

CHAOSMOS OF LABYRINTHS

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Jorge Luis Borges remains, for eternity,¹ in the number of the few great writers who—apart from writing texts to occupy the central hexagon of **The Library**—deserve our admiration and gratitude for turning us into “model readers.”² Too generous and considered, he would not wish to be responsible for the birth of the ideal reader suffering from ideal insomnia. Anyway, Joyce took care of that, once and for all. Borges would have rather wished to conceive the innocent reader willing to be challenged by all kind of metaphysical and cultural, linguistic, epistemological, semiotic interrogations. But he also strove to invent the reader capable of being aesthetically gratified by his lucid, decorous, witty and urbane, finely crafted prose, ordered narrative, elegantly musical diction: thoughtful and gentle as he was, always meticulously attentive to the word and the concept, with their respective and attuned harmonic resonances.

In their intrinsic aesthetic and lyrical merit, Borges’s writings deserve our gratitude for an added significant reason. They have guided, inspired, and influenced the birth of other writings, and the art of writing of other writers. They have helped to shape, also theoretically, a new sensibility: all that is sensible and plausible in postmodernism. Williamson is perfectly right when he writes in the Preface to his recent biography:

His stories and essays were perceived to have anticipated some of the principal topics of modern critical theory. His subtle reflections on time and the self, on the dynamics of writing and reading, had generated texts that embodied ideas such as the arbitrariness of personal identity, the decentered subject, the “death of the author”, the limitations of language and rationality, intertextuality, or the historically relative and “constructed” nature of human knowledge. (Williamson vii)

We could add to the list the idea of the “anti-hero” narrative. Eco has more to say about Borges’s abductive detective plots, again intertextuality, influence, and much more; also about his own debt to the Argentine master, and analogies and differences between Borges and Joyce.³

Borges would be happy in the knowledge that he created his own kind of ideal reader: the one who would enjoy—with a large dose of disquiet and distancing irony, at once—the nightmarish illogicality, rigorous and terrifying like all nightmares, of his quest. He would be happy to know that his readers discover, through his own passion of reading and writing, the passion of being overwhelmed in the labyrinthine corridors and halls of libraries: the encyclopaedia of all encyclopaedias, the mirror of books that mirror each other, the search for the book as the catalogue of all catalogues. The catalogue book (in Babel anyway) stands as the token of Library, Encyclopaedia, Universe. “En algún anaquel de algún hexágono (razonaron los hombres) debe existir un libro que sea la cifra y el compendio perfecto *de todos los demás*: algún bibliotecario lo ha recorrido y es análogo a un dios.” (Borges, “La biblioteca de

Babel”, *Ficciones* 92). The Library of Babel is the universe. “El universo (que otros llaman la Biblioteca) se compone de un número indefinido, y tal vez infinito, de galerías hexagonales.” (Borges, *Ficciones* 85).

In another world, on the night of the second day in the Abbey, “In which the labyrinth is finally broached and the intruders have strange visions and, as happens in labyrinths, lose their ways” (Eco, *The Name* 167) William and Adso explore the library. The rooms are crowded with innumerable books on many subjects and in many languages. The format of the volumes is more random and chaotic than in the Library of Babel. The *aedificium*, however, is ordered and structured like a medieval *summa*. The rooms are heptagonal. But Eco’s library is as infinite as that of Babel. It is also “a great labyrinth, a sign of the labyrinth of the world. You enter and you do not know whether you will come out” (Eco, *The Name* 158). Most important, there is a mirror guarding one of the rooms. (Eco, *The Name* 172). It is not surprising that, in the novel, Eco should play his own intertextual games with Borges. “I wanted a blind man who guarded a library [...], and library plus blind man can only equal Borges, also because debts must be paid” (Eco, *Reflections* 28).

In Borges’s writings, libraries and labyrinths are interchangeable metaphors of reality and of other probable universes. The idea or model of the encyclopaedia was not unfamiliar to him. We could guess that Borges added momentum to the semiotic explorations into the encyclopaedic structure of knowledge and language. Eco in particular (*Semiotics* 80-86), writes of “the encyclopaedia as labyrinth.” Distinguishing three types of labyrinth: the classical and linear, the meandering maze of Manneristic invention, the rhizome net suggested by Deleuze and Guattari, Eco argues that The Encyclopaedia—as total sum of universal knowledge and semiosis—could resemble the rhizome. And he adds:

a labyrinth of this kind is a *myopic algorithm*; at every node of it no one can have the global vision of all its possibilities but only the local vision of the closest ones: every local description of the net is a *hypothesis*, subject to falsification, about its further course; in a rhizome blindness is the only way of seeing (locally), and thinking means to *grope one’s way*.” (*Semiotics* 82)

We need to engage in detective work, with the aide of abductions. And we pay yet another debt to Jorge of Burgos.

Commenting on Eco’s theoretical reflections on the universe of the encyclopaedic order, Patrizia Violi has written: “If we re-read the metaphors and expressions used by Eco to describe the encyclopaedia, we note that they all point to the same isotopy. Eco writes of ‘the library of libraries,’ ‘the archive of all available information,’ ‘that immense and ideal library whose theoretical model is the encyclopaedia’” (*Semiotics* 109).⁴ The precise images of this theoretical model are Borges’s Library of Babel, in the exhaustion and slow vanquishing of its readers and librarians, and the library in *The Name of the Rose*, destined to be consumed by fire.

In Violi’s comment:

The Enlightenment faith in culture and its order, which appeared to ground and sustain the theoretical project of the encyclopedia, seems permeated by an innermost doubt and uncertainty: chaos lies in ambush and its fire can, at any moment, destroy the order. Moreover, there is perhaps no difference between order [cosmos] and its opposite [chaos], between God and the primordial chaos, as the young Adso intuited in witnessing the immense final fire. But then, perhaps, if chaos and the formless could find a place within that order instead of being violently ostracised, [...] if one could attempt a theory—and not only the narrative story—of both chaos and the informal “monstrum,” then they would cease to be so menacing and destructive, and might show to be—even in their disquieting countenance—a constitutive part of ourselves. (Violi 109-110)

The creative world of Borges’s writings is a disquieting and estranging, yet most rewarding—intellectually, linguistically, poetically, aesthetically—universe. Self-contained, yet in perpetual expansion, it behaves like the organic architecture of Hegel’s system: it expands and unfolds while, at once, compressing and infolding, it spreads out pursuing the boundaries of the infinite and of eternity, while subtly gently preoccupied with our ephemeral condition, with all its fears and hopes, and seeking the one final or at least penultimate resting word. In the echoes of Hopkins, it inscapes and outscapes. It infolds while it unfolds. It draws in and out at once, as it should, like every being in the image of the immortal Dragonfly.

It would be a grave mistake to forget that Borges is, first and foremost, a poet. Through the music of words he came to the music of ideas. Through this other—and always the same—music, he grew into the craft of drawing the warmth of poetic sound onto icy conceptual metaphysical preoccupations which, not unlike all great poetry, touch our lives. For him, thought and poetry are the same. In order to breathe poetic diction into narratives of abstract concerns, he turned to prose, and (naturally) he favoured principally the short story which is, one may argue, the most amenable to poetic and musical treatment. Following the logic of abductive detective procedures, his essays—whether fictional or literary and philosophical—are as cogent and ordered as finely crafted sonnets or string quartets. (Perhaps also because of the choice of his congenial genre, he remained ignored for too long. And we note that Northrop Frye has not even a secondary or lateral mention of our author in his duly respected *Anatomy of Criticism*.)

If a planet, world and universe, such as Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius did not really exist, it should be created and intentionally devised. If a place such as The Library of Babel were not already open to the public, it should be designed, built, filled with an infinite number of books and other documents, especially the book and inventory that contains all other books: the catalogue of catalogues. If labyrinths were not already the customary and disconcerting places of our dwelling, Daedalus should be summoned to return into our midst, and start all over again. No doubt, other Asterions and other Minotaurs could be readily found. While at least one new Ariadne and another Theseus are always nearby and already attending to their task.

The seemingly paradoxical fact is that Orbis Tertius, The Library of Babel, The House of Asterion, The Sect of the Phoenix, The Immortal dreamer, with all other Imaginary Beings, places, times and eternities, already exist. Borges has written about them, we read of them, and now—in our turn—we can write more to celebrate them.

The debate concerning the truth of fiction, and the existence of imaginary characters and entities in literary and mythical worlds, is as old as the first attempts at literary theory in the pages of Aristotle, and still alive. An elegant solution to the question concerning the existence of fictional characters, entities, and places has been elaborated by Umberto Eco, particularly in his *The Role of the Reader* and *The Limits of Interpretation*. It is erroneous to think that The Library of Babel does not exist. It does exist, as a labyrinthine building that hosts endless volumes, but it exists in a world different from the world in which we live. We could add that the other world is “more interesting, more true, even perhaps more real” than our own (Santambrogio 151). From our point of view, the other world lacks actual existence but it is perfectly possible and eminently credible nonetheless. “Therefore, poets and fiction writers do not speak of things that do not exist at all; rather, like travellers in distant lands, they tell us of characters and events that live and happen elsewhere: mere possibilities in other possible worlds” (Santambrogio 152). The idea of imaginary entities, as possibilities not actualised, dwelling in other worlds, stems from the application of the theory of possible worlds to fictional beings.

Matters may appear to be more complicated when one considers Borges’s imaginary entities. Some certainly seem most unreal, some are quite surreal indeed, yet they convince the reader that they are as real as any other—apparently less improbable—literary character. We believe in the existence of Achilles and Ulysses, don Quixote and Sancho, Casaubon and Dorothea, William of Baskerville and Adso, Adrian Leverkühn and Serenus Zeitblom. All the aforementioned appear to live in an apparently real and familiar world. The imaginary places of their abode remind us of our own and resemble, in many ways, our actual world. Let us say that they (characters and their worlds) are—by and large—contrived in accordance with the general logical rules that govern our rational mortal condition. When familiar logical and rational rules are violated, they simply highlight the power of the rules, while challenging the apparently unassailable solidity of what we deem to be real. Aristotle has taught us that fictional characters and worlds are construed according to the laws of “probability and necessity.” Because of this, even the most sophisticated model readers will readily suspend their disbelief. Borges’s labyrinthine universes are as tenable and credible as what we consider a real universe.

Umberto Eco has suggested that the logical and narrative strategies deployed by Borges are construed according to “the mechanism of conjecture in a sick Spinozist universe” (*The Limits* 152-162). Eco refers to Spinoza’s notion that “ordo et connexio rerum idem est ac ordo et connexio idearum.” However, if we introduce a mirror and mirrors in that Spinozist universe sick with the illogicality and paradoxes dictated by the rules of the Library, we could think also of a sick Leibnizian universe. “In the hallway there is a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances. Men usually infer from this mirror

that the Library is not infinite (if it really were, why this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite” (Borges, *Labyrinths* 78).

Mirrors and infinity are quite at home in the monadological world: “the best of all possible worlds.” The monads are infinite in number and, ruled by the law of pre-established harmony, they do not directly impinge upon each other, in a causal way. In the case of spiritual monads such as humans and angels, each contemplates, beholds, mirrors the whole universe. Here, the connection between mirrors and infinity. Each monad mirrors the infinite number of monads in the universe and, in each other infinite monad, its own mirroring of the other infinite monads. This sets in motion a universe of endless spirals and “exponential curves:” a universe of universes. From a purely experiential optical point of view, two mirrors facing each other are sufficient to induce vertigo by their abysmal effect. How infinitely more disconcerting and terrifying is the idea—and improbable experience—of an infinite series of infinite mirrorings!

Also echoes of Leibniz’s theory of infinitesimal calculus, the theory of the indiscernibles, not to mention his passionate pursuit of a perfect language, and the idea that—if projected into infinity—opposite terms coincide, resonate throughout Borges’s pages. His reference to Georg Cantor’s “set theory” in *The History of Eternity*, confirms his preoccupation with infinity. “There is a concept which corrupts and distorts all other concepts. I don’t mean Evil, whose limited empire is within Ethics. I speak of the infinite” (Borges quoted in Andreotti 81). With this remark, Borges makes us also aware of Leibniz’s paradoxical metaphysics, while hinting at his own quest for a “principle” that may defy infinity, and perhaps to his nostalgia of a lost cosmos.

If we attempted to instance the purely visual quality and effect of the labyrinthine and endless mirroring process—as, for instance, in “The Library of Babel,” “The Lottery of Babylon,” “Tlön,” “The Circular Ruins,” “The Immortal,” “The House of Asterion,” and numerous other writings—we could not but find amazing analogies in the pictorial universe of M.C. Escher, rather than Piranesi’s, (misspelled as Pirenesi!) as Rodríguez Monegal has innocently suggested (68). Escher’s work constitutes the closest and most probable visual “double” of Borges’s literary imagination. Escher, too, pursued analogies and paradigms of the infinite, the monster, self-reference, mirroring, labyrinth, chaosmos. Toying with the representability of the infinite, understood as the formless and therefore the monstrous, Escher created a surreal universe of “informal forms.” The paradoxical and abysmal effect of his works—either expanding into potential infinity or (often at once) self-referentially self-mirroring and inscaping—induces an experience of symmetric order and perfect chaos, at once, and of virtual inexhaustibility. His disconcerting and fascinating universes are formally governed by mathematical and scientific models: the principle of isometry characteristic of crystallography, non Euclidean geometries, impossible figures, such as Penrose’s impossible triangle and stairs, and Möbius’s tape (Andreotti 88-89, 92-93). Numerous drawings come to mind. In particular, *Drawing Hands*, *Belvedere*, *Balcony*, *Convex and Concave*, *Castle in the Air*, *The Drowned Cathedral*, the series *Metamorphosis*, *Reptiles*, *Horseman*, *Day and Night*, but especially the

endless *Cycle*, *Magic Mirror*, *House of Stairs*, *Up and Down* (1947), *Waterfall*, *Gallery of Prints*, and finally *Up and Down* (1960), they can all be read as visual metaphors of Borges's literary metaphors.⁵

In his typically ambiguous and disconcerting manner, Borges toys endlessly with the tension between time and eternity, place and nowhere, fragmentation and conflagration, the many and the one, self-identity and double, the dreamer and the dreamt one, the horror and the fascination of mirrors, the clearly circumscribed micro-event and the horror (and fascination, again) of the infinite. One of the heresiarchs of Uqbar had declared that "mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men" (Borges, *Labyrinths* 3). "The text of the encyclopedia said: for one of those Gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or (more precisely) a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and disseminate that universe" (Borges, *Labyrinths* 4). Rodríguez Monegal reminds us that:

On many occasions he establishes an unexpected link between mirrors and copulation. The first time he does it is in 'The Masked Dyer, Hakim of Merv' [...] In a section of that story called The Abominable Mirrors, Borges summarizes the protagonist's cosmogony: 'The world we live in is a mistake, a clumsy parody. Mirrors and fatherhood, because they multiply and confirm the parody, are abominations. Revulsion is the cardinal virtue.' (31)

Leaving aside the references to copulation and fatherhood, on which Rodríguez Monegal has adequately commented, it would be helpful to entertain the thought that Borges is tirelessly attempting to exorcise—by incantatory refutations, illogical dialectics, and ironic interrogations—the paradoxes of eternity, mirrors, and infinity.

For all the rigorous symmetry of its crystalline architecture, paradoxically The Library does not instance the metaphysics of "pre-established harmony" but, because of its infinity and its mirror, it rather announces the monstrous miracle of pre-established chaos. As metaphors of pre-established disorder and contradiction, Borges's universes are supervised not by a benevolent clock-making God determined to keep the time, but by a devious and elusive demiurge who—perhaps to escape the embarrassment of his boredom—randomly stops, or slows down, or accelerates different clocks: for the sole purpose of terrorising us into the hopeful (or hopeless) dream of eternity.

Borges awakens us from our metaphysical slumber and makes us ask a fundamental question. What and how much do we really know of our universe and our world? To what extent do we share in the encyclopaedic knowledge stored in our libraries? It should not be difficult to admit that we possess a partial and limited knowledge of our own universe, while the process of knowing and understanding remains an asymptotic and endless journey. His writings prompt us to ask another question, about the form and models of our knowledge. They certainly prompt us to abandon, or at least suspend, our customary ontological/realist pretence and/or our convenient rationalist/idealist ambition, by which we seek some sense of security in a cosmos we can control. (Let us remember that even the more robust and highly formalised philosophical systems, no more nor less than coherent scientific theories, remain

open to endless interrogation, and exhibit broken links and signs of some internal contradiction). The universe may remain unknown, mostly or partly, to us. Therefore, let us invent new maps of our universe and of many more. Only if we give up, or only temporarily bracket, our familiar expectations, we make ourselves ready for literature and art.

In the construction of totally other universes in which even the wildest imagination is seized by vertigo, Borges is unsurpassed. The illogical paradoxes that abound in his pages remind us that the universe we inhabit could be otherwise: and certainly that it could be thought and spoken of otherwise. The playful inventory, intended as an alternative classificatory order, according to a “certain Chinese encyclopedia titled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*” makes the point clear. “In its remote pages it is written that animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) that have just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from afar look like flies” (“The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” *Otras* 142). The Celestial Emporium is introduced in Borges’s discussion of John Wilkins’s, and others’, attempts at devising a general, universal, encyclopaedic language capable of organising and encompassing all human knowledge. The imperfections and final failure of the project prompt Borges to remark: “obviously there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural. The reason is simple: we do not know what the universe is” (“The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” *Otras* 104).⁶ This states clearly Borges’s own “recognition of a universe experienced by him as inscrutable,” with the recognition of “the arbitrariness of every classificatory scheme, no matter how coincident with appearances that scheme may be” (Wicks 81).

In countless other pages Borges reiterates, with variations, the same idea. “It is hazardous to think that a coordination of words (philosophies are nothing else) can have much resemblance to the universe [...] Let us admit what all idealists admit: that the nature of the world is hallucinatory” (“Avatars of the Tortoise,” *Otras* 114).

Perhaps it is in the nature of The Encyclopaedia, as map of the universe and of all possible universes, that it should require us to see things otherwise, and that we should be obliged to endlessly draw new possible and probable maps. The world in which we citizens of other Babel cities live turns out to be a metaphor of something else and of other worlds.

In the end, we may hear in Borges’s voice a gentle note of nostalgia. Perhaps he saw that the chaos of Library, Encyclopaedia, Universe finally aspires to the condition of simplicity of a single word and—more, or less, than that—of a single letter of the alphabet: the **Aleph**: “the letter that stands for all other letters by itself, the origin of all books, the symbol of cosmic unity and—according to the Kabbalah—of the divine energy that preceded and initiated creation” (Sacks 45).

Borges discovered, in the search for his **Aleph**, that “Quizá la historia universal es la historia de unas cuantas metáforas,” or “Quizá la historia universal es la historia de la diversa entonación de algunas metáforas.” (*Otras* 13, 17). We have no reason to doubt that, at the end of his journey, he—in the words

of Michelangelo—gazed into himself and fully realized that the only possible reality is that which we invented. Finally, it is absolutely certain that Borges understood what Angelus Silesius meant when he wrote, as his *Conclusion (Beschluss)*: “Freund, es ist auch genug. Im Fall du mehr willst lesen, / So geh und werde selbst die Schrift und selbst das Wesen” (Friend, indeed it is enough. In case you wish to further read, / just go and become yourself the Script and self the Meaning/Substance). The Substance of the Script may well resemble the *summa* of the Library, which Borges mentions in the final footnote to “The Library of Babel:”

Letizia Álvarez de Toledo ha observado que la vasta Biblioteca es inútil; en rigor, bastaría *un solo volumen*, de formato común, impreso en cuerpo nueve o en cuerpo diez, que constara de un número infinito de hojas infinitamente delgadas. (Cavalieri a principios del siglo XVII, dijo que todo cuerpo sólido es la superposición de un número infinito de planos.) El manejo de ese *vademecum* sedoso no sería cómodo: cada hoja aparente se desdoblaba en otras análogas; la inconcebible hoja central no tendría revés.” (*Otras* 86).

I have good reasons to believe that this single volume is identical with the Aleph and the Zahir tirelessly pursued by Borges, and that it is also the encyclopaedic mirror of The Library, invented to remind us that “le grand miroir s’appelle psyché” (Fabbri 55).

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Notes

¹ Ackroyd ends his review of Borges's *The Total Library: Non-Fiction, 1922-1986* with the words: "In one essay he says of Joyce that 'he is less a man of letters than a literature.' We may without hesitation apply the same description to Borges himself, with the codicil that his is the literature of eternity" (313).

² On the concept, see in particular, Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader*.

³ Umberto Eco, *On Literature*, "Between La Mancha and Babel" 104-117; "Borges and My Anxiety of Influence" 118-135; "Intertextual Irony and Levels of Reading" 212-235; and *The Limits of Interpretation*. In so far as, in Eco's words: "Borges appears to have read everything (and even more, given that he has reviewed nonexistent books)" (*The Limits of Interpretation* 156), he went "beyond intertextuality to anticipate the age of hypertextuality, in which one book not only talks of another, but one can penetrate one book from within another. In not only designing the form of his library but also prescribing in every page how one should peruse it, Borges had designed the World Wide Web ahead of its time" (*On Literature* 115-116).

⁴ Unless otherwise obvious or clearly indicated, the translations are mine.

⁵ Borges would be excellent company to Gödel, Escher, Bach, as in Hofstadter's book..

⁶ Wicks reminds us that Michel Foucault quotes Borges's instance of the Chinese encyclopaedia in the introduction to *Les mots et les choses*, and explains convincingly Foucault's intentions and the significance of the reference to Borges. On John Wilkins, see Eco (*The Search* 239-259).