories are big fictional mirrors of being¹² that ultimately imply a fantastic *simulacrum* of that notion of being that is fictionally reflected. The uncertainty arising from the reflection is a direct consequence of the fantastic nature of the fictional exploration. I will analyse Borges' fictions as paradoxical constructs devised through the exploration of the fantastic uncertainty.

Borges, in his analysis of *The Enneads*, compares Plotinus' idealist conception of matter to the notion of a mirror:

The plenitude of matter is precisely that of a mirror that simulates to be full but it is empty; it is a phantasm that doesn't even disappear because it doesn't even have the capability of ceasing to be. (*PC* 1: 319)

In this Borgesian way, a conceptual mirror, which is full but empty, can be seen as a very similar entity to a paradox. I will treat Borges fictional mirrors as paradoxical fictional constructs. I will use some of the notions developed by Gilles Deleuze in my handling of the nature and philosophical implications of paradoxes. Deleuze defines a paradox in the following way:

¹¹ Another term developed by V. Shklovsky.

¹² The notion of being will be treated here in purely ontological terms. Being is the realm of everything that is. W.V. Quine's definition of being is: "to be the value of a variable." The realm of being contains everything that is ontologically defined as being something, i.e. as having a value of logical truth grounding its identity, like the realms of Logic, Mathematics and Geometry, among others.

The paradoxical element is at once word and thing. It is a word that denotes exactly what it expresses and expresses what it denotes. It says something but at the same time, it says the sense of what it says: it says its own sense. It is therefore completely abnormal. (67)

According to Deleuze's analysis, the most relevant feature of a paradox is that by transcending the three basic dimensions on which language is grounded (denotation, manifestation, and signification), it penetrates the wider dimension of sense, which is what makes meaning possible. Sense is "the expressed of the proposition, an incorporeal complex and irreducible entity, at the surface of things, a pure event" (19). Deleuze's definition of sense as the expressed of the proposition is based on the principles of Stoic logic, that happens to be also the origin of paradoxical conceptions. Stoic logic was based on the assumption that both the linguistic signs, and 'that which exists' are physical bodies, while the significate (*lekton*) (Mates 11)¹³ or "that which is meant" is a non-physical entity. The *lekton* is then a pure event; i.e. a pure effect of bodies. The linguistic materialisation of events takes the basic form of verbs, while nouns are simply considered purely as physical signs.

The whole series of events or *lektions* will then constitute the realm of Sense. The location of sense in the actual boundary between the bodies of propositions and the bodies of things articulates their difference and by doing this, makes language possible. Sense is then the realm of becoming, i.e. the realm of processes and changes. The essence of this realm of sense and becoming is intrinsically paradoxical and thus indeterminate or uncertain from an asymmetric and determinate conception of time and causality:

In so far as it eludes the present, becoming does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to pull in both directions at once. (Deleuze 3)

¹³ Paradoxes are a Stoic invention. The Greek for paradox (Παράδοξ) means "to make wonderful of extraordinary, contrary to all expectation, incredible" and also "apparently contradictory theory of the Stoics", from H.G. Liddell.

This realm of becoming or sense is then based on an indeterminate causal and temporal base, so any notion of absolute identity having any sort of stability within this realm seems to be a contradiction in terms. Everything that is fuses then into the whole flux of becoming, and all identity disappears: "A Paradox is initially that which destroys good sense, but it is also that which destroys common sense as the assignation of fixed identities" (3).

The destruction of the notion of a fixed identity is one of the main ideas behind Borges' "Pierre Menard Author of the Quixote" (1939). Borges apparently wrote "Pierre Menard" just after he had suffered a very serious illness. Up until then, Borges had written some modernist poetry, under the influence of a Spanish literary movement called Ultraism. He had also written an imaginary biography of his Argentinian friend and poet, Evaristo Carriego (1930), some essays on fiction and film under the title *Discussion* (1932), and some baroque "exercises in narrative prose" in the *Universal History of Infamy*, (1935).

The illness was a very serious infection of the blood, septicemia. This disease made Borges suffer from serious hallucinations for about a month in which he swayed between life and death. The first thing Borges wrote after he recovered was "Pierre Menard". Whatever Borges went through during that illness is uncertain, but the literary result of Borges' septicemia was something spectacular that definitely effected a radical change in Borges' conception of fiction. So we can say that the real Borgesian uncertainty started with "Menard".

The narrator of the story, apparently a friend of the recently deceased French symbolist poet Pierre Menard, is trying to correct some serious "omissions" and "additions" in a published obituary note by Madame Henry de Bachelier, written just after Menard had passed away. The work is simply a note trying to restore the bibliographical accuracy of Menard's work after his poignant death.

However, the literary posterity of Menard is surprisingly not due to his "visible" work as the French symbolist poet that he was: a series of symbolist poems, translations, and essays on symbolic logic, chess and philosophy. Menard's great literary achievement is some "other text": "the underground work, the interminably heroic, the

unmatchable, and also -alas! of the potential of man- the unfinished" (*Ficciones*).

The work which has placed Menard so deep in the heart of his melancholic readers is no more and no less than Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Menard's masterpiece is an incomplete and very brief work consisting of just two chapters and a paragraph, more precisely chapters IX and XXXVIII and a paragraph of chapter XXII of Cervantes' *Quixote*. Despite the short length and the apparently derived nature of Menard's work, the narrator of the story doesn't hesitate to consider it as "the most significant work of our time".

The implications of Menard's visible "work" are huge and can be seen as constituting the philosophical foundations for Borges' fiction. Menard, like Borges, departs as a symbolist poet (with a single symbolist poem), and seems from his very beginnings to be very interested in achieving an autonomous symbolic logic, away from the denotative constraints of mere signification. In 1901 Menard writes a treaty on the possibility of developing an exclusively poetic language based on ideal objects, and shortly after this interest in an aesthetic symbolic system leads to a study of philosophy, more particularly to a study of the differential calculus.¹⁴

A "monography" on the connections between the thought of Leibniz, Descartes and John Wilkins, is followed by an essay on Ramon Llull¹⁵, a translation of a chess manual, and some drafts on

¹⁴ The differential calculus or calculus is the basic formal language (implying both a syntax and a grammar) on which symbolic languages like logic or algebra are constructed upon. Both Menard and Borges seemed to be incredibly attracted to the idea of any symbolic system of signs as a mathematical articulation or numerical systematisation of everything that is. One of the most ancient examples of these symbolic systems is the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes* (circa 12th century).

¹⁵ Leibniz, Descartes and Wilkins, 17th century philosophers, tried to give a mathematical foundation for human knowledge with different success. Descartes is universally considered as the founder of the modern scientific thought with his *cogito*. Leibniz, the father of modern logic, developed his *Caracteristica Universalis* as the basis for the calculus or Art of Combinations, from which truth emerges from "the logical conclusions from the given propositions which are true in themselves", the first proposition being identity. Wilkins, an Oxford philosopher, in his *Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* written around 1664 divides the world in forty categories, dividing these in differences and species, giving them a two-lettered syllable, a consonant and a vowel, respectively, and thus creating his language. This system had obvi-

the symbolic logic of Boole.¹⁶ Apart from a transformation of Valéry's *Cimetière Marin*¹⁷ into alexandrines, Menard's last relevant text is *Les problèmes d'un problème*, which deals with the different solutions to the Achilles' paradox¹⁸. The rest are mainly sonnets.

However, instead of imposing a new symbolic language of being either in the form of poetry or logic, Menard adopts something close to Valéry's conclusion in the *Cimetière Marin* and decides to immerse himself in the process of change or becoming by the creation of an absolutely fantastic text.

All these references at the beginning of the story, which on a first contact with Borges may seem random and gratuitous, are as I have tried to show very important, as important and relevant as Menard's choice of chapters for his unfinished *Quixote*.

Chapter IX contains the first metafictional element we find as we penetrate the fictional world of the *Quixote*. In this chapter, Cervantes constructs a very complex narrative structure with three different voices. The previous action of the story is suddenly left in a halt at the end of chapter VIII, mainly because there is no more text to edit or re-write. Cervantes here constructs a surprisingly complex layered text in which the first narrator of the story appears to be simply the editor of an Arabic text written by the 'first' narrator of the adventures of Alonso Quijano, Cide Hamete Benengeli. The third voice

ously very little impact in the development of modern logic. Llull, a Balearic philosopher and physician, developed his own *Ars Magna Universalis* and is similar to the one by Leibniz.

¹⁶Mathematician who proposed a calculus for proving syllogisms, translating them into arithmetical notation. Boole ideas led to the creation of the propositional calculus and his own Boolean algebra.

¹⁷ One of Valéry's masterpieces. A very philosophical poem that has been analysed by G. Cohen as containing the following four different stages: "-Immobility of being or of eternal unconscious nothingness, -Mobility of the ephemeral and conscious being, -Death or immortality, -Triumph of the fleeting and successive change and of the poetic creation." Those stages can be also seen as having some resonance in Borges' fiction.

¹⁸ One of the paradoxes of movement developed by Zeno of Elea, a Stoic philosopher. Zeno reasoned that since the series of distances contained an infinite number of distances, each of a finite value, the sum of the series must be infinite and therefore it could not be traversed in a finite time. Zeno's paradox implies a conceptual negation of an absolute linear time, for if time is mathematically continuous the paradox is right, and Achilles could never pass the turtle. This paradox is omnipresent in Borges fiction.

of this layered narrative is the questionably accurate translator who puts Cide Hamete's Arabic words into the Spanish of the first and now second narrator that can be seen as Cervantes himself.

Cervantes, through this revolutionary modern narrative technique, opens up his work to a multiplicity of dimensions that implicitly question the authority of a single monologic narrative voice as 'the' author of a text. The main implication of this "multiple meta-fictional game" is, as analysed by Félix Martínez-Bonati, that it "deauthorizes the image of life offered by all literature, including this novel" (225).

I will argue here that Borges, in "Pierre Menard" uses the same basic metafictional principle of Cervantes, but takes it a 'quantum' step further. What Borges refutes is not only the idea of the existence of a single omniscient entity as the narrator/author of a text, but the idea of any person as the 'real' individual author of any text written in any apparently 'real' moment in history. According to Borges, our notion of a 'self' seems to be as fictional as the idea of Hamlet or of Don Quixote:

Why do we feel anxious about Don Quixote being a reader of the *Quixote* and Hamlet, a spectator of *Hamlet*? I think I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters of a fiction can be spectators or readers, we, their readers or spectators, can be fictional. ("Partial Magic of The Quixote", *PC* 1: 175)

By making Menard actually write two chapters and a passage of *The Quixote*, Borges questions the notion of absolute identity behind the idea of 'an' author, and also the reality of the historical dimension of that work written by 'that' particular author. By doing this he fictionally refutes the universal notion of personal identity and the notion of historical time. This notion of a solid conception of time as history and as ground for logical truth is paradoxically the actual concept behind the following passage, the only we have access to, from Menard's *Quixote*:

(...) truth, whose mother is history, emulator of time, deposit of actions, witness of the past, example and advice of the present, warning of what is yet to come. (Cervantes' *Quixote*, Ch. IX ; Borges, « Pierre Menard » *PC* 1: 432)

By his apparently futile quixotic creation, Menard is consciously inserting himself in an overwhelmingly paradoxical frame of pure simulacra. He knows that it is a contradiction in terms for a French symbolist poet to write an already written novel of the Spanish Renaissance that has nothing to do with him:

I can't imagine the world without the interjection of Poe "*Ah bear in mind that this garden was enchanted*" (...) but I know I am able to imagine it without the *Quixote*. *The Quixote* is a contingent work, it is an unnecessary work. (PC 1: 430)

And it is this explicit and conscious contradiction in terms between the person Menard 'is', and what he actually manages to write, which shows the incredible heroism of Menard's creative imagination. This same contradiction is the reason for the inclusion of Menard's other chapter XXXVIII (the "Discourse about Arms and Letters"). In this Chapter, Menard seems to favour a Renaissance attitude in favour of arms against the cultivation of art. And it is this going against himself, this "reiteration in those nebulous sophisms", by Menard himself, "*a man contemporary of the Le trahison des clers*¹⁹ and of Bertrand Russell" which makes his creative attempt an entirely heroic deed.

By paradoxically overcoming his externally fixed identity, Menard transcends that same previously fixed notion of himself as a "French symbolist poet". It is basically the same basic working strategy of *The Quixote* in which a decrepit Alonso Quijano overcomes his real identity and transcends the spatio-temporal logic of that identity turning into the now mythical chivalric hero Don Quijote de La Mancha.

In Borges' story, Menard manages to execute the most powerful simulacra: the actual repetition of a fixed event in terms of Identity and History. This is understood by the narrator of the story as a narrative technique that has emerged in a conscious attempt to overcome those same notions of truth on which rational logic is based: "the technique of the deliberate anachronism and of the wrong at-

¹⁹ Work by Julien Benda, French rationalist, anti-Romantic philosopher, seriously opposed to Bergson's intuitionism.

tributions" (433). However, in his definition of Menard's technique, Borges through the narrator, subverts our most basic pre-conceptions of time and identity by considering our actual notions of time and identity to be a direct *effect* of Menard's revolutionary 'technique':

This is a technique of infinite application that urges one to go through the *Odyssey* as if it was posterior to the *Iliad*, and the book *Le jardin du centaur* by Madame Henry Bachelier as if it was by Madame Henry Bachelier. (PC 1: 433)

However, this paradoxical construct is only a fictional metaphor and can only be interpreted as such. This is what any reading of Borges as metafiction seems to point out: the impossibility of going beyond fiction. What Borges is obsessively and recurrently saying in his fiction is indeed that all our conceptual forms (identity, history and literary forms here in "Menard") are simply fictive: "Notoriously, there is no classification of the world that is not purely conjectural and arbitrary. The reason for this is very simple: We don't know what the universe is" (PC 1: 224).

But as I have been trying to develop in this paper, a metaphor or poetic truth used as a fantastic exploration of a conceptual uncertainty seems to be somehow a valid instrument for arriving at a valid universal truth. Borges is definitely aware of the epistemological power of the purely aesthetic, i.e. the power of the sublime artistic creation. What seems to be his point here is that it is only through an exploration of conceptual forms as being intrinsically fictional, that their fictional nature is laid bare. This conscious hyper-fictionalisation of the construct of ideas liberates the individual from those externally imposed narratives that gave that individual his/her logical coordinates based on an absolute definition of being in terms of identity and logical truth. It is by this breaking away from what shapes our notions of being that we penetrate a closer contact with events. Deleuze puts this problem in the following words:

The problem is therefore one of knowing how the individual would be able to transcend his form and his syntactical link with the world, in order to attain to the universal communication of events, i.e. to the affirmation of a disjunctive synthesis beyond logical contradictions. (178)

Pierre Menard accomplishes the impossible and manages to create a text that he as Pierre Menard couldn't have written, but that was written about 300 years before him by Miguel de Cervantes. By means of this fantastic deed, Pierre transcends his "form and syntactical link with the world" and becomes part of the immortal unity of the cosmic family of intelligences of Poe's "Eureka": "Every man must be capable of all ideas and I understand that in the future he will be." (433)

A man capable of all ideas will then be capable of the creation of a new universe. This new fantastic manmade Universe is the main idea behind Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940). In "Tlön", Borges develops an amazingly complex paradoxical structure of superposed worlds (fictional) that seem to contain each other *ad infinitum*, these worlds being a pure simulacrum of one another. The conception is simply astonishing. Before I delve into the nature of the harmonious world of "Tlön", I will deal with the narrative structure of the story.

The narrator of the story, supposedly Borges himself, together with his friend Bioy Casares, find, by chance, about a place called Uqbar, which only appears in an article of a random and single copy of the *Anglo American Cyclopaedia*, that happens to be a copy of the *Britannica*. In this single entry on Uqbar we learn of another place called Tlön. Tlön is an imaginary region referred to in the literature section on the entry on Uqbar. The literature of Uqbar is exclusively fantastic. The epistemological vertigo of Borges fantastic uncertainty suddenly appears, blurring the differences between forms. After some time in which the narrator tries to find out more information about the land of Uqbar, he suddenly happens to find volume XI of the Encyclopaedia of Tlön, the fantastic fictional region of Uqbar.

These two main dimensions (the reality of Borges in which the semi-fictional world of Uqbar is found, and the fully fictional world of Tlön) are the two basic realities contained in the main text of the story as "it appeared in the Anthology of Fantastic literature" (PC 1: 420).

This last fact implies that what we have read so far is merely a work of fantastic fiction as it was published in 1940. But suddenly, seven years after the publication of this first text, something incredibly fantastic occurs. According to the postscript to the main text, the

world of Tlön suddenly seems to be intruding the reality of the narrator by the simultaneous appearance of certain items from the world of Tlön in different geographical regions of the 'real' world.

Apparently the Encyclopaedia of Tlön was actually conceived by a group of scientists and philosophers sponsored by the American "ascetic millionaire" Ezra Buckley who not content with the idea of devising a new country, sponsors the creation of a new universe. Here Borges seem to treat the notions of an encyclopaedia and a universe as equivalent terms of the same basic idealist nature. The Universe is only that which we conceive to be an universe, and that happens to be the textual content of every encyclopaedia, in this case the fantastic encyclopaedia of Tlön:

The edition [of the first encyclopaedia of Tlön] is secret: its forty volumes (the vastest work ever accomplished by man) would be the basis for another one, more detailed, written not now in English, but in one of the languages of Tlön. This revision of an illusory world is provisionally called *Orbis Tertius* (...)

The final paradoxical turn in this story is that *Orbis Tertius*, an unwritten encyclopaedia in a yet-to-be-developed language from an imaginary universe suddenly turns into the conceptual paradigm for the final 'real' fictional dimension:

Now, the (hypothetical) "primitive language" of Tlön has penetrated the schools; now the teaching of its harmonious history (and full of moving episodes) has obliterated the one that presided my childhood; now, the memories of a fictive past occupy the place of another one, of which we know nothing with certainty – not even that it is false. (424)

By an amazingly complex "metafictional game", Borges has managed to establish an unwritten text in a non-existent language as the final reality of the story. *Orbis Tertius*, the more detailed encyclopaedia in one of the languages of Tlön, turns into the 'Third Orbit' or third dimension of textual experience that manages to include within its intrinsic unreality all the previous real and fictional realities that we have gone through in this text. The difference between fiction and reality is totally lost from the very beginning of the story.

The different fictional worlds not only end up merging into a fantastic text, but are assumed by a void, non-existent text, a third orbit of which its centre is nowhere and its circumference everywhere.

This last twist pushes our experience of the text to its rational limit, leaving us in an extremely uncertain dimension. We, as readers of the story, know that everything we have been through in this story is part of a mere fantastic fiction. However, the fact that the whole structure is grounded on something we perceive as void or non-existent does penetrate one's mind creating a deep sense of real epistemological uncertainty.

The establishment of the Tlönist world of *Orbis Tertius* as the ultimate and merely hypothetical paradigm of experience of the fictional reality of the text is a direct consequence of the nature of that fantastic world. Tlön is the world of pure and absolute becoming. It is a world of pure events. It is a monist world in which the slightest notion of identity is seen as the most absurd paradox, a mere "verbal fallacy": "(...) because it presupposes the identity of the first nine coins and of the last ones. They pointed that every substantive (man, coin, Wednesday, rain) only has a metaphorical value. (416)

Tlön is a world merely constituted of bodies and events. There are no substances²⁰ in the cosmos of Tlön. The two main languages in Tlön are then only made up of pure events: verbs and adjectives. Experience is seen not as a continuous series of objects in space, but as a heterogeneous series of independent acts that have no continuity in time. One of the most important features of this world of becoming is the notion that the human being modifies his physical environment in any attempt to conceptualise experience, like naming or counting entities. The notions of space and geometry (tactile) follow a similar human re-shaping: "this geometry does not know about parallels and declares that the man who moves modifies the forms that surround him" (418).

Borges is showing here how a simple change in the logical foundation of our epistemological experience of the world, basically from a logic based on the notion of the identity of indiscernibles to a logic based on pure events totally changes our perception of experi-

²⁰ See footnote 10, for the sense of my use of "substance" in this paper.

ence. If a slight change in our logical foundation for our mental processes does generate a new fantastic world, our reality is after all not as far from the world of Tlön as it may first seem.

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is ultimately a critique of any ideological basis for human experience. What Borges is suggesting is that our notions of reality do fully determine our experience. Reality will be like a void structure that we fill with our own notions, and these notions are what ultimately determine our conscious behaviour. Experience can then be seen as a big paradoxical mirror that is full but empty, and that reflects whatever variable of being we input into its empty form:

Just only ten years ago, any sort of symmetry with an appearance of order- dialectical materialism, antisemitism, nazism- was enough to captivate human beings. How could we not yield to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an ordered planet? (423)

In this analysis of "Pierre Menard", and of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", I have tried to show how Borges fictions are big paradoxical mirrors of what I have described as the realm of being. Borges introduces any of the notions that are supposed to have some fixed element of truth as identity into his radical version of the fantastic uncertainty, and then lays them bare into their mere variable value as pure fictions. Any approach to Borges' work as mere metafiction is usually abandoned at this stage of analysis, showing the ways Borges develops this metafictional deconstruction of the various notions that constitute the realm of being.

However, my main argument in this paper is that this paradoxical deconstruction of the realm of being opens up the actual fiction to a new (fictional) dimension. By leaving the fictional reality of each story in a void and undetermined final dimension that paradoxically asserts and negates the value of the conceptual forms in the fiction, like the non-existent world of Orbis Tertius, or the final paradoxical remarks on Menard's narrative technique, Borges opens up those fictions to the void and undetermined dimension of the flux itself of processes and changes.

Once all the rational forms of conceptualising experience are gone, we are left in the open flux of experience, or in other words

we penetrate the realm of pure becoming. Becoming literary means “A coming to be, or a passing into a state” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The notion of becoming as a philosophical concept opposed to the classical stable ontology of being was originally fully theorised by Henry Bergson in his *Creative Evolution*. Bergson relates ‘becoming’ to a conception of time as duration, in which time is seen as a heterogeneous series of temporal changes in constant movement, rather than an idealist mathematically divisible continuum. Bergson himself connects his notion of time as duration to the refutation of linear time developed by the Stoic philosopher Zeno of Elea (Chapter V), who happens to be also omnipresent in Borges’ fiction.

As I have tried to show here, Borges’ fiction fully connects with this notion of becoming in his fictional attempt to destroy the notion of linear time. The most shocking point is that Borges’ fictional embodiment of this world of becoming has a very similar form to the basic scientific paradigm generated by Quantum Mechanics. Both Borges’ paradoxical hyperfictions, and quantum theory show an uncertain universe suspended over an abyss of superposed waves that contain all potential realities, each of them incessantly splitting into a stupendous number of branches, like a garden of forking paths.

3. TIME REFUTED: TOWARDS A FOURTH DIMENSION

In “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941), Borges once again, devises an incredibly complex narrative pattern consisting of a sequence of fictional worlds that seem to contain each other infinitely. The implications of Borges’ fictional conception reach here the very notion that grounds our rational (tri-dimensional) perception of reality: the notion of absolute time.

“The Garden of Forking Paths” is a fictional destruction of linear time. The two key aspects of this conception of time, i.e. asymmetry and historical linearity, seem paradoxically to fully control the apparent fictional development of its narrative structure. The short story is presented as part of a real historical document written during World War I, and it seems to follow the basic plot of spy-fiction. It is a historical confession “dictated, re-read and signed” (PC 1: 463)

by the German-Chinese spy Yu Tsun, in what seems to be the aftermath of the action presented in the story.

Once the historical dimension of the story is subtly set, Borges uses the incessant asymmetry of time as the main narrative element that fully controls the flow of the story. Tsun is located in very limited lapse of time of a couple of hours in which to carry out his mission of killing Stephen Albert. The irreversible brevity of this time is emphasised by the fictional presence of the agent Richard Madden. The time structure of the story is in this way very narrowly defined. Time as a real, linear dimension of irreversible consequences seems to be the main narrative force of the story, absolutely shaping and controlling the development of its plot.

However, Borges' fantastic uncertainty suddenly manifests itself and begins to blur the fictional and historical preconceptions of linear time set at the beginning of the story. When Yu Tsun leaves the train at Ashgrove, he suddenly seems to enter a labyrinth. As soon as Tsun penetrates this labyrinth leading to Albert's house, the whole story takes a very uncertain turn. Tsun's apparent familiarity with labyrinths makes him accept this one with a sense of strange "plenitude". One of the main elements producing this sense of plenitude is the presence of some "Chinese syllabic music". Yu Tsun has already penetrated Ts'ui Pên's uncertain labyrinth of The Garden of Forking Paths.

Tsun finally meets Stephen Albert, who happens to be a sinologist whose main achievement is the deciphering of the mystery of the Garden of Forking Paths created by Ts'ui Pên, who happens to be Yu Tsun's great-grandfather. Albert, happy and proud of his incredible achievement, and of being able to share it with one of Pên's grandsons, tells Tsun about his ancestor's fantastic creation. Ts'ui Pên's work is both a book and a labyrinth, a narrative "labyrinth of symbols- (...) -an invisible labyrinth of time":

In all fictions, every time a man has to face diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in Ts'ui Pên's nearly inextricable work, he goes simultaneously for all of them. He *creates* thus diverse futures, diverse times, that also proliferate and fork themselves. (...) In the work of Ts'ui Pên, all the denouements take place, each one of them is the starting point of another forking branch. (470)

Borges then turns Ts'ui Pên's notion of fictional time into the structural axis for the whole story. The labyrinth-book *The Garden* will end up containing in its form the reality of both Albert and Tsun, and by achieving this transcendence into their fictional reality, it will also contain in its form the apparent notion of history and linear time on which their/our notion of reality seems to be grounded.

Through contact with the world of Stephen Albert, Tsun suddenly penetrates a new dimension in which he is able to connect with a time scheme wide enough to connect his present moment with his past, and also with the present moment of Stephen Albert. But Albert also seems to have reached the same past of Yu Tsun through his knowledge of *The Garden of Forking Paths*. By this surprising sharing of time schemes, both penetrate the actual branch-like fictional world of the labyrinthine book that at the same time happens to contain all theoretically possible plots of a work of fiction.

At the same time, the action of the 'real' spy-plot also merges now into these various time schemes shared by Tsun and Albert, making the simultaneous whole even more complex. Tsun, now fully immersed in this multiple labyrinthine conception of time, has to eventually kill Albert, even though Albert, through his reconstruction of *The Garden*, has restored a big part of Tsun's own self.

Tsun then finds himself in a sort of superposition of time schemes each of them containing a simulacrum of each other, in a way that the same present state naturally leads to a 'real' multiplicity of diverse futures, each of them having completely different results and thus, leading to completely different realities. In one of them, Albert is venerated for his recreation of *The Garden*, in another Tsun has to kill Albert, in another one Albert knows he is going to die, in another Albert embodies the figure of Ts'ui Pên by his connection to *The Garden*, in other one it is Tsun himself who symbolises Ts'ui Pên, and this can go exponentially on into an infinite progression of superposed realities.

By this further fantastic twist of the plot, their merged times now fuse into all the other possible diversions contained in the fictional labyrinth of time developed by Ts'ui Pên. Borges seems to suggest that the fictional book now assumes and contains their real time schemes. We can also infer here that if their reality happens to be a

clear and definite historical conception of time, this same notion of time will be contained by the fictional nature of this labyrinth of time. Everything will then merge into the undefined simultaneous whole of The Garden of Forking Paths. Albert himself seems to be aware of the impact of that whole sequence of superposed times in actual experience:

We don't exist in most of those times; in some of them it is you who exists and not me; in others, it is me and not you; in others we both exist. In this one, brought forth by some favourable chance, you have come to my house; in another one, as you walk along the garden you find me dead; in another one, I say these same words but I am an error, a ghost.

—In all of them— I voiced not without slightly shaking— I am grateful to you and venerate your recreation of the garden of Ts'ui Pên.

—Not in all of them— he murmured with a smile— Time perpetually forks into innumerable futures. In one of them I am your enemy. (PC 1: 472)

And so Yu Tsun shoots Stephen Albert and tragically performs the task imposed by his historical circumstances. However, in the fictional development of this action, Borges has developed a very powerful fictional destruction of linear time. We as well as Yu Tsun, and Stephen Albert have felt the conceptual vertigo of this uncertain superposition of worlds in "The Garden of Forking Paths". The time sequence developed by Borges' here of time branches that split *ad infinitum* into a simultaneous multiplicity of other branches is quite revolutionary. Borges breaks away from the notion of time as an absolute single linear time that can be divided infinitely into an infinite series of definite individual parts.

Borges notion of time as developed in "The Garden of Forking Paths" is shockingly similar to the Many-Worlds Theory of Quantum Mechanics. This theory developed by De Witt and Graham in 1973 tries to solve the measurement problem of quantum mechanics by developing an interpretation based on an idea of splitting worlds. Before I get into their theory, I need to briefly deal with the measurement problem of Quantum Mechanics.

The Standard Theory of Quantum Mechanics developed by Dirac and Von Newman (1926) describes the basic constituents of matter

to behave basically in a counter-intuitive way. The main problem with matter at a quantum level is that its random behaviour is determined by two dynamic laws that seem to be mutually incompatible. When matter is not observed, particles follow a superposition of trajectories in the form of wave packets that can be analysed according to the linear wave equation developed by Schrödinger in 1926. This linear wave equation (first dynamic law) is determinate and continuous.

However, whenever one looks for a particle (a measurement is made) that particle's state collapses to a state in which the particle has randomly and immediately a determinate position. This second stochastic and discontinuous dynamic law is called random collapse mechanics. The main problem with quantum mechanics is to know what is what makes the particle in a wave packet collapse into a determinate position in a random way, or in other words what is what happens whenever a measurement is made.

The Many-Worlds interpretation of De Witt and Graham tries to solve the measurement problem by negating the random collapse mechanics. According to them, the wave equation will give a mathematical explanation for the behaviour of matter. The collapse will be explained by the apparent existence of a "multitude of mutually unobservable but equally real worlds, in each of which every good measurement has yielded a definite result" (Barret 51):

This universe is constantly splitting into a stupendous number of branches, all resulting from the measure-like interactions between its myriad of components. Moreover every quantum transition taking place on every star, in every galaxy, in every remote corner of the universe is splitting our local world on earth into a myriad of copies of itself. (De Witt 161)

This view of splitting potential worlds at a quantum level is strikingly similar to the idea of time developed by Borges in "Garden". De Witt and Graham's theory though conceptually valid within quantum theory, seems however not to have been as successful as Borges' 'fictional' refutation of time.

Borges, trying to give to his philosophically poetic fiction some theoretical basis, wrote, first in 1946, and then in a final version that

text in 1952, his “New Refutation of Time”. In this work, Borges theoretically negates linear time following the same process of negation of matter and of self, performed respectively by Berkeley and Hume:

I negate with arguments of idealism the vast temporal line that idealism admits. Hume negated the existence of an absolute space in which everything has its place. I negate the existence of a single time in which all events are linked together. I negate in a very high number of cases successiveness /consecutiveness, I negate in a high number of cases too the notion of contemporaneity. (...) Outside of each perception (actual or hypothetical) there is no matter; outside of every mental state there is no spirit; in this way, time wouldn't really exist outside each present instant. There is no time. (PC 1)

The philosophical implications of Borges' refutation of time connect with some of the philosophical implications of contemporary physics. The idea behind both Borges', and the account of the nature of time developed by contemporary physicists, is strikingly similar: linear time seems to be a mere mental illusion. The main scientific argument for this physical refutation of time based on the physical theories of relativity and quantum mechanics, is briefly stated by John Archibald Wheeler in the following passage:

Is time -ruler of it all today- to be toppled? Fall from primordial concept in the description of nature to secondary, approximate and derived?... Should we some day see a new structure for the foundations of physics that does away with time?

Yes; that is the thesis of this account. Yes, because time is in trouble.

1. Time ends up in a big bang and gravitational collapse.
2. Past and future are interlocked in a way contrary to the causal ordering presupposed by time.
3. Quantum theory denies all meaning to the concepts of “before” and “after” in the world of the very small. (27)

Following Wheeler's physical refutation of time, we can see how Borges philosophical and fictional refutation of time does have some real physical implications. In the same way as Poe manages to connect with a shockingly valid picture of the Cosmos by the exploration of the basic mode of thought behind the fantastic form, Borges

arrives, shockingly as well, at something very close to the picture of the Cosmos offered by key contemporary physicists, in which “space and time are no longer the dominant factors determining the relationships of dependence or independence of different objects” (Bohm xv).

This paper is far from arguing that both Poe and Borges are actually transcending the realm of literature in their fiction. I have only tried to show how a purely fictional, and purely fantastic exploration of experience does connect with a scientific description of the same experience that is grounded on the apparently uncertain and indeterminate physical nature of the Universe.

EPILOGUE

As I have tried to develop in this paper, it is Borges’ refutation of the apparent linearity and irreversibility of time and causality what constitutes the conceptual basis for his development of the fantastic uncertainty. The notions of absolute time and causality ground our rational conception of the realm of being, i.e. the realm of everything that is, or whatever has the value of a variable. Borges, in his fantastic hyperfictions, totally refutes the reality of any conceptual entity based of this notion of time through a fictional superposition of parallel worlds imbued of a sense of paradoxical *simulacra*. It is solely through this incredibly complex fictional technique that Borges’ fiction achieves its impressive philosophical implications.

I have also been trying to show how Borges’ fiction does not only imply a refutation of absolute time, but that it also opens up to a dimension of experience I have defined in terms of the notion of becoming. This world of becoming, as opposed to the world of being, on which rationality is based, will be a world of pre-conceptual processes and changes. It is a world in which existence can only be experienced by a full immersion in that same flux of becoming that emerges after all our conceptual notions of being are finally destroyed.

Once our conceptual forms are refuted as mere fictions, the only thing we do experience is the series of vital events that constitute the realm of sense, in Deleuze’ words, or “that which is expressed” (the

lekton) in Stoic logic. This realm of becoming is primarily felt as a void form that generates an extreme sense of uncertainty. This can be seen as the second stage of Borges' exploration of the fantastic uncertainty.

What Borges simply does is to problematise the re-establishment of a sense of a final truth in the reality of his fictions after having explored the conceptual uncertainties that constitute the essence of the fantastic. Instead of creating a new sense of illusion of a final coherent reality, Borges leaves his fictions in a very uncertain paradoxical realm that both asserts and negates the reality of everything (however fantastic) established in his fictions, generating a sense of a conceptual void. In this way, Borges' fictions can be seen as mirrors of being. Borges' stories have the fictional structure of a mirror that is both reflecting, and being that which is reflected. However, the paradoxical emptiness of the final reflection turns the fictions themselves into pure fictional mirrors.

But there is something else going on in Borges' fictional mirrors. It is because of the fully imaginative nature of Borges' exploration of the fantastic uncertainty that this exploration does connect with a physical truth, in the same way as Poe seems to have achieved in "Eureka". Furthermore, this explains the similarities of certain aspects of Borges' fiction with key notions of Quantum Mechanics.

Borges' imaginative exploration of this epistemological uncertainty seems to suggest that the only way we can escape from the conceptual void that experience seems to be, is by imposing our own imagination onto this void form. In his work, Borges simply develops his own imaginary fictional paradigm, although he seems to be fully aware of the real philosophical and physical implications of his vision:

Meinong in his theory of apprehension admits the apprehension of imaginary objects: the fourth dimension, we can say, or the sensible statue of Condillac, or the hypothetical animal of Ltze, or the square root of -1 . If the reasons I have shown here are valid, to this same nebulous orb also belong matter, the self, the external world, universal history, our lives. ("New Refutation of Time", PC 1)

The final point I should like to timidly propose in this paper is that the notion of this uncertain “nebulous orb” or fourth dimension as the actual nature of matter, of the imagination, of the realm of sense and becoming, and of the whole physical Universe, happens to have quite a solid scientific basis according to the cosmic paradigm developed by 20th century physics. This is simply what I have attempted to suggest with the brief account of certain notions of contemporary physics contained in this paper. Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, Bohm’s notion of implicate order and holomovement, De Witt and Graham’s Many-Worlds interpretation, and Wheeler’s quantum refutation of time definitely point towards the same “nebulous” conception of the Universe that Borges mentions.

This paper however has not been an attempt to give a coherent account of this uncertain physical Universe, but rather simply an attempt to give a coherent vision of Borges’ fictional embodiment of the same universal uncertainty as the conceptual matrix of his fictional ‘macabre’ hyperfictions:

The Universe, the total sum of all events is a no less ideal collection that all the horses that Shakespeare dreamt about- one?, many?, none?- between 1592 y 1594. (*PC* 1: 98)

Borges leaves us there, in the middle of an extremely uncertain dimension, suggesting in a very subliminal way that the only thing we can do in this uncertain Universe is something like what Deleuze is saying in the following words: “Today’s task is to make the empty square circulate, and to make pre-individual and non-personal singularities speak- in short, to produce sense” (73).

My friend, that is enough for now. In case you want to read more, just go and become the self of Writing and the self of Being.²¹

Ignacio Infante
Trinity College, Dublin

²¹ Last quotation in Borges “A New Refutation of Time”. By Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* Vi, 263, 1625.

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