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Fictions

Ficciones (*Fictions*) was the name used from 1944 on to designate Borges's most influential collection of short stories, one that includes such famous stories as "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," and "The Garden of Forking Paths." This was not the original title of the collection, and the contents of the book varied later when it was included in the (incomplete and chaotic) *Obras completas*, but it is the title most commonly used for that collection, and a highly influential title, as we shall see. (It was even preserved as the title for the English translation of the book that Anthony Kerrigan made for Grove Press in 1962.)

In the late 1930s Borges was working as a cataloguer at a small branch library in the Boedo neighborhood of Buenos Aires. His knowledge of library classification systems comes up a number of times in his subsequent writings, most notably in "John Wilkins' Analytical Language" (1942) in *Other Inquisitions*. His library work no doubt focused his attention on one of the basic classification schemes, the division of printed work between "fiction" and "non-fiction." "*Ficción*" was not a common classification category in Spanish at the time (*cuento*, *novela*, *narrativa* were all more common), but in the English-speaking world, school and public librarians were in the habit of dividing their books that way, even though one of the most common classification systems used in such libraries, the Dewey Decimal System (developed by Melvil Dewey in 1878), did have a decimal classification for fiction (within the 800 numerals used for literature). Public libraries in the United States, however, frequently did not follow this aspect of the Dewey classification system. These small, non-academic libraries usually contained a high percentage of novels, a fact that counseled for a pragmatic separation of works of fiction from other works in the library collection. The distinction between fiction and non-fiction, of course, has ancient roots in literary criticism, since the concept of *fiction* or *invention* was contrasted with truth. Plato's and Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* was informed by a distinction between truth and verisimilitude, between the thing itself and

representations of it, and Borges refers numerous times in his literary criticism of the 1930s to this distinction.

In Borges's career, the switch from mostly non-fiction to significant fiction writing was notable. His early writings (from 1919 to 1930, roughly) were mostly poetry and poetry criticism, though already by the middle of the 1920s he had become an important book reviewer, and more generally a cultural critic (with writings on art and film, as well as occasionally on popular music and other aspects of popular culture). What are usually considered his first short stories were written in 1933 and 1934 for a literary supplement, and were collected in the volume *A Universal History of Iniquity* in 1935; they were, however, not original stories (except for one), but recast versions based on published sources that were listed in a bibliography at the end of the volume. Critics have noted the important ways in which Borges rewrote these "twice-told tales," but there is no dispute that they are not "fiction" in the fullest sense, since they were rewritten from earlier ("non-fictional") sources. The first full *ficción* is "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim," but that too was not cast fully as a short story, masquerading instead as a book review, and for good measure was first published in *A History of Eternity* (1936), a book of essays. (It would later be included in *The Garden of Forking Paths* and *Fictions*, and omitted from some later editions of *A History of Eternity*.) The cluster of stories written between 1939 and 1941 and then collected as *The Garden of Forking Paths* (issued the last day of 1941 but circulated beginning in 1942) were notable, then, within the context of Borges's career at the time, since he was mostly considered a book reviewer and essayist, and was characterized as such in early editions of *Quién es quién en la Argentina* (*Who's Who in Argentina*).

A bit more than two years after the initial publication of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Borges published *Fictions*. The first section, entitled *The Garden of Forking Paths*, reproduced the earlier book (including the earlier mock book review "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim"); a second section entitled *Artifices* added six stories. Editions of *Fictions* that appeared from 1956 on included three additional stories, "The South," "The Cult of the Phoenix," and "The End," which were written after the publication of *The Aleph* (Borges's other path-breaking book of stories) in 1949. The history of the book, then, is quite complex, with the majority of the stories written between 1940 and 1944, but with a few that were written earlier and (quite a bit) later. The Spanish title, *Ficciones*, was a bold one at the time, since most other collections of stories in Spanish would have been called "*relatos*" or "*cuentos*."

If Borges is known as the master of *ficciones*, though, this has not so much to do with the choice of one word over another as for the fact that the stories

collected in the volume were radically different from anything that anyone had written up to that time (in any language). The success of the title, then, has to do with its distilling in a single word something of the anomalous nature of those texts. In what remains of this chapter, I would like to discuss the stories collected there, one by one in the order in which they appear in the book (which is not the order in which they were written or published in periodicals), then return to the question of what *ficciones* means here.

The opening story has the rather daunting title "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Published originally in *Sur* in May 1940 (and reprinted a few months later in the *Antología de la literatura fantástica* edited by Borges with Adolfo Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo, and translated into English as *The Book of Fantasy*), it tells the story of three anomalous objects that appear in the narrator's world: a four-page article on an imaginary region (Uqbar), the eleventh volume of the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön*, the rest of that encyclopedia, and some mysterious metallic objects that are not of this world. The temporal setting is 1935 to 1947 (the latter being the date of a postscript that appeared in the original 1940 publications of the story); the spatial setting is various small towns on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. The story narrates the detective work done by Borges and several of his friends to understand the origin of these anomalous objects, which eventually leads them to uncover an international conspiracy that would overthrow the ways we think about the world. This conspiracy is metaphysical, but by the end of the story it has political effects, and they seem atrocious to the narrator. Subtly, then, Borges writes about imaginary encyclopedias but he is also writing about the crisis shaking the world as he writes (at the beginning of the Second World War).

"Tlön" was one of several stories that Borges would describe in the Foreword to the volume as "notes on *imaginary* books" that would have the advantage over other apocryphal books on books (he mentions Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*) of being much shorter (CF 67). They are reviews in the sense that they sum up and critique a work, showing with carefully chosen examples and an occasional flare of polemics, the contours of an intellectual project. In a parallel sense, the narrator of "Tlön" notes that the article on Uqbar (and then the encyclopedia of Tlön) has the dry tone of writing in encyclopedias: "quite plausible, very much in keeping with the general tone of the work, even (naturally) somewhat boring" (CF 69). This contrasts with the tone of the story itself: if the narrator can say that his father and Herbert Ashe had "one of those close English friendships (the first adjective is perhaps excessive) that begin by excluding confidences and soon eliminate conversation" (CF 71), he himself is anything but reticent about the impact of the discoveries on himself, his circle of friends, and eventually the wider

world. A passionate text that plays off the idea of dispassion, "Tlön" hovers, then, over the very distinction between ideas and reality, or perhaps between fiction and non-fiction.

In many editions of *Fictions*, "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" appears next. As already explained, it had been published initially in the essay collection *A History of Eternity* in 1936; it was subsequently included in *The Garden of Forking Paths* and *Fictions*, but has now been moved back to *A History of Eternity* in the latest editions of the *Obras completas*. (In individual editions of *A History of Eternity* and *Fictions* it often appears in both.) The first of the fictive book reviews, it opens with invocations of Dorothy Sayers and other figures in the British intellectual world of the time, and masks as a review of the first Indian crime novel. The "reviewer" has at hand only the second edition of the novel, published in London and with a strong allegorizing (or Orientalizing) tendency that he hypothesizes was not as strong in the original Bombay edition. The story came out at a time when Borges was especially active as a book reviewer, and the touches of verisimilitude are so strong that his best friend Adolfo Bioy Casares is said to have tried to order the book from London. Like the later "The Man on the Threshold" (in *The Aleph*) it is a story that plays on Kipling, and evinces a strong interest in British India. At the same time, it seems to be at least partly a mock review of *El enigma de la calle Arcos* (*The Mystery of Arcos Street*), an anonymous Argentine crime novel (at least no one has deciphered in a convincing way the identity of the author hidden behind the pseudonym of Sauli Lostal), first published serially in 1932 in the newspaper *Crítica* (whose literary supplement Borges would direct with Ulises Petit de Murat in 1933-34) and in book form in 1934; the dates, and the physical description of the book, are very close to those in "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim."

Another of the famously challenging stories, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," predates "Tlön," since it was published in *Sur* in May 1939. If "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim," the only story in *Fictions* written before "Pierre Menard," masquerades as a book review, "Pierre Menard" masquerades as an obituary, written by some obscure provincial French man of letters in Nîmes in 1939 (as the colophon of the story informs us). The narrator writes to defend the reputation of his late friend against others, whom he considers opportunistic and treacherous, most notably a local lady named Madame Henri Bachelier. The story begins with Menard's funeral, but most of the middle consists of an annotated bibliography of Menard's "visible work," and a discussion of his unfinished version of *Don Quixote*. Of the latter, he finished only two and a half chapters (chapters 9, 22, and 38 of Part One of the Cervantes novel), but from a single phrase that he quotes we know that his version is identical (down to the punctuation) to

the Cervantes text and yet "almost infinitely richer" (CF 94), or so he insists. The "previous" writing of Menard is so strong that, as in a palimpsest where the original text can be recovered from the marks on the parchment (CF 95), Cervantes's text in its entirety seems to the narrator to have been written by his friend, more than three hundred years (and in a different country) from the original.

One of the many intriguing features of the story is the fact that there was a French intellectual named Dr. Pierre Menard (without an accent, as in the Borges story) in Nîmes in the decades when Borges's fictional character lived there, and that he wrote a series of books on the contributions of graphology to psychoanalysis, most notably *L'Écriture et le subconscient: psychanalyse et graphologie* (*Writing and the Subconscious: Psychoanalysis and Graphology*).¹ Dr. Menard hypothesized that handwriting analysis would provide a scientific basis for psychoanalysis, and provides his reader with a detailed course whereby to analyze the writer through the inclination, size, width, speed, and shape of his or her letters. Something of this comes through in the final footnote of the story, which refers to Menard's "insect-like handwriting" and use of graph paper for his manuscripts (as was the case for Borges during this period), but more importantly the book focuses on analyzing through copying or tracing the letters of the original, so that the analyst can fully identify with the analysand. This is the very idea of the Novalis fragment mentioned in the story (fragment 2005 of the Dresden edition reads: "I demonstrate that I have really understood a writer only when I am able to act in the spirit of his thoughts, and when I can translate his works and alter them in various ways without detracting from his individuality"). This idea of "total identification," as the narrator terms it in the story, effaces and yet heightens the distance between Menard and Cervantes, or perhaps (as critics have argued) between any reader and any author.

The fact that the fictional author's name is that of a medical doctor interested in psychoanalysis is suggestive, since it plays with Freud's and others' speculations at the time (and Freud died in London only a few months after the publication of the story) on the relations between literature and the psyche, between imagined and lived experience. The story, then, plays with a theme just developed in "Tlön," of the fascination and difficulty of a rigorous imagining of a world in which nothing is outside of perception, and in which psychology is the master discipline. (That Borges was skeptical of the claims of psychoanalysis, and had devastating things to say about "psychological fiction," makes his underlining of psychological processes the more interesting here.) "Fiction," then, can express a complex truth about its author, just as handwriting can betray the secret impulses of the person who puts pen to paper.

"The Circular Ruins" was first published in *Sur* in December 1940. Once again, the relation of "fiction" to "reality" is the thing at stake, this time as a magician (in some ancient time, and unspecified place) tries to imagine a "son" and introduce him into reality. The time and place of the story are not, however, anywhere so vague as it would seem, and Mac Williams has established that the story makes clear use of Zoroastrian beliefs (a fact that Borges hinted at with his mention in the story of the Zend language), particularly those at stake in the so-called Zurvanite heresy.² The purification rituals, the totem animals, the use of ruined temples, the sacred nature of fire all point toward ancient rituals of renewal and creation. At the same time, Borges's interest in mathematics (expressed eloquently in his review of Kasner and Newman's *Mathematics and the Imagination*, SNF 249-50) subtends the mathematical structure of the story, concerned with ruins n and $n+1$ in an infinite series. The dreamer dreamed: the Baroque conceit at the heart of the story points toward the idea developed a few years later in the essay "Partial Magic in the *Quixote*," that the presence of a *mise en abyme* in a text like this one calls attention to the "fictional" or "literary" nature of that text, but also contaminates with unreality the "real" status of the reader.

"The Lottery in Babylon," first published in *Sur* in January 1941, has often been read as political allegory, though there is little consensus about whether it refers to all human societies or to particular varieties of totalitarianism. The narrator, who like his fellow citizens has been allotted very different destinies at different moments of his life, is missing a finger (an indication of one of the whims to which he was subject) and informs us near the end that his ship is about to sail. The world around him is radically unstable, with everything being determined by lot – with negative as well as positive consequences. The story, written at a particularly fierce moment in the Second World War, seems to anticipate later existentialist writing (though Borges would be unsympathetic to that movement when it emerged after the war), with its portrayal of a radically alienated individual in a chaotic universe. The affiliation with (later) existentialism could have as its symbol the sacred latrine named Qaphqa – Borges was of course a devoted reader of Kafka throughout this period, as Sartre and Camus would be later – and by the slightly creepy use made of it, as a place where denunciations can be left. The world of Kafka's trial and castle, and of his strange parables, is very much the world of this story.

"A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain" appeared in *Sur* in April 1941. It is mentioned in the prologue to *The Garden of Forking Paths* as another one of the notes on imaginary books, in this case the several novels of the imaginary author mentioned here. These include a Freudian novel, a detective novel, and a novel that plays with temporal regression (a mirroring of

the motif developed in the title story of the volume a few months later). A Herbert Quain novel is what Ricardo Reis reads in José Saramago's novel *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, in which the eponymous Reis (one of the heteronyms adopted by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa) returns to Lisbon after the death of his author, confirming in a strange way that Quain's fiction is inserted (by Borges, then by Saramago) into a different kind of fictive reality. Quain's motto in the story, "I belong not to art but to the history of art" (CF 107), is ironic, since the narrator quickly informs us that Quain regarded history as an inferior discipline; of course, it is hard to see how a novel could *only* belong to a history of the novel or a painting *only* to the history of painting. "History" is inflected as an accumulation of absences here: a negative capability, in Keats's famous phrase, where he refers to Shakespeare's, and then to Coleridge's, "fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge." Again, the question of verisimilitude: the fictional construct sneaks into the history of such constructs, as the world of Tlön sneaks into our world.

"The Library of Babel" was previously unpublished when it first appeared in *The Garden of Forking Paths* at the end of 1941, but it is closely related to an earlier essay, "The Total Library," that had appeared in *Sur* in August 1939. The society of librarians described in the story, alienated from their own task by the nonsensical nature of the volumes that surround them (apparently generated by some sort of random number generator, though it generates letters instead of numbers) and the uncertain nature of the size of the library that surrounds them (is it finite or infinite?) lend the story a tone of quiet desperation: some librarians commit suicide, others go blind or go mad. The narrator never explains how the (apparently all male) society reproduces itself, though there are two references (one masked by a famous typographical error that has been perpetuated in decades of editions, which speaks of "final necessities" instead of the "fecal necessities" mentioned in the first edition, and clearly visible in the first page of the manuscript) to another of the lower bodily functions.

"The Garden of Forking Paths" was also unpublished when it appeared as the final and title story in the 1941 volume. Chosen as title story perhaps because of the way in which its title is at once the text itself, the novel described in the text, and the garden described in biographies of the writer of the novel, the story is also (as I have argued in *Out of Context*) a representation of the chaotic world of 1916, the year of the ghastly Battle of the Somme, to which explicit reference is made in the opening of the story. Borges plays in this story with a series of fractured colonial histories – the bitter end of English colonialism in Ireland, the brief German colonial

adventure in Tsingtao, China – to suggest that the characters cannot find solutions to the mysteries in their lives because those solutions are open secrets that others can see but that they cannot.³ (As John Irwin argues, the similarities to Poe's "The Purloined Letter" are no doubt intentional.⁴)

"The Garden of Forking Paths," whose very title ("El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan") sounds in Spanish as if translated from English (and perhaps from Chinese to English) and is often misremembered as "El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan" (which would sound less strange or "foreignizing," to use the term from translation studies), involves a philosophical excursus into alternate notions of time, but a rigid historical time is the one that actually takes precedence at a crucial moment at the end of the story. Yu Tsun, stimulated by Stephen Albert's theory of proliferating times, feels surrounded by himself and Albert in other "dimensions" of time, and says that in every one of them he is Albert's friend; Albert responds that in at least one of those other times they are enemies, and at that very moment Yu Tsun sees the Irish detective, Richard Madden, arriving at the garden and is forced to shoot Stephen Albert. The historical context is clear: as the reference to the Liddell Hart book clarifies, the Battle of the Somme is about to be joined in swampy terrain of northern France (the "Serre-Montauban line" mentioned in the story), and a map in Liddell Hart shows the position of the town of Albert behind the British lines. Borges was fond enough of the Liddell Hart book to mention it a couple of times as one of the books that he had most reread and annotated (the others are Mauthner's dictionary of philosophy, Spiller's *The Mind of Man*, Lewes's *Biographical Dictionary of Philosophy*, and Kasner and Newman's *Mathematics and the Imagination*, a fascinating and strange little library). His Irish detective is suspected of disloyalty so soon after the Easter Rising in Dublin, and his Chinese spy taught English at the Deutsche-Chinesische Hochschule of Tsingtao (which really existed, and where English was in fact taught in the years before the First World War): Borges has interpolated his fiction into a dense web of historical references. The title story is indeed a memorable one, and one that provides insight into what Todorov calls the "poetics of prose" (though not specifically apropos of Borges). "Fiction" works in tandem with "non-fiction," and the responsible reader will necessarily want to follow up the many references.⁵ Only then will the complexity of Borges's achievement come into focus.

The second half of *Fictions* is called *Artifices*, and as already noted it contains stories published between 1942 and 1944 (when *Fictions* was first published under that title), with three additions that date from after the publication of *The Aleph*. The title of the second section highlights the "artificial" nature of the stories, the fact that their very essence is "artifice," though again there is a complex interplay between the artificial and the natural (or

between the fictional and the non-fictional). Many of the stories again work from references to extra-textual realities, and their "artifice" calls attention to their complex genesis.

"Funes, His Memory," one of the most famous of these stories, first appeared in the newspaper *La Nación* on June 7, 1942. Like "Pierre Menard" it is masked as a memorial text, though unlike the former it is not written soon after the character's death but decades later, when a group of Uruguayan intellectuals were bringing together a group of essays on their extraordinary late fellow countryman and decided to invite the narrator (despite his being Argentine, and as such something of a rival) to contribute his reminiscences of Funes. The memoir of Funes begins with an emphatic use of the ways in which the narrator remembers the young man, and the ways in which he is unworthy of using the verb "remember": there is no competing, even decades later, with Funes's extraordinary memory. The story is famous for its touching, almost funny description of the terrible thing that it would be to be endowed with a total memory. Reality crowds in on Funes after the accident that leaves him paralyzed; in order to sleep he thinks of blank surfaces (the dark bottom of a swift river, the other side of a shed built since his accident) since only these are not tense with detail and particularity. The numbering system Funes invents, which the narrator finds chaotic in the extreme, is idiosyncratic and only available to him; it is what Wittgenstein called a private language. Many of his "numbers" refer to Uruguayan culture, and we know from the narrator that he disdains that of neighboring Argentina (particularly the snobbish culture of its capital city); the memoir is also troubled by the tension between the two countries, since the narrator (inhabitant of the larger and more powerful one) feels superior to his country cousin, but then comes to realize the extraordinary intellect of the cousin's young peon.

"The Shape of the Sword" also first appeared in *La Nación* (this story on July 26, 1942). A memoir of the Irish civil war of two decades earlier, it (like "Funes") is set in rural Uruguay, this time by an Irish fugitive who addresses his listener at the end as "Borges." The retelling of the story of John Vincent Moon hinges on a lie, and the fact that the listener ("Borges") does not catch on turns the story into something like a challenge (perhaps like the knife fights associated so strongly by Borges with rural settings, as well as with marginal urban ones). Taking up again the question of the Irish struggle for independence (which was in the deep background of "The Garden of Forking Paths," and will be the central theme of the following story), Borges tells a story of a heroic sacrifice, but waits until the very end to have Moon reveal himself as the coward. This narrative trick forces the reader to reread the whole of the previous text, and on this rereading a whole series of

details, beginning with the ironic nickname given Moon in Uruguay, where he is called "the Englishman at La Colorada" (CF 138), come to the fore. "The Shape of the Sword" is told by a character who, like the "traitor and hero" in the following story, calls attention to his duplicity, and thus forces the question of responsibility onto his listener (and, by extension, onto us as readers). And like the following story, as well as the later "The South," it is a story that calls attention to its own artifice. Strikingly, that artifice turns on the unresolved dilemmas of colonialism, explicitly through the Irish setting, but also as present in the scimitar, a trophy of British colonial adventures in the Orient. The fight between Moon and his unnamed comrade takes place in the house of a General Berkeley, and the name suggests (as in "Tlön") that philosophical controversies about matter and perception have real-world consequences. This is a point also hinted at when Moon claims that his young revolutionary (apparently the other, but ultimately shown to be his younger self) subscribed to a vulgar Marxism, the reduction of "universal history to a sordid economic conflict." Marx and Berkeley, then: being is perception, but also the task of the philosopher residing not only in the understanding but also in the transformation of the world.

"The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," first published in *Sur* in February 1944, is clearly a continuation of the same issue, though this is set not in the Ireland of 1922 but in the Ireland of 1824 (though the story is reconstructed a hundred years later by the protagonist's great-grandson). The epigraph from one of Yeats's great poems on the Irish revolution makes clear that the story is centrally about the intellectual's responsibilities, though this is treated ironically when Ryan discovers that Nolan has plagiarized from the English enemy Shakespeare: "The idea that history might have copied history is mind-boggling enough; that history should copy *literature* is inconceivable ..." (CF 144). The complexity of the story hinges not only on the double nature of its protagonist, but also on the fact that the process of the invention of a national tradition (in which literature is centrally important to the shaping of history) can be ascribed not only to Ireland in 1824 but also to Poland, the republic of Venice, or some Balkan or South American state. The story tells what Borges had earlier called a "universal history of iniquity" (as Andrew Hurley translates the title of the 1935 collection of stories); notions of "universal history" are invoked quite specifically with the allusions to Condorcet, Hegel, Spengler, and Vico. This is to say, the story zeroes in on the ways in which history depends on fables, yet recasts these patterns in specific ways depending on time and place: the story could be retold in Poland or in Peru, or in Bulgaria, but that would depend on a similar attention to the interplay between local history and local literature, on the ways in which language is a party to political and historical conflict.

"Death and the Compass" appeared initially in *Sur* in May 1942. Like the previous stories, this one is about the ways in which reading shapes the interpretation of reality: Lönnrot is a better reader of detective stories than he is a detective, Scharlach reads the popular press (and the texts mentioned in it) to spin his web. Here the philosopher invoked is not Berkeley or Marx (or Hegel or Condorcet, or the others just mentioned) but Spinoza, whose "more geometrico" (in his commentary on Descartes, and in subsequent writings) inspires the imposition of equilateral triangles and rhombuses on a city that turns out to be more Buenos Aires than somewhere in France. A detective story turned inside out, "Death and the Compass" poses the question of the limits of rationality (hence the invocation of Spinoza and implicitly of Descartes). Lönnrot's name invokes Elias Lönnrot, the compiler of folk poems into the *Kalevala*, who became thereby the creator of the idea of Finland (as a future state invented with a deep national past); this process of an "invention of tradition" is also at stake in Lönnrot's tardy (and misguided) attempts to understand Jewish mysticism, a field where his antagonist (a Jewish gangster figure like Monk Eastman in *A Universal History of Iniquity*) is way ahead of him. In keeping with the theme of *Fictions* as a whole, this is clearly a story about the ways in which reading fiction shapes the experience of reality, but also the ways in which the real world can give the fictive one a slip.

"The Secret Miracle," published in *Sur* in February 1943, is a story that clearly relates to the historical time in which it was written and published. Set during the Nazi invasion of Prague in March 1939, it is (like "The Garden of Forking Paths") a story in which games with time are played out against a historical background, and in which the prison house of chronology closes in on the subject. Jaromir Hladik's unfinished project, the verse drama "The Enemies," plays on psychoanalytic ideas of dream-life and traumatic return; the secret year which he is granted, that separates the firing of the bullets by the firing squad from the moment of his death, allows him to return again and again to his poem, to express the dilemma of the relations between reality and "irrealidad," between experience and fiction.

"Three Versions of Judas" was published in *Sur* in August 1944 and shortly thereafter in *Fictions*. As Edna Aizenberg has shown, it anticipates by more than sixty years the publication of the lost *Gospel of Judas*, though Borges seems to have known the central idea of that book (that Judas was the true redeemer, since he abased himself to treachery and infamy for the sake of divine design) from medieval refutations of it.⁶ The story plays off a wide variety of theological debates, and it is obvious that Borges takes pleasure in the absurdity of this mode of inquiry (at the same time that he obviously is knowledgeable about it, and perhaps even fascinated).

"The End," the first of the three stories added to the second edition of *Fictions* in 1956, was first published in *La Nación* on October 11, 1953 (and as such was the last story that Borges wrote before his blindness impeded his reading and writing: this story is also an "end" of an important stage of his literary career). It follows on the 1944 publication of "A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz," a story that rewrites a crucial episode in Argentina's most famous poem, José Hernández's *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872). "The End" rewrites the ending of the second part of that poem, *The Return of Martín Fierro* (1879), suggesting that the rhetoric of national reconciliation that dominates the second Hernández poem (written at the time of a national accord that brought an end to sixty years of civil war) was just a sham, and that the poem's hero dies in a knife fight with the brother of a man he had slain some years before (in the first part of the poem). The story about Cruz was written in the decisive year of the rise to power of Juan Domingo Perón, an event that horrified Borges, and glorifies defiance of the state; the story about Fierro's death was written two years before the "Liberating Revolution" (of which Borges was an enthusiastic supporter) which ended the Perón regime, and which resulted in the muffling of dissent by members of Argentina's largest political party. Interestingly, "The End" is told through the voice of Recabarren, the paralyzed owner of a country general store (there are strong echoes of "Funes" here), who hears (but does not see) the events that are told through him: as if there were an impartial witness to history.

"The Cult of the Phoenix" first appeared in *Sur* in a double issue in September–October 1952; like "The End" and "The South," it was added to the second edition of *Fictions*. Like "Three Versions of Judas," this story plays with theology, though the "secret" suggested here does not seem to have to do with the true nature of divinity. Borges suggests that the secret that is at the core of his sect is mundane and all around us, and that all sorts of people initiate others into it. Many critics have suggested that the secret here is the sexual act, and Borges confirmed this on at least one occasion.

"The South," the final story in the second edition of *Fictions* (and in subsequent ones), was first published in *La Nación* on February 8, 1953. Dahlmann's life story is in many ways parallel to Borges's: both are products of families that descend from European men of letters as well as from *criollo* military figures, both work as librarians and are fond of similar books (and share a reverence for the Argentine politician Hipólito Yrigoyen), and both suffer accidents with a window frame that result in septicemia and delirium. Borges's accident occurred on Christmas Eve 1938, and he would write "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" when recovering from it; Dahlmann's accident results either in his death in a hospital after surgery or

in his death in a knife fight somewhere in the southern part of the province of Buenos Aires. The story is told in such a way as to justify both readings, and Borges mentions in his 1956 postscript to the preface to *Artifices* that the story (which he considers his best) can be read "both as a forthright narration of novelistic events and in quite another way, as well" (CF 129). The issue that is at stake throughout *Fictions* is highlighted in this last story, which harks back to the first stories in the book.

The whole of *Fictions*, then, though not written as a book (and interrupted in its second part by the stories that were collected in *The Aleph*), turn on the complex relations between fiction and non-fiction. The first page of "Tlön," the first story in the book, says that the narrator and his friend Bioy Casares were discussing the possibility of writing a first-person novel in which certain discordant details would suggest to a select group of readers that the fiction masked an "atrocious or banal reality"; the last story (which was in fact the next-to-last story that Borges would write before going blind) suggests that the reader must be willing to read a story in two antithetical ways. The games that Borges plays here with both reality and fiction are highly complex. His interest in techniques of verisimilitude, developed in the early 1930s in two crucial essays, "The Postulation of Reality" and "Narrative Art and Magic," provided him with a way of writing fiction that inserts itself into gaps in the discourses of reality (most notably that of history), while at the same time calling attention to the narrative conventions that are used to talk about reality. Radical stories like "Tlön," "Pierre Menard," "The Garden of Forking Paths," "Funes," and "The South" are all written about these gaps: between language and its referents, between text and reader, between the thing and the idea. *Fictions* is one of the most important books of twentieth-century literature precisely because it is so provocative in the ways in which its "fiction" tells of what is considered not to be fiction.

NOTES

- 1 Pierre Menard, *L'Écriture et le subconscient: psychanalyse et graphologie*, Paris, Librairie Félix Alcan, 1931.
- 2 Mac Williams, "Zoroastrian and Zurvanite Symbolism in 'Las ruinas circulares,'" *Variaciones Borges*, 25 (2008), 115-35.
- 3 Daniel Balderston, *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1993.
- 4 John T. Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges and the Analytic Detective Story*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.
- 5 Perhaps using as tools the Fishburn and Hughes, *Dictionary of Borges*, and the