

I

I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia. The mirror troubled the depths of a corridor in a country house on Gaona Street in Ramos Mejia; the encyclopedia is fallaciously called *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* (New York, 1917) and is a literal but delinquent reprint of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1902. The event took place some five years ago. Bioy Casares had had dinner with me that evening and we became lengthily engaged in a vast polemic concerning the composition of a novel in the first person, whose narrator would omit or disfigure the facts and indulge in various contradictions which would permit a few readers - very few readers - to perceive an atrocious or banal reality. From the remote depths of the corridor, the mirror spied upon us. We discovered (such a discovery is inevitable in the late hours of the night) that mirrors hare something monstrous about them. Then Bioy Casares recalled that one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar had declared that mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number or men. I asked him the origin of this memorable observation and he answered that it was reproduced in *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, in its article on Uqbar. The house (which we had rented furnished) had a set of this work. On the last pages of Volume XLVI we found an article on Upsala; on the first pages of Volume XLVII, one on Ural-Altai Languages, but not a word about Uqbar. Bioy, a bit taken aback, consulted the volumes of the index. In vain he exhausted all of the imaginable spellings: Ukbar, Uebar, Ooqbar, Ookbar, Oukbahr... Before leaving, he told me that it was a region of Iraq or of Asia Minor. I must confess that I agreed with some discomfort. I conjectured that this undocumented country and its anonymous heresiarch were a fiction devised by Bioy's modesty in order to justify a statement. The fruitless examination of one of Justus Perthes' atlases fortified my doubt.

The following day, Bioy called me from Buenos Aries. He told me he had before him the article on Uqbar, in volume XLVI of the encyclopedia. The heresiarch's name was not forthcoming, but there was a note on his doctrine, formulated in words almost identical to those he had repeated, though perhaps literally inferior. He had recalled: *Copulation and mirrors are abominable*. 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*. I told him, in all truthfulness, that I should like to see that article. A few days later he brought it. This surprised me, since the scrupulous cartographical indices of Ritter's *Erdkunde* were plentifully ignorant of the name Uqbar.

The tome Bioy brought was, in fact, Volume XLVI of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. On the half-title page and the spine, the alphabetical marking (Tor-Ups) was that of our copy but, instead of 917, it contained 921 pages. These four additional pages made up the article on Uqbar, which (as the reader will have noticed) was not indicated by the alphabetical marking. We later determined that there was no other difference between the volumes. Both of them (as I believe I have indicated) are reprints of the tenth *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Bioy had acquired his copy at some sale or other.

We read the article with some care. The passage recalled by Bioy was perhaps the only surprising one. The rest of it seemed very plausible, quite in keeping with the general tone of the work and (as is natural) a bit boring. Reading it over again, we discovered beneath its rigorous prose a fundamental vagueness. Of the fourteen names which figured in the geographical part, we only recognized three - Khorasan, Armenia, Erzerum - interpolated in the text in an ambiguous way. Of the historical names, only one: the impostor magician Smerdis, invoked more as a metaphor. The note seemed to fix the boundaries of Uqbar, but its nebulous reference points were rivers and craters and mountain ranges of that same region. We read, for example, that the lowlands of Tsai Khaldun and the Axa Delta marked the southern frontier and that on the islands of the delta wild horses procreate. All this, on the first part of page 918. In the historical section (page 920) we learned that as a result of the religious persecutions of the thirteenth century, the orthodox believers sought refuge on these islands, where to this day their obelisks remain and where it is not uncommon to unearth their stone mirrors. The section on Language and Literature was brief. Only one trait is worthy of recollection: it noted that the literature of Uqbar was one of fantasy and that its epics and legends never referred to reality, but to the two imaginary regions of Mlejnas and Tlön... The bibliography enumerated four volumes which we have not yet found, though the third - Silas Haslam: *History of the Land Called Uqbar*, 1874 - figures in the catalogs of Bernard Quartich's book shop (1). The first, *Lesbare und lesenswerthe Bemerkungen uber das Land Ukkbar in Klein-Asien*, dates from 1641 and is the work of Johannes Valentinus Andrea. This fact is significant; a few years later, I came upon that name in the unsuspected pages of De Quincey (*Writings*, Volume XIII) and learned that it belonged to a German theologian who, in the early seventeenth century, described the imaginary community of Rosae Crucis - a community that others founded later, in imitation of what he had prefigured.

That night we visited the National Library. In vain we exhausted atlases, catalogs, annuals of geographical societies, travelers' and historians' memoirs: no one had ever been in Uqbar. Neither did the general index of Bioy's encyclopedia register that name. The following day, Carlos Mastronardi (to whom I had related the matter) noticed the black and gold covers of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* in a bookshop on Corrientes and Talcahuano... He entered and examined Volume XLVI. Of course, he did not find the slightest indication of Uqbar.

## II

Some limited and waning memory of Herbert Ashe, an engineer of the southern railways, persists in the hotel at Adroque, amongst the effusive honeysuckles and in the illusory depths of the mirrors. In his lifetime, he suffered from unreality, as do so many Englishmen; once dead, he is not even the ghost he was then. He was tall and listless and his tired rectangular beard had once been red. I understand he was a widower, without children. Every few years he would go to England, to visit (I judge from some photographs he showed us) a sundial and a few oaks. He and my father had entered into one of those close (the adjective is excessive) English friendships that begin by excluding confidences and very soon dispense with dialog. They used to carry out an exchange of books and newspapers and engage in taciturn chess games... I remember him in the hotel corridor, with a mathematics book in his hand, sometimes looking at the irrecoverable colors of the sky. One afternoon, we spoke of the duodecimal system of numbering (in which twelve is written as 10). Ashe said that he was converting some kind of tables from the duodecimal to the sexagesimal system (in which sixty is written as 10). He added that the task

had been entrusted to him by a Norwegian, in Rio Grande du Sul. We had known him for eight years and he had never mentioned in sojourn in that region... We talked of country life, of the *capangas*, of the Brazilian etymology of the word *gaucho* (which some old Uruguayans still pronounce *gaucho*) and nothing more was said - may God forgive me - of duodecimal functions. In September of 1937 (we were not at the hotel), Herbert Ashe died of a ruptured aneurysm. A few days before, he had received a sealed and certified package from Brazil. It was a book in large octavo. Ashe left it at the bar, where - months later - I found it. I began to leaf through it and experienced an astonished and airy feeling of vertigo which I shall not describe, for this is not the story of my emotions but of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius. On one of the nights of Islam called the Night of Nights, the secret doors of heaven open wide and the water in the jars becomes sweeter; if those doors opened, I would not feel what I felt that afternoon. The book was written in English and contained 1001 pages. On the yellow leather back I read these curious words which were repeated on the title page: *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön. Vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr*. There was no indication of date or place. On the first page and on a leaf of silk paper that covered one of the color plates there was stamped a blue oval with this inscription: *Orbis Tertius*. Two years before I had discovered, in a volume of a certain pirated encyclopedia, a superficial description of a nonexistent country; now chance afforded me something more precious and arduous. Now I held in my hands a vast methodical fragment of an unknown planet's entire history, with its architecture and its playing cards, with the dread of its mythologies and the murmur of its languages, with its emperors and its seas, with its minerals and its birds and its fish, with its algebra and its fire, with its theological and metaphysical controversy. And all of it articulated, coherent, with no visible doctrinal intent or tone of parody.

In the "Eleventh Volume" which I have mentioned, there are allusions to preceding and succeeding volumes. In an article in the N. R. F. which is now classic, Nestor Ibarra has denied the existence of those companion volumes; Ezequiel Martínez Estrada and Drieu La Rochelle have refuted that doubt, perhaps victoriously. The fact is that up to now the most diligent inquiries have been fruitless. In vain we have upended the libraries of the two Americas and of Europe. Alfonso Reyes, tired of these subordinate sleuthing procedures, proposes that we should all undertake the task of reconstructing the many and weighty tomes that are lacking: *ex ungue leonem*. He calculates, half in earnest and half jokingly, that a generation of *tlönistas* should be sufficient. This venturesome computation brings us back to the fundamental problem: Who are the inventors of Tlön? The plural is inevitable, because the hypothesis of a lone inventor - an infinite Leibniz laboring away darkly and modestly - has been unanimously discounted. It is conjectured that this brave new world is the work of a secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebraists, moralists, painters, geometers... directed by an obscure man of genius. Individuals mastering these diverse disciplines are abundant, but not so those capable of inventiveness and less so those capable of subordinating that inventiveness to a rigorous and systematic plan. This plan is so vast that each writer's contribution is infinitesimal. At first it was believed that Tlön was a mere chaos, and irresponsible license of the imagination; now it is known that is a cosmos and that the intimate laws which govern it have been formulated, at least provisionally. Let it suffice for me to recall that the apparent contradictions of the Eleventh Volume are the fundamental basis for the proof that the other volumes exist, so lucid and exact is the order observed in it. The popular magazines, with pardonable excess, have spread news of the zoology and topography of Tlön; I think its transparent tiger and towers of blood perhaps do not merit the continued attention of *all*

men. I shall venture to request a few minutes to expound its concept of the universe.

Hume noted for all time that Berkeley's arguments did not admit the slightest refutation nor did they cause the slightest conviction. This dictum is entirely correct in its application to the earth, but entirely false in Tlön. The nations of this planet are congenitally idealist. Their language and the derivations of their language - religion, letters, metaphysics - all presuppose idealism. The world for them is not a concourse of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial. There are no nouns in Tlön's conjectural *Ursprache*, from which the "present" languages and the dialects are derived: there are impersonal verbs, modified by monosyllabic suffixes (or prefixes) with an adverbial value. For example: there is no word corresponding to the word "moon," but there is a verb which in English would be "to moon" or "to moonate." "The moon rose above the river" is *hlor u fang axaxaxas mlo*, or literally: "upward behind the onstreaming it mooned."

The preceding applies to the languages of the southern hemisphere. In those of the northern hemisphere (on whose *Ursprache* there is very little data in the Eleventh Volume) the prime unit is not the verb, but the monosyllabic adjective. The noun is formed by an accumulation of adjectives. They do not say "moon," but rather "round airy-light on dark" or "pale-orange-of-the-sky" or any other such combination. In the example selected the mass of adjectives refers to a real object, but this is purely fortuitous. The literature of this hemisphere (like Meinong's subsistent world) abounds in ideal objects, which are convoked and dissolved in a moment, according to poetic needs. At times they are determined by mere simultaneity. There are objects composed of two terms, one of visual and another of auditory character: the color of the rising sun and the faraway cry of a bird. There are objects of many terms: the sun and the water on a swimmer's chest, the vague tremulous rose color we see with our eyes closed, the sensation of being carried along by a river and also by sleep. These second-degree objects can be combined with others; through the use of certain abbreviations, the process is practically infinite. There are famous poems made up of one enormous word. This word forms a *poetic object* created by the author. The fact that no one believes in the reality of nouns paradoxically causes their number to be unending. The languages of Tlön's northern hemisphere contain all the nouns of the Indo-European languages - and many others as well.

It is no exaggeration to state that the classic culture of Tlön comprises only one discipline: psychology. All others are subordinated to it. I have said that the men of this planet conceive the universe as a series of mental processes which do not develop in space but successively in time. Spinoza ascribes to his inexhaustible divinity the attributes of extension and thought; no one in Tlön would understand the juxtaposition of the first (which is typical only of certain states) and the second - which is a perfect synonym of the cosmos. In other words, they do not conceive that the spatial persists in time. The perception of a cloud of smoke on the horizon and then of the burning field and then of the half-extinguished cigarette that produced the blaze is considered an example of association of ideas.

This monism or complete idealism invalidates all science. If we explain (or judge) a fact, we connect it with another; such linking, in Tlön, is a later state of the subject which cannot affect or illuminate the previous state. Every mental state is irreducible: there mere fact of naming it - i.e., of classifying it - implies a falsification. From which it can be deduced that there are no sciences

on Tlön, not even reasoning. The paradoxical truth is that they do exist, and in almost uncountable number. The same thing happens with philosophies as happens with nouns in the northern hemisphere. The fact that every philosophy is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has caused them to multiply. There is an abundance of incredible systems of pleasing design or sensational type. The metaphysicians of Tlön do not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding. They judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature. They know that a system is nothing more than the subordination of all aspects of the universe to any one such aspect. Even the phrase "all aspects" is rejectable, for it supposes the impossible addition of the present and of all past moments. Neither is it licit to use the plural "past moments," since it supposes another operation... One of the schools of Tlön goes so far as to negate time: it reasons that the present is indefinite, that the future has no reality other than as a present memory (2). Another school declares that *all time* has already transpired and that our life is only the crepuscular and no doubt falsified an mutilated memory or reflection of an irrecoverable process. Another, that the history of the universe - and in it our lives and the most tenuous detail of our lives - is the scripture produced by a subordinate god in order to communicate with a demon. Another, that the universe is comparable to those cryptographs in which not all the symbols are valid and that only what happens every three hundred nights is true. Another, that while we sleep here, we are awake elsewhere and that in this way every man is two men.

Amongst the doctrines of Tlön, none has merited the scandalous reception accorded to materialism. Some thinkers have formulated it with less clarity than fervor, as one might put forth a paradox. In order to facilitate the comprehension of this inconceivable thesis, a heresiarch of the eleventh century (3) devised the sophism of the nine copper coins, whose scandalous renown is in Tlön equivalent to that of the Eleatic paradoxes. There are many versions of this "specious reasoning," which vary the number of coins and the number of discoveries; the following is the most common:

*On Tuesday, X crosses a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds in the road four coins, somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain. On Friday, Z discovers three coins in the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the corridor of his house. The heresiarch would deduce from this story the reality - i.e., the continuity - of the nine coins which were recovered. It is absurd (he affirmed) to imagine that four of the coins have not existed between Tuesday and Thursday, three between Tuesday and Friday afternoon, two between Tuesday and Friday morning. It is logical to think that they have existed - at least in some secret way, hidden from the comprehension of men - at every moment of those three periods.*

The language of Tlön resists the formulation of this paradox; most people did not even understand it. The defenders of common sense at first did no more than negate the veracity of the anecdote. They repeated that it was a verbal fallacy, based on the rash application of two neologisms not authorized by usage and alien to all rigorous thought: the verbs "find" and "lose," which beg the question, because they presuppose the identity of the first and of the last nine coins. They recalled that all nouns (man, coin, Thursday, Wednesday, rain) have only a metaphorical value. They denounced the treacherous circumstance "somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain," which presupposes what is trying to be demonstrated: the persistence of the four coins from Tuesday to Thursday. They explained that *equality* is one thing and *identity*

another, and formulated a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*: the hypothetical case of nine men who on nine nights suffer a severe pain. Would it not be ridiculous - they questioned - to pretend that this pain is one and the same? They said that the heresiarch was prompted only by the blasphemous intention of attributing the divine category of *being* to some simple coins and that at times he negated plurality and at other times did not. They argued: if equality implies identity, one would also have to admit that the nine coins are one.

Unbelievably, these refutations were not definitive. A hundred years after the problem was stated, a thinker no less brilliant than the heresiarch but of orthodox tradition formulated a very daring hypothesis. This happy conjecture affirmed that there is only one subject, that this indivisible subject is every being in the universe and that these beings are the organs and masks of the divinity. X is Y and is Z. Z discovers three coins because he remembers that X lost them; X finds two in the corridor because he remembers that the others have been found... The Eleventh Volume suggests that three prime reasons determined the complete victory of this idealist pantheism. The first, its repudiation of solipsism; the second, the possibility of preserving the psychological basis of the sciences; the third, the possibility of preserving the cult of the gods. Schopenhauer (the passionate and lucid Schopenhauer) formulates a very similar doctrine in the first volume of *Parerga und Paralipomena*.

The geometry of Tlön comprises two somewhat different disciplines: the visual and the tactile. The latter corresponds to our own geometry and is subordinated to the first. The basis of visual geometry is the surface, not the point. This geometry disregards parallel lines and declares that man in his movement modifies the forms which surround him. The basis of its arithmetic is the notion of indefinite numbers. They emphasize the importance of the concepts of greater and lesser, which our mathematicians symbolize as  $>$  and  $<$ . They maintain that the operation of counting modifies the quantities and converts them from indefinite into definite sums. The fact that several individuals who count the same quantity would obtain the same result is, for the psychologists, an example of association of ideas or of a good exercise of memory. We already know that in Tlön the subject of knowledge is on and eternal.

In literary practices the idea of a single subject is also all-powerful. It is uncommon for books to be signed. The concept of plagiarism does not exist: it has been established that all works are the creation of one author, who is atemporal and anonymous. The critics often invent authors: they select two dissimilar works - the *Tao Te Ching* and the *1001 Nights*, say - attribute them to the same writer and then determine most scrupulously the psychology of this interesting *homme de lettres*...

Their books are also different. Works of fiction contain a single plot, with all its imaginable permutations. Those of a philosophical nature invariably include both the thesis and the antithesis, the rigorous pro and con of a doctrine. A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete.

Centuries and centuries of idealism have not failed to influence reality. In the most ancient regions of Tlön, the duplication of lost objects is not infrequent. Two persons look for a pencil; the first finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but closer to his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hronir* and are, though awkward in form,

somewhat longer. Until recently, the *Hronir* were the accidental products of distraction and forgetfulness. It seems unbelievable that their methodical production dates back scarcely a hundred years, but this is what the Eleventh Volume tells us. The first efforts were unsuccessful. However, the *modus operandi* merits description. The director of one of the state prisons told his inmates that there were certain tombs in an ancient river bed and promised freedom to whoever might make an important discovery. During the months preceding the excavation the inmates were shown photographs of what they were to find. This first effort proved that expectation and anxiety can be inhibitory; a week's work with pick and shovel did not manage to unearth anything in the way of a *hron* except a rusty wheel of a period posterior to the experiment. But this was kept in secret and the process was repeated later in four schools. In three of them failure was almost complete; in a fourth (whose director died accidentally during the first excavations) the students unearthed - or produced - a gold mask, an archaic sword, two or three clay urns and the moldy and mutilated torso of a king whose chest bore an inscription which it has not yet been possible to decipher. Thus was discovered the unreliability of witnesses who knew of the experimental nature of the search... Mass investigations produce contradictory objects; now individual and almost improvised jobs are preferred. The methodical fabrication of *hronir* (says the Eleventh Volume) has performed prodigious services for archaeologists. It has made possible the interrogation and even the modification of the past, which is now no less plastic and docile than the future. Curiously, the *hronir* of second and third degree - the *hronir* derived from another *hron*, those derived from the *hron* of a *hron* - exaggerate the aberrations of the initial one; those of fifth degree are almost uniform; those of ninth degree become confused with those of the second; in those of the eleventh there is a purity of line not found in the original. The process is cyclical: the *hron* of the twelfth degree begins to fall off in quality. Stranger and more pure than any *hron* is, at times, the *ur*: the object produced through suggestion, educed by hope. The great golden mask I have mentioned is an illustrious example.

Things became duplicated in Tlön; they also tend to become effaced and lose their details when they are forgotten. A classic example is the doorway which survived so long it was visited by a beggar and disappeared at his death. At times some birds, a horse, have saved the ruins of an amphitheater.

*Postscript* (1947). I reproduce the preceding article just as it appeared in the *Anthology of Fantastic Literature* (1940), with no omission other than that of a few metaphors and a kind of sarcastic summary which now seems frivolous. So many things have happened since then... I shall do no more than recall them here.

In March of 1941 a letter written by Gunnary Erfjord was discovered in a book by Hinton which had belonged to Herbert Ashe. The envelope bore a cancellation from Ouro Preto; the letter completely elucidated the mystery of Tlön. Its text corroborated the hypotheses of Martinez Estrada. One night in Lucerne or in London, in the early seventeenth century, the splendid history has its beginning. A secret and benevolent society (amongst whose members were Dalgarno and later George Berkeley) arose to invent a country. Its vague initial program included "hermetic studies," philanthropy and the cabala. From this first period dates the curious book by Andrea. After a few years of secret conclaves and premature syntheses it was understood that one generation was not sufficient to give articulate form to a country. They resolved that each of the masters should elect a disciple who would continue his work. This

hereditary arrangement prevailed; after an interval of two centuries the persecuted fraternity sprang up again in America. In 1824, in Memphis (Tennessee), one of its affiliates conferred with the ascetic millionaire Ezra Buckley. The latter, somewhat disdainfully, let him speak - and laughed at the plan's modest scope. He told the agent that in America it was absurd to invent a country and proposed the invention of a planet. To this gigantic idea he added another, a product of his nihilism (4): that of keeping the enormous enterprise a secret. At that time the twenty volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* were circulating in the United States; Buckley suggested that a methodical encyclopedia of the imaginary planet be written. He was to leave them his mountains of gold, his navigable rivers, his pasture lands roamed by cattle and buffalo, his Negroes, his brothels and his dollars, on one condition: "The work will make no pact with the impostor Jesus Christ." Buckley did not believe in God, but he wanted to demonstrate to this nonexistent God that mortal man was capable of conceiving a world. Buckley was poisoned in Baton Rouge in 1828; in 1914 the society delivered to its collaborators, some three hundred in number, the last volume of the First Encyclopedia of Tlön. The edition was a secret one; its forty volumes (the vastest undertaking ever carried out by man) would be the basis for another more detailed edition, written not in English but in one of the languages of Tlön. This revision of an illusory world, was called, provisionally, *Orbis Tertius* and one of its modest demiurghi was Herbert Ashe, whether as an agent of Gunnar Erfjord or as an affiliate, I do not know. His having received a copy of the Eleventh Volume would seem to favor the latter assumption. But what about the others?

In 1942 events became more intense. I recall one of the first of these with particular clarity and it seems that I perceived then something of its premonitory character. It happened in an apartment on Laprida Street, facing a high and light balcony which looked out toward the sunset. Princess Faucigny Lucinge had received her silverware from Pointiers. From the vast depths of a box embellished with foreign stamps, delicate immobile objects emerged: silver from Utrecht and Paris covered with hard heraldic fauna, and a samovar. Amongst them - with the perceptible and tenuous tremor of a sleeping bird - a compass vibrated mysteriously. The princess did not recognize it. Its blue needle longed from magnetic north; its metal case was concave in shape; the letters around its edge corresponded to one of the alphabets of Tlön. Such was the first intrusion of this fantastic world into the world of reality.

I am still troubled by the stroke of chance which made me witness of the second intrusion as well. It happened some months later, at a country store owned by a Brazilian in Cuchilla Negra. Amorim and I were returning from Sant' Anna. The River Tacuarembó had flooded and we were obliged to sample (and endure) the proprietor's rudimentary hospitality. He provided us with some creaking cots in a large room cluttered with barrels and hides. We went to bed, but were kept from sleeping until dawn by the drunken ravings of an unseen neighbor, who intermingled inextricable insults with snatches of *milongas* - or rather with snatches of the same *milonga*. As might be supposed, we attributed this insistent uproar to the store owner's fiery cane liquor. By daybreak, the man was dead in the hallway. The roughness of his voice had deceived us: he was only a youth. In his delirium a few coins had fallen from his belt, along with a cone of bright metal, the size of a die. In vain a boy tried to pick up this cone. A man was scarcely able to raise it from the ground. It held in my hand for a few minutes; I remember that its weight was intolerable and that after it was removed, the feeling of oppressiveness remained. I also remember the exact circle it pressed into my palm. The sensation of a very small and at the same



time extremely heavy object produced a disagreeable impression of repugnance and fear. One of the local men suggested we throw it into the swollen river; Amorim acquired it for a few pesos. No one knew anything about the dead man, except that "he came from the border." These small, very heavy cones (made from a metal which is not of this world) are images of the divinity in certain regions of Tlön.

Here I bring the personal part of my narrative to a close. The rest is in the memory (if not in the hopes or fears) of all my readers. Let it suffice for me to recall or mention the following facts, with a mere brevity of words which the reflective recollection of all will enrich or amplify. Around 1944, a person doing research from the newspaper *The American* (of Nashville, Tennessee) brought to light in a Memphis library the forty volumes of the First Encyclopedia of Tlön. Even today there is a controversy over whether this discovery was accidental or whether it was permitted by the directors of the still nebulous *Orbis Tertius*. The latter is most likely. Some of the incredible aspects of the Eleventh Volume (for example, the multiplication of the *hronir*) have been eliminated or attenuated in the Memphis copies; it is reasonable to imagine that these omissions follow the plan of exhibiting a world which is not too incompatible with the real world. The dissemination of objects from Tlön over different countries would complement this plan... (5) The fact is that the international press infinitely proclaimed the "find." Manuals, anthologies, summaries, literal versions, authorized re-editions and pirated editions of the Greatest Work of Man flooded and still flood the earth. Almost immediately, reality yielded on more than one account. The truth is that it longed to yield. Ten years ago any symmetry with a resemblance of order - dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism - was sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly plant? It is useless to answer that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws - I translate: inhuman laws - which we never quite grasp. Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men.

The contact and the habit of Tlön have disintegrated this world. Enchanted by its rigor, humanity forgets over and again that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels. Already the schools have been invaded by the (conjectural) "primitive language" of Tlön; already the teaching of its harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has wiped out the one which governed in my childhood; already a fictitious past occupies in our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty - not even a that it is false. Numismatology, pharmacology and archeology have been reformed. I understand that biology and mathematics also await their avatars... A scattered dynasty of solitary men has changed the face of the world. Their task continues. If our forecasts are not in error, a hundred years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of the Second Encyclopedia of Tlön.

Then English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön. I pay no attention to all this and go on revising, in the still days at the Adroque hotel, an uncertain Quevedian translation (which I do not intend to publish) of Browne's *Urn Burial*.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Haslam has also published *A General History of Labyrinths*.

<sup>2</sup> Russell (*The Analysis of Mind*, 1921, page 159) supposes that the planet has been created a few minutes ago, furnished with a humanity that "remembers" an illusory past.

<sup>3</sup> A century, according to the duodecimal system, signifies a period of a hundred and forty-four years.

<sup>4</sup> Today, one of the churches of Tlön Platonically maintains that a certain pain, a certain greenish tint of yellow, a certain temperature, a certain sound, are the only reality. All men, in the vertiginous moment of coitus, are the same man. All men who repeat a line from Shakespeare *are* William Shakespeare.

<sup>5</sup> There remains, of course, the problem of the *material* of some objects.

Pierre Menard Author of the Quixote  
by Jorge Luis Borges

## I

The *visible* work left by this novelist is easily and briefly enumerated. Impardonable, therefore, are the omissions and additions perpetrated by Madame Henri Bachelier in a fallacious catalogue which a certain daily, whose *Protestant* tendency is no secret, has had the inconsideration to inflict upon its deplorable readers—though these be few and Calvinist, if not Masonic and circumcised. The true friends of Menard have viewed this catalogue with alarm and even with a certain melancholy. One might say that only yesterday we gathered before his final monument, amidst the lugubrious cypresses, and already Error tries to tarnish his Memory . . . Decidedly, a brief rectification is unavoidable.

I am aware that it is quite easy to challenge my slight authority. I hope, however, that I shall not be prohibited from mentioning two eminent testimonies. The Baroness de Bacourt (at whose unforgettable *vendredis*. I had the honor of meeting the lamented poet) has seen fit to approve the pages which follow. The Countess de Bagnoregio, one of the most delicate spirits of the Principality of Monaco (and now of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, following her recent marriage to the international philanthropist Simon Kautzsch, who has been so inconsiderately slandered, alas! by the victims of his disinterested maneuvers) has sacrificed "to veracity and to death" (such were her words) the stately reserve which is her distinction, and, in an open letter published in the

magazine *Luxe* , concedes me her approval as well. These authorizations, I think, are not entirely insufficient.

I have said that Menard's visible work can be easily enumerated. Having examined with care his personal files, I find that they contain the following items:

- a) A Symbolist sonnet which appeared twice (with variants) in the review *La conqu*e (issues of March and October 1899).
- b) A monograph on the possibility of constructing a poetic vocabulary of concepts which would not be synonyms or periphrases of those which make up our everyday language, "but rather ideal objects created according to convention and essentially designed to satisfy poetic needs" (Nîmes, 1901).
- c) A monograph on "certain connections or affinities" between the thought of Descartes, Leibniz and John Wilkins (Nîmes, 1903).
- d) A monograph on Leibniz's *Characteristica universalis* (Nîmes 1904).
- e) A technical article on the possibility of improving the game of chess, eliminating one of the rook's pawns. Menard proposes, recommends, discusses and finally rejects this innovation.
- f) A monograph on Raymond Lully's *Ars magna generalis* (Nîmes, 1906).
- g) A translation, with prologue and notes, of Ruy López de Segura's *Libro de la invención liberal y arte del juego del axedrez* (Paris, 1907).
- h) The work sheets of a monograph on George Boole's symbolic logic.
- i) An examination of the essential metric laws of French prose, illustrated with examples taken from Saint-Simon (*Revue des langues romanes*, Montpellier, October 1909).
- j) A reply to Luc Durtain (who had denied the existence of such laws), illustrated with examples from Luc Durtain (*Revue des langues romanes*, Montpellier, December 1909).
- k) A manuscript translation of the *Aguja de navegar cultos* of Quevedo, entitled *La boussole des précieux*.
- l) A preface to the Catalogue of an exposition of lithographs by Carolus Hourcade (Nîmes, 1914).

m) The work *Les problèmes d'un problème* (Paris, 1917), which discusses, in chronological order, the different solutions given to the illustrious problem of Achilles and the tortoise. Two editions of this book have appeared so far; the second bears as an epigraph Leibniz's recommendation "*Ne craignez point, monsieur, la tortue*" and revises the chapters dedicated to Russell and Descartes.

n) A determined analysis of the "syntactical customs" of Toulet (N. R. F. , March 1921). Menard—I recall—declared that censure and praise are sentimental operations which have nothing to do with literary criticism.

o) A transposition into alexandrines of Paul Valéry's *Le cimetière marin* (N. R. F. , January 1928).

p) An invective against Paul Valéry, in the *Papers for the Suppression of Reality* of Jacques Reboul. (This invective, we might say parenthetically, is the exact opposite of his true opinion of Valéry. The latter understood it as such and their old friendship was not endangered.)

q) A "definition" of the Countess de Bagnoregio, in the "victorious volume"—the locution is Gabriele d'Annunzio's, another of its collaborators—published annually by this lady to rectify the inevitable falsifications of journalists and to present "to the world and to Italy" an authentic image of her person, so often exposed (by very reason of her beauty and her activities) to erroneous or hasty interpretations.

r) A cycle of admirable sonnets for the Baroness de Bacourt (1934).

s) A manuscript list of verses which owe their efficacy to their punctuation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Madame Henri Bachelier also lists a literal translation of Quevedo's literal translation of the *Introduction à la vie dévote* of St. Francis of Sales. There are no traces of such a work in Menard's library. It must have been a jest of our friend, misunderstood by the lady. This, then, is the *visible* work of Menard, in chronological order (with no omission other than a few vague sonnets of circumstance written for the hospitable, or avid, album of Madame Henri Bachelier). I turn now to his other work: the subterranean, the interminably heroic, the peerless. And—such are the capacities of man!—the unfinished. This work, perhaps the most significant of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of chapter twenty-two. I know

such an affirmation seems an absurdity; to justify this “absurdity” is the primordial object of this note.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>I also had the secondary intention of sketching a personal portrait of Pierre Menard. But how could I dare to compete with the golden pages which, I am told, the Baroness de Bacourt is preparing or with the delicate and punctual pencil of Carolus Hourcade?

Two texts of unequal value inspired this undertaking. One is that philological fragment by Novalis—the one numbered 2005 in the Dresden edition—which outlines the theme of a *total* identification with a given author. The other is one of those parasitic books which situate Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Cannebière or Don Quixote on Wall Street. Like all men of good taste, Menard abhorred these useless carnivals, fit only—as he would say—to produce the plebeian pleasure of anachronism or (what is worse) to enthrall us with the elementary idea that all epochs are the same or are different. More interesting, though contradictory and superficial of execution, seemed to him the famous plan of Daudet: to conjoin the Ingenious Gentleman and his squire in *one* figure, which was Tartarin . . . Those who have insinuated that Menard dedicated his life to writing a contemporary *Quixote* calumniate his illustrious memory.

He did not want to compose another Quixote—which is easy—but *the Quixote itself*. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.

“My intent is no more than astonishing,” he wrote me the 30th of September, 1934, from Bayonne. “The final term in a theological or metaphysical demonstration—the objective world, God, causality, the forms of the universe—is no less previous and common than my famed novel. The only difference is that the philosophers publish the intermediary stages of their labor in pleasant volumes and I have resolved to do away with those stages.” In truth, not one worksheet remains to bear witness to his years of effort.

The first method he conceived was relatively simple. Know Spanish well, recover the Catholic faith, fight against the Moors or the Turk, forget the history of Europe between the years 1602 and 1918, be Miguel de Cervantes. Pierre Menard studied this procedure (I know he attained a

fairly accurate command of seventeenth-century Spanish) but discarded it as too easy. Rather as impossible! my reader will say. Granted, but the undertaking was impossible from the very beginning and of all the impossible ways of carrying it out, this was the least interesting. To be, in the twentieth century, a popular novelist of the seventeenth seemed to him a diminution. To be, in some way, Cervantes and reach the *Quixote* seemed less arduous to him—and, consequently, less interesting—than to go on being Pierre Menard and reach the *Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard. (This conviction, we might say in passing, made him omit the autobiographical prologue to the second part of *Don Quixote*. To include that prologue would have been to create another character—Cervantes—but it would also have meant presenting the *Quixote* in terms of that character and not of Menard. The latter, naturally, declined that facility.) “My undertaking is not difficult, essentially,” I read in another part of his letter. “I should only have to be immortal to carry it out.” Shall I confess that I often imagine he did finish it and that I read the *Quixote*—all of it—as if Menard had conceived it? Some nights past, while leafing through chapter XXVI—never essayed by him—I recognized our friend’s style and something of his voice in this exceptional phrase: “the river nymphs and the dolorous and humid Echo.” This happy conjunction of a spiritual and a physical adjective brought to my mind a verse by Shakespeare which we discussed one afternoon:

Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk . . .

But why precisely the *Quixote*? our reader will ask. Such a preference, in a Spaniard, would not have been inexplicable; but it is, no doubt, in a Symbolist from Nîmes, essentially a devoté of Poe, who engendered Baudelaire, who engendered Mallarmé, who engendered Valéry, who engendered Edmond Teste. The aforementioned letter illuminates this point. “*The Quixote*,” clarifies Menard, “interests me deeply, but it does not seem—how shall I say it?—inevitable. I cannot imagine the universe without Edgar Allan Poe’s exclamation: Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted! or without the *Bateau ivre* or the *Ancient Mariner*, but I am quite capable of imagining it without the *Quixote*. (I speak, naturally, of my personal capacity and not of those works’ historical resonance.) The *Quixote* is a contingent book; the *Quixote* is unnecessary. I can premeditate writing it, I can write it, without falling into a tautology. When I was ten or twelve years old, I read it, perhaps in its entirety. Later, I have reread closely certain chapters, those which I shall not attempt for the time being. I have also gone through the interludes, the plays, the *Galatea*, the exemplary novels, the undoubtedly laborious tribulations of Persiles and Segismunda and the *Viaje del Parnaso*. . . My general recollection of the *Quixote*, simplified by forgetfulness and indifference,

can well equal the imprecise and prior image of a book not yet written. Once that image (which no one can legitimately deny me) is postulated, it is certain that my problem is a good bit more difficult than Cervantes' was. My obliging predecessor did not refuse the collaboration of chance: he composed his immortal work somewhat *à la diable*, carried along by the inertias of language and invention. I have taken on the mysterious duty of reconstructing literally his spontaneous work. My solitary game is governed by two polar laws. The first permits me to essay variations of a formal or psychological type; the second obliges me to sacrifice these variations to the "original" text and reason out this annihilation in an irrefutable manner . . . To these artificial hindrances, another—of a congenital kind—must be added. To compose the *Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century was a reasonable undertaking, necessary and perhaps even unavoidable; at the beginning of the twentieth, it is almost impossible. It is not in vain that three hundred years have gone by, filled with exceedingly complex events. Amongst them, to mention only one, is the *Quixote* itself."

In spite of these three obstacles, Menard's fragmentary *Quixote* is more subtle than Cervantes'. The latter, in a clumsy fashion, opposes to the fictions of chivalry the tawdry provincial reality of his country; Menard selects as his "reality" the land of Carmen during the century of Lepanto and Lope de Vega. What a series of *espagnolades* that selection would have suggested to Maurice Barrès or Dr. Rodríguez Larreta! Menard eludes them with complete naturalness. In his work there are no gypsy flourishes or conquistadors or mystics or Philip the Seconds or *autos da fé*. He neglects or eliminates local color. This disdain points to a new conception of the historical novel. This disdain condemns *Salammbô*, with no possibility of appeal.

It is no less astounding to consider isolated chapters. For example, let us examine Chapter XXXVIII of the first part, "which treats of the curious discourse of Don Quixote on arms and letters." It is well known that Don Quixote (like Quevedo in an analogous and later passage in *La hora de todos*) decided the debate against letters and in favor of arms. Cervantes was a former soldier: his verdict is understandable. But that Pierre Menard's Don Quixote—a contemporary of *La trahison des clercs* and Bertrand Russell—should fall prey to such nebulous sophistries! Madame Bachelier has seen here an admirable and typical subordination on the part of the author to the hero's psychology; others (not at all perspicaciously), a *transcription* of the *Quixote*; the Baroness de Bacourt, the influence of Nietzsche. To this third interpretation (which I judge to be irrefutable) I am not sure I dare to add a fourth, which concords very well with the almost divine modesty of Pierre Menard: his resigned or ironical habit of propagating ideas which were the strict reverse of those he preferred. (Let us recall once more his diatribe against Paul Valéry in Jacques Reboul's

ephemeral Surrealist sheet.) Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More ambiguous, his detractors will say, but ambiguity is richness.)

It is a revelation to compare Menard's *Don Quixote* with Cervantes'. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):

. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor. Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "lay genius" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

History, the *mother* of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened. The final phrases—*exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor*—are brazenly pragmatic.

The contrast in style is also vivid. The archaic style of Menard—quite foreign, after all—suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time.

There is no exercise of the intellect which is not, in the final analysis, useless. A philosophical doctrine begins as a plausible description of the universe; with the passage of the years it becomes a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or a name—in the history of philosophy. In literature, this eventual caducity is even more notorious. The *Quixote*—Menard told me—was, above all, an entertaining book; now it is the occasion for patriotic toasts, grammatical insolence and obscene de luxe editions. Fame is a form of incomprehension, perhaps the worst.

There is nothing new in these nihilistic verifications; what is singular is the determination Menard derived from them. He decided to anticipate the vanity awaiting all man's efforts; he set himself to an undertaking which was exceedingly complex and, from the very beginning, futile. He dedicated his scruples and his sleepless nights to repeating an already extant book in an alien tongue. He multiplied draft upon draft, revised tenaciously and tore up thousands of manuscript pages.<sup>1</sup> He did not let



anyone examine these drafts and took care they should not survive him. In vain have I tried to reconstruct them.

<sup>1</sup> I remember his quadricular notebooks, his black crossed-out passages, his peculiar typographical symbols and his insect-like handwriting. In the afternoons he liked to go out for a walk around the outskirts of Nîmes; he would take a notebook with him and make a merry bonfire.

I have reflected that it is permissible to see in this “final” *Quixote* a kind of palimpsest, through which the traces—tenuous but not indecipherable—of our friend’s “previous” writing should be translucently visible. Unfortunately, only a second Pierre Menard, inverting the other’s work, would be able to exhume and revive those lost Troys . . .

“Thinking, analyzing, inventing (he also wrote me) are not anomalous acts; they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional performance of that function, to hoard ancient and alien thoughts, to recall with incredulous stupor that the *doctor universalis* thought, is to confess our laziness or our barbarity. Every man should be capable of all ideas and I understand that in the future this will be the case.”

Menard (perhaps without wanting to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution. This technique, whose applications are infinite, prompts us to go through the *Odyssey* as if it were posterior to the *Aeneid* and the book *Le jardin du Centaure* of Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the most placid works with adventure. To attribute the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce, is this not a sufficient renovation of its tenuous spiritual indications?

### **The Circular Ruins** **Jorge Luis Borges**

No one saw him disembark in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe sink into the sacred mud, but in a few days there was no one who did not know that the taciturn man came from the South and that his home had been one of those numberless villages upstream in the deeply cleft side of the mountain, where the Zend language has not been contaminated by Greek and where leprosy is infrequent. What is certain is that the grey man kissed the mud, climbed up the bank with pushing aside (probably, without feeling) the blades which were lacerating his flesh, and crawled, nauseated and bloodstained, up to the circular enclosure crowned with a stone

tiger or horse, which sometimes was the color of flame and now was that of ashes. This circle was a temple which had been devoured by ancient fires, profaned by the miasmal jungle, and whose god no longer received the homage of men. The stranger stretched himself out beneath the pedestal. He was awakened by the sun high overhead. He was not astonished to find that his wounds had healed; he closed his pallid eyes and slept, not through weakness of flesh but through determination of will. He knew that this temple was the place required for his invincible intent; he knew that the incessant trees had not succeeded in strangling the ruins of another propitious temple downstream which had once belonged to gods now burned and dead; he knew that his immediate obligation was to dream. Toward midnight he was awakened by the inconsolable shriek of a bird. Tracks of bare feet, some figs and a jug warned him that the men of the region had been spying respectfully on his sleep, soliciting his protection or afraid of his magic. He felt a chill of fear, and sought out a sepulchral niche in the dilapidated wall where he concealed himself among unfamiliar leaves.

The purpose which guided him was not impossible, though supernatural. He wanted to dream a man; he wanted to dream him in minute entirety and impose him on reality. This magic project had exhausted the entire expanse of his mind; if someone had asked him his name or to relate some event of his former life, he would not have been able to give an answer. This uninhabited, ruined temple suited him, for it is contained a minimum of visible world; the proximity of the workmen also suited him, for they took it upon themselves to provide for his frugal needs. The rice and fruit they brought him were nourishment enough for his body, which was consecrated to the sole task of sleeping and dreaming.

At first, his dreams were chaotic; then in a short while they became dialectic in nature. The stranger dreamed that he was in the center of a circular amphitheater which was more or less the burnt temple; clouds of taciturn students filled the tiers of seats; the faces of the farthest ones hung at a distance of many centuries and as high as the stars, but their features were completely precise. The man lectured his pupils on anatomy, cosmography, and magic: the faces listened anxiously and tried to answer understandingly, as if they guessed the importance of that examination which would redeem one of them from his condition of empty illusion and interpolate him into the real world. Asleep or awake, the man thought over the answers of his phantoms, did not allow himself to be deceived by imposters, and in certain perplexities he sensed a growing intelligence. He was seeking a soul worthy of participating in the universe.

After nine or ten nights he understood with a certain bitterness that he could expect nothing from those pupils who accepted his doctrine passively, but that he could expect something from those who occasionally dared to oppose him. The former group, although worthy of love and affection, could not ascend to the level of individuals; the latter pre-existed to a slightly greater degree. One afternoon (now afternoons were also given over to sleep, now he was only awake for a couple hours at daybreak) he dismissed the vast illusory student body for good and kept only one pupil. He was a taciturn, sallow boy, at times intractable, and whose sharp features resembled those of his dreamer. The brusque elimination of his fellow students did not disconcert him for long; after a few private lessons, his progress was enough to astound the teacher. Nevertheless, a catastrophe took place. One day, the man emerged from his sleep as if from a viscous desert, looked at the useless afternoon light which he immediately confused with the dawn, and understood that he had not dreamed. All that night and all day long, the intolerable lucidity of

insomnia fell upon him. He tried exploring the forest, to lose his strength; among the hemlock he barely succeeded in experiencing several short snatches of sleep, veined with fleeting, rudimentary visions that were useless. He tried to assemble the student body but scarcely had he articulated a few brief words of exhortation when it became deformed and was then erased. In his almost perpetual vigil, tears of anger burned his old eyes.

He understood that modeling the incoherent and vertiginous matter of which dreams are composed was the most difficult task that a man could undertake, even though he should penetrate all the enigmas of a superior and inferior order; much more difficult than weaving a rope out of sand or coining the faceless wind. He swore he would forget the enormous hallucination which had thrown him off at first, and he sought another method of work. Before putting it into execution, he spent a month recovering his strength, which had been squandered by his delirium. He abandoned all premeditation of dreaming and almost immediately succeeded in sleeping a reasonable part of each day. The few times that he had dreams during this period, he paid no attention to them. Before resuming his task, he waited until the moon's disk was perfect. Then, in the afternoon, he purified himself in the waters of the river, worshiped the planetary gods, pronounced the prescribed syllables of a mighty name, and went to sleep. He dreamed almost immediately, with his heart throbbing.

He dreamed that it was warm, secret, about the size of a clenched fist, and of a garnet color within the penumbra of a human body as yet without face or sex; during fourteen lucid nights he dreamt of it with meticulous love. Every night he perceived it more clearly. He did not touch it; he only permitted himself to witness it, to observe it, and occasionally to rectify it with a glance. He perceived it and lived it from all angles and distances. On the fourteenth night he lightly touched the pulmonary artery with his index finger, then the whole heart, outside and inside. He was satisfied with the examination. He deliberately did not dream for a night; he took up the heart again, invoked the name of a planet, and undertook the vision of another of the principle organs. Within a year he had come to the skeleton and the eyelids. The innumerable hair was perhaps the most difficult task. He dreamed an entire man--a young man, but who did not sit up or talk, who was unable to open his eyes. Night after night, the man dreamt him asleep.

In the Gnostic cosmosgonies, demiurges fashion a red Adam who cannot stand; as a clumsy, crude and elemental as this Adam of dust was the Adam of dreams forged by the wizard's nights. One afternoon, the man almost destroyed his entire work, but then changed his mind. (It would have been better had he destroyed it.) When he had exhausted all supplications to the deities of earth, he threw himself at the feet of the effigy which was perhaps a tiger or perhaps a colt and implored its unknown help. That evening, at twilight, he dreamt of the statue. He dreamt it was alive, tremulous: it was not an atrocious bastard of a tiger and a colt, but at the same time these two fiery creatures and also a bull, a rose, and a storm. This multiple god revealed to him that his earthly name was Fire, and that in this circular temple (and in others like it) people had once made sacrifices to him and worshiped him, and that he would magically animate the dreamed phantom, in such a way that all creatures, except Fire itself and the dreamer, would believe to be a man of flesh and blood. He commanded that once this man had been instructed in all the rites, he should be sent to the other ruined temple whose pyramids were still standing downstream, so that some voice would glorify him in that deserted edifice. In the dream of the man that dreamed, the dreamed one awoke.

The wizard carried out the orders he had been given. He devoted a certain length of time (which finally proved to be two years) to instructing him in the mysteries of the universe and the cult of fire. Secretly, he was pained at the idea of being separated from him. On the pretext of pedagogical necessity, each day he increased the number of hours dedicated to dreaming. He also remade the right shoulder, which was somewhat defective. At times, he was disturbed by the impression that all this had already happened . . . In general, his days were happy; when he closed his eyes, he thought: Now I will be with my son. Or, more rarely: The son I have engendered is waiting for me and will not exist if I do not go to him.

Gradually, he began accustoming him to reality. Once he ordered him to place a flag on a faraway peak. The next day the flag was fluttering on the peak. He tried other analogous experiments, each time more audacious. With a certain bitterness, he understood that his son was ready to be born--and perhaps impatient. That night he kissed him for the first time and sent him off to the other temple whose remains were turning white downstream, across many miles of inextricable jungle and marshes. Before doing this (and so that his son should never know that he was a phantom, so that he should think himself a man like any other) he destroyed in him all memory of his years of apprenticeship.

His victory and peace became blurred with boredom. In the twilight times of dusk and dawn, he would prostrate himself before the stone figure, perhaps imagining his unreal son carrying out identical rites in other circular ruins downstream; at night he no longer dreamed, or dreamed as any man does. His perceptions of the sounds and forms of the universe became somewhat pallid: his absent son was being nourished by these diminution of his soul. The purpose of his life had been fulfilled; the man remained in a kind of ecstasy. After a certain time, which some chronicles prefer to compute in years and others in decades, two oarsmen awoke him at midnight; he could not see their faces, but they spoke to him of a charmed man in a temple of the North, capable of walking on fire without burning himself. The wizard suddenly remembered the words of the god. He remembered that of all the creatures that people the earth, Fire was the only one who knew his son to be a phantom. This memory, which at first calmed him, ended by tormenting him. He feared lest his son should meditate on this abnormal privilege and by some means find out he was a mere simulacrum. Not to be a man, to be a projection of another man's dreams--what an incomparable humiliation, what madness! Any father is interested in the sons he has procreated (or permitted) out of the mere confusion of happiness; it was natural that the wizard should fear for the future of that son whom he had thought out entrail by entrail, feature by feature, in a thousand and one secret nights.

His misgivings ended abruptly, but not without certain forewarnings. First (after a long drought) a remote cloud, as light as a bird, appeared on a hill; then, toward the South, the sky took on the rose color of leopard's gums; then came clouds of smoke which rusted the metal of the nights; afterwards came the panic-stricken flight of wild animals. For what had happened many centuries before was repeating itself. The ruins of the sanctuary of the god of Fire was destroyed by fire. In a dawn without birds, the wizard saw the concentric fire licking the walls. For a moment, he thought of taking refuge in the water, but then he understood that death was coming to crown his old age and absolve him from his labors. He walked toward the sheets of flame. They did not bite his flesh, they caressed him and flooded him without heat or combustion. With

relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him.

### **The Lottery in Babylon (translated from the Spanish) by Jorge Luis Borges**

Like all men of Babylon, I have been proconsul; like them all, a slave; I have also known omnipotence, opprobrium, incarceration. Look: on my right hand is missing my index finger. Look: through this rent cape can be seen on my stomach a ruddy tattoo — it is the second symbol, Beth. On nights when the moon is full, this symbol confers unto me power over the men whose mark is Ghimel while rendering me subject to the men of Aleph, who on moonless nights must obey the men of Ghimel. In a cellar in the half-light of dawn, I have slit before a black altar the throats of sacred bulls. For an entire lunar year, I have been declared invisible: I would cry out and no one would respond, I would steal bread and I was not beheaded. I have known what the Greeks knew not: uncertainty. In a brass chamber, before the strangler's silencing scarf, hope has remained faithful; in the river of delights, panic stood steadfast. Heraclides Ponticus relates with admiration that Pythagoras recalled having been Pyrrhus, before him Euphorbus, and before him some other mortal; to recall analogous vicissitudes I need not find recourse in death, nor even imposture.

I owe this almost monstrous variety to an institution that other republics do not know, or which works imperfectly or secretly in them: the lottery. Into its history I have not delved; I know that the sages cannot manage to agree; I know of its powerful aims what a man not versed in astrology can know of the moon. I am of a vertiginous country where the lottery is a principal part of reality: until this very day, I have thought as little of it as I have the conduct of the inscrutable gods or of my own heart. Now, far from Babylon and its beloved customs, I think with some bewilderment of the lottery and of the blasphemous conjectures that the shrouded men murmur at twilight.

My father would recount that in ancient times — a question of centuries, of years? — the lottery in Babylon was a game with a plebeian character. He would relate (truthfully or not I cannot say) that barbers gave out rectangles made of bone or parchment and adorned with symbols in exchange for copper coins. In the full light of day, a drawing of lots would be held: the fortunate few would receive, without further corroboration by chance, money coined in silver. The procedure, as you can see, was simple.

Naturally, these 'lotteries' failed. Their moral virtue was nil. They did not appeal to all the faculties of man, only to his hope. In the face of the public's indifference, the merchants who founded these venal lotteries began to lose money. Someone tried something new: the interpolation of a few adverse fortunes amongst the many favourable. With this reform, the buyers of numbered rectangles ran the double chance of winning a sum of money or of paying a fine, sometimes considerable. This slight danger (for every thirty favourable numbers there was one adverse) awoke, as is natural, the interest of the public. The Babylonians flocked to the game. He who did not purchase fortunes was considered pusillanimous, a yellow-belly. With time, this justified contempt found a further target: along with he who did not play, he who had lost out and did not pay his fine was also disdained. The Company (as it had begun to be called by then) had to protect the interests of the winners, who could not collect their winnings if there

was lacking in the coffers the almost entire sum of the fines. Lawsuits were filed against the losers: the judge sentenced them to pay the original fine, plus court costs, or be put in jail for a time. So as to defraud the Company, they all opted for jail. From the daring of these few was born the source of the Company's almightiness: its ecclesiastical and metaphysical significance.

A short while later, the lottery reports omitted the listing of fines and limited themselves to publishing the days of prison that each adverse number was worth. This laconicism, almost unnoticed at the time, was of capital importance. *It was the first appearance of non-pecuniary elements in the lottery.* Success was grand. Urged on by the lottery's players, the Company was forced to increase the number of adverse fortunes.

It is widely known that the people of Babylon are devout followers of logic, and even of symmetry. To them, it was incoherent that the favourable numbers should result in rounded coins and the unfavourable in days and nights of incarceration. Some moralists reasoned that the possession of money did not always bring about happiness and that other forms of fortune are perhaps more immediate.

Another source of restlessness abounded in the down-at-heel neighbourhoods. The members of the sacerdotal college multiplied the stakes and rejoiced in the full range of hope's and of terror's vicissitudes; the poor, with an understandable or inevitable envy, knew themselves to be excluded from these notoriously delightful ups and downs. Everyone, rich and poor alike, had a justified yearning to participate equally in the lottery, which inspired an indignant agitation whose memory the years have not erased. Certain obstinate souls did not comprehend, or pretended not to comprehend, that they were dealing with a new order, a necessary historical stage... A slave stole a crimson ticket, a ticket that in the next drawing merited his having his tongue burnt to a crisp. The criminal code fixed the same penalty for a ticket's theft. A number of Babylonians argued that he deserved the red-hot iron for his thieving; others, more magnanimous, that the public executioner should apply the lottery's penalty as chance had so determined...

There were disturbances, there were lamentable effusions of blood; but the Babylonian people finally imposed their will and they achieved their generous ends against the opposition of the rich. Firstly, they forced the Company to assume full public power. (This unification was necessary given the vastness and complexity of the new operations.) Secondly, they made the lottery secret, general and free of charge. The mercenary sale of lots was abolished. Once initiated into the mysteries of Bel, all free men automatically took part in the sacred drawings of lots, all of which were held in the labyrinths of the god every sixty nights and determined each man's destiny until the subsequent drawing. The consequences were incalculable. A happy drawing could instigate one's elevation to the council of magi or the imprisonment of an enemy (well-known or private) or, in the peaceful dark of one's room, one's meeting the woman who has begun to make one fluster or who one was never expecting to see again; an adverse drawing: mutilation, a variety of infamies, death. Sometimes a single event — C's assassination in a tavern, B's mysterious apotheosis — was the brilliant result of thirty or forty drawings. Combining bets was difficult; we must remember, though, that the individuals of the Company were (and are) all-powerful and astute. In many cases, the knowledge that certain joys were simple fabrications of chance would have diminished their moral worth; to avoid this

inconvenience, agents of the Company made use of suggestion and magic. Their moves, their manipulations, were secret. To get at everybody's innermost hopes and fears, astrologers and spies were employed. There were certain stone lions, there was a sacred latrine called Qaphqa, there were fissures in a dusty aqueduct all of which, according to general opinion, led to the Company; persons malign or benevolent deposited exposés in these sites. An alphabetical archive collected these reports of varying veracity.

Incredibly, grumbling abounded. The Company, with its habitual discretion, did not reply directly. It preferred to scribble in the rubble of a mask factory a short line of reasoning which now forms part of the sacred scriptures. This doctrinal piece observed that the lottery is an interpolation of chance into the order of the world and that the acceptance of errors is not the contradiction of chance, but its corroboration. It observed also that those lions and the sacred squatting place, although not disclaimed by the Company (which did not renounce the right to consult them), functioned without official guarantee.

This declaration pacified the public's unease. It also had other effects, perhaps not foreseen by its author: it profoundly modified the spirit and the operations of the Company. There remains little time — we have been told that the ship is about to set sail — but I will try to explain.

As improbable as it may seem, nobody until then had attempted to produce a general theory of games. The Babylonian is not speculative. He reveres the dictates of chance, surrendering his life, his hopes, his panicked terror to them, but it never occurs to him to delve into their labyrinthine laws, nor the giratory spheres from which they are revealed. Nonetheless, the officious declaration that I have mentioned inspired many discussions of a juridico-mathematical nature. From one of them was born the following conjecture: if the lottery is an intensification of chance, its periodic infusion into the cosmos, would it not be desirable then for chance to intervene in all stages of the drawing and not only in one? Is it not ridiculous that chance should dictate that a person die while the circumstances of that death — its confidentiality, its publicity, its timing an hour or a century into the future — are not subject to chance? These eminently reasonable scruples prompted in the end a considerable reform whose complexities (aggravated by centuries of practice) are understood only by a handful of specialists; I will attempt to summarise them regardless, even though I do so only symbolically.

Let us imagine a first drawing, one which condemns a man to death. In order for the sentence to be realised, another drawing is held that proposes, say, nine possible executioners. Of these nine, four might initiate a third drawing that will give the name of the eventual executioner, two might replace the drawing's adverse result with a fortunate one (say, a treasure's discovery), another might exacerbate the sentence of death (that is, a sentence made more infamous or embellished with torture), still others might refuse to carry it out...

Such is the lottery's symbolic scheme. In reality, the number of drawings is infinite. No decision is final, each branch out into others. The ignorant suppose that infinite drawings require an infinite time; in reality, it is enough that time be infinitely divisible, as the famous parable of Achilles and the Tortoise demonstrates. This infinitude harmonises admirably with the sinuous numbers of Chance and the Celestial Archetype of the Lottery adored by Platonists...

A certain deformed echo of our ritual seems to have resounded along the Tiber: Aelius Lampridius, in his *Life of Antoninus Heliogabalus*, tells of how this emperor would write out on seashells the fortunes fated for his guests so that one would receive ten pounds of gold and another ten flies, ten dormice, ten bears. It is only right to recall that Heliogabalus was educated in Asia Minor, amongst the priests of his eponymous god.

There are also impersonal drawings without definite purposes: one will decree that a sapphire from Taprobana be thrown into the waters of the Euphrates; another, that a bird be released from atop a tower; another, that each century a grain of sand be removed (or added) to the innumerable found on the beach. Sometimes, the consequences are terrifying.

Under the beneficent influence of the Company, our customs are steeped in chance. The buyer of a dozen amphorae of Damascene wine would not be surprised if one were to contain a talisman or a viper; the scribe who draws up a contract very rarely fails to introduce some erroneous point; in this hasty declaration, I myself have embroidered a certain splendour, a certain atrocity; perhaps, too, a certain mysterious monotony...

Our historians, the orb's most perspicacious, have invented a method for correcting chance. It is well known that the operations of this method are (in general) trustworthy; although, naturally, they are not divulged without a measure of deceit. In any case, there is nothing so contaminated with fiction as the history of the Company...

A paleographic document, exhumed in a temple, could well be the result of a drawing from the previous day or the previous century. No book is published without some variation between copies. Scribes take a secret oath to omit, interpolate, vary. Indirect falsehood is also practiced.

The Company, with divine modesty, eludes all publicity. Its agents, as is only natural, are secret; the orders it continually (perhaps incessantly) issues out are no different to those lavishly spread by impostors. Besides, who would boast of being a mere impostor? The inebriate who improvises an absurd mandate, the dreamer who suddenly awakes and with his own bare hands strangles to death the woman who sleeps by his side — are they not, perhaps, carrying out a secret decision of the Company's? This silent working, comparable to God's, inspires all manner of conjecture. One such example abominably insinuates that the Company ceased to exist centuries ago and that the sacred disorder in our lives is purely hereditary, traditional; another considers the Company to be eternal and teaches that it will endure until the last night, when the last god will annihilate the world. Another declares that the Company is omnipotent but that it exerts its influence only in the most trifling of matters: the cry of a bird, the shades of the rust and the dust, the half-asleep dreaming of the dawn. Another, from the mouths of masked heresiarchs, claims that *the Company has never existed and never will*. Another, no less vile, reasons that to affirm or deny the reality of the Company is inconsequential, as Babylon is nothing but an infinite game of chance.



## Examination of the Works of Herbert Quain

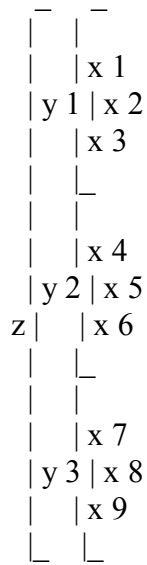
Herbert Quain has died in Roscommon; I have noted without astonishment that the *times literary supplement* barely conceded him half a column of necrological piety, in which there is no laudatory epithet that is not corrected (or seriously admonished) by an adverb. The *Spectator*, in the pertinent edition, is doubtless less laconic and perhaps more cordial, but it compares Quain's first book - *The God of the Labyrinth* - to one by Agatha Christie and to others of Gertrude Stein: evocations that no-one will judge to be inevitable, and which would not have pleased the deceased. He, as it happens, never believed himself brilliant; not even on those peripatetic nights of literary conversation, in which the man who has exhausted the presses invariably plays at being Monsieur Teste or Doctor Samuel Johnson... he saw, with complete lucidity, the experimental condition of his novels: admirable perhaps for the novelty and for a certain laconic probity, but not for the virtues of passion. "I am like Cowley's Odes", he wrote to me from Longford on the 6th of march 1939. "I do not belong to art, but to the mere history of art". For him there was no discipline inferior to history.

I have repeated a modesty of Herbert Quain's: naturally, this modesty does not exhaust his thought. Flaubert and Henry James have accustomed us to consider works of art infrequent and of laborious construction; the sixteenth century, (remember the *Voyage of Parnassus*, remember the fate of Shakespeare) did not share this disconsolate opinion. Nor Herbert Quain, neither. It seemed to him that good literature is a satiated commonplace and that there is hardly any street dialogue which does not reach to it. It also seemed to him that the aesthetic work cannot do without any element of astonishment, and that to be surprised by memory is difficult. He deplored with a smiling sincerity "the servile and obstinate conservation" of preteritous books... I don't know if his vague theory is justifiable; I know that books yearn for surprise too much.

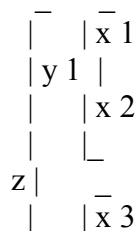
I regret having lent to a woman, irretrievably, his first publication. I mentioned that we were dealing with a political novel: *The God of the Labyrinth*, I can add that the editor proposed it for sale in the last days of November 1933. In the first days of December, the agreeable and arduous adventures of the *Siamese Twins Mystery* attacked London and New York; I prefer to attribute to this ruinous coincidence the failure of our friend's novel. Additionally (and I wish to be entirely sincere), to the deficiency in its execution and to the vain and frigid pomp of certain descriptions of the sea. At the end of seven years, it is impossible for me to recover the details of the action; here is its outline; now it impoverishes, as much as it purifies, my memory. There is an indecipherable murder in the initial pages, a slow discussion in the middle, a solution at the end. The enigma thus being clear, there was a large and retrospective paragraph which contained this phrase: "everyone believed that the meeting of the two chess players had been entirely random." This phrase allows it to be understood that the solution is erroneous. The reader, worried, reviews the relevant pages and discovers *another* solution, which is the truth. The reader of this singular book has more perspicacity than the detective.

Even more heterodox is the "regressive, ramified novel" *April March*, whose third and only part dates from 1936. No-one, judging this novel, refuses to discover that it is a game: it is reasonable to record that the author never considered anything else. "I reinvidicate by this work," I heard him say, "the characteristics essential to all games: symmetry, arbitrary laws, boredom." Up to the name is a weak *calembour*: it does not mean 'march of april' but literally 'April March'.

Someone has perceived in its pages an echo of the doctrines of Dunne; Quain's prologue preferred to evoke that inverse world of Bradley's, in which death precedes birth and the scar the hurt, and the hurt the blow (*Appearance and Reality*, 1897, page 215) 1. The worlds that *April March* proposes are not regressive, that is the manner of historifying them. Regressive and ramified, as I said. Three chapters integrate the work. The first refers to an ambiguous dialogue between some strangers on a platform. The second refers to the events on the day before of the first. The third, also retrograde, refers to the events of *another* possible previous day; the fourth, of yet another. With each of these three days of a very diverse kind. The complete work consists, therefore, of nine novels, each of three large chapters. (The first is common to all of them, naturally). Of these novels, one is of a symbolic character; another, supernatural; another, political; another physiological, another, communist; another; anticommunist, etc. Perhaps a diagram will aid in comprehension of the structure.



On seeing this structure it is fit to repeat what Schopenhauer said about the twelve Kantian categories: all is sacrificed to a symmetrical fury. Forseeably, one of the nine stories is beneath Quain; the best is not that which he originally imagined, the *x 4*; it is that of fantastical Nature, *x 9*. Others are affected by languid jokes or useless pseudopropositions. Those who read in chronological order (for example: *x 3*, *y 1*, *z*) miss the peculiar flavour of this strange book. Two stories - *x 7*, and *x 8* - lack value individually; only the juxtaposition lends it to them... I don't know if I ought to record that after *April March* was published, Quain repented of the ternary and predicted that the people who would imitate it would opt for the binary:



| y 2 |  
| | x 4  
└ ┘  
└ ┘

and the demiurges and gods opt for the infinite: infinite stories, indefinitely ramified.

Very diverse, but also ramificated, is the heroic comedy in two acts *the secret mirror*. In the works already resigned, formal complexity had obstructed the imagination of the author: here, his evolution is freer. The first act (the most extensive) occurs at the country house of General Thrale, C.I.E, near Melton Mowbray. The invisible centre of the drama is Miss Ulrika Thrale, the eldest daughter of the general. By means of a dialogue we glimpse her, amazonic and arrogant; we suspect that she does not tend to visit literature; the papers announce her engagement to the Duke of Rutland; the papers deny the engagement. A dramatic author, Wilfred Quarles, loves her; she has once apportioned him a distracted kiss. The characters are of vast fortune and old blood; the affection, noble though vehement; the dialogue seems to vacillate between the mere vaniloquence of Bulwer-Lytton and the epigrams of Wilde or of Mr Philip Guedalla. There is a nightingale and a night; there is a secret duel on a balcony. (And almost imperceptible, there is a curious contradiction, there are sordid details. The characters from the first act reappear in the second - with other names. The "dramatic author" Wilfred Quarles is a commission agent in liverpool; his real name, John William Quigley. Miss Thrale exists; Quigley has never seen her, but morbidly collects her pictures from *Tatler* or *Sketch*. Quigley is the author of the first act. The unreal or unlikely "country house" is the Jewish-Irish hostel in which he lives, transfigured and magnified by him... The plots of the acts are parallel, but in the second everything is slightly horrible, all is delayed or frustrated. When *The Secret Mirror* was released, the critics spoke the names of Freud and Julian Green. The mention of the first seems most unjustified to me.

Renown let it be known that *The Secret Mirror* was a freudian comedy; this (false) interpretation determined the outcome. Unfortunately, Quain was already forty years old; he was accustomed to failure and did not sweetly resign himself with to a change of habits. He resolved to get even. At the end of 1939 he published *Statements*: perhaps the most original of his books, without doubt the least praised and the most secret. Quain used to argue that readers were already an extinct species. "There is no one in europe," he reckoned, " that is not a writer, in potential or in act," he also affirmed that of the various goodnesses that literature can administer, the highest was the imagination. While not everyone is capable of this happiness, many will have to content themselves with simulacra. For these "imperfect writers", whose name is legion, Quain told the eight stories in the book *Statements*. Each one of those prefigures or promises a good line of reasoning, voluntarily frustrated by the author. Someone - not the best - will insinuate hint at *two* arguments. The reader, distracted by vanity, will believe himself to have invented them. From the third, *The Rose of Yesterday*, I committed the ingenuity of extracting *The circular ruins*, which is one of the narratives in the book, "The garden of forking paths".

1941

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1 Ah the erudition of Herbert Quain, ah, page 215 of a book from 1897. An interlocutor of the *Politics*, of Plato, had already described a similar regression: that of the Sons of the Earth and

Autochtons who, subjected to an influx of an inverse rotation of the cosmos, pass at once from age to maturity, from maturity to childhood, from childhood to disappearance and to nothing. Also Teopompo, in his *Phillipic*, noted that there are certain exotic fruits which originate in those who have eaten them. the same retrograde process... it is more interesting to imagine an inversion of Time; a state where we will remember the future and we will ignore, or hardly have a presentiment of, the past. cf. the Tenth Canto of the *Inferno*, versos 97-102, where the prophetic vision and far-sightedness are compared.

### **the Library of babel**

*By this art you may contemplate the variation of the 23 letters.*

*The Anatomy of Melancholy* part 2, sect II, mem IV.

The universe - that others call the Library - is made up of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number, of hexagonal galleries, with vast ventilation wells in the centre, surrounded by very low railings. From each hexagon, one sees the floors above and below: interminably. The distribution of the galleries is invariable. twenty shelves, five large shelves to a side, cover all but two sides; their height, which is that of the ceiling, hardly exceeds that of a normal library. One of the free faces gives a narrow vestibule which ends in another gallery, identical to the first and to the lot. to the left and the right of the vestibule there are two miniscule cabinets. In one, one may sleep standing up; in the other, satisfy the fecal necessities. Over there goes the spiral staircase, which elevates and abysses remotely. In the vestibule is a mirror, which faithfully duplicates appearances. People used to infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite, (if it actually was, then what of this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that the [brunidas] surfaces figure and promise infinity... the light proceeds from some [esfericas] fruits that have the name of lamps. there are two in each hexagon; transversal. The light they shed is insufficient, incessant.

Like all people in the Library, I had journeyed in my youth; gone on pilgrimage in search of one book, perhaps the catalogue of catalogues; now that my eyes can hardly decipher what I write, I prepare to die a few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born. Dead, there will be no shortage of pious hands to throw me from the railing; my sepulchre will be the unsoundable air; my body will [hundira] long and will corrupt and dissolve in the sense engendered by the fall, which is infinite. I affirm that the Library is interminable. The idealists argue that the hexagonal salons are a necessary form in absolute space, or, at least, of our intuition of space. They rationalise that a triangular or pentagonal salon is inconceivable. (The mystics pretend that ecstasy reveals to them a circular chamber of continuous back, which goes all around the walls; but their testimony is suspicious; their words, obscure. that cyclical book is God.) It suffices, for now, to repeat the classical dictate: "the Library is a sphere whose exact center is whichever hexagon whose circumference is inaccessible."

Five shelves correspond to each of the walls of each hexagon; each shelf encloses thirty-two books of uniform format; each book is four hundred and ten pages' each page, of forty lines, each line, of some eighty black letters. There are also letters on the back of each book; these letters do not index or prefigure what the pages will say. I know that this disconnection once seemed mysterious. Before summarizing the solution, (whose discovery, despite its tragic implications, is perhaps the capital deed in the story.) I want to recall some axioms.

The first: the Library exists *ab aeterno*. This truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world, no reasonable mind can doubt. The human, the imperfect librarian, can be a work of chance or of the malevolent demiurges; the universe, with its elegant dowry of shelves, of enigmatic tomes, of infatigable stairways for the traveller and of latrines for the sedentary librarian, can only be the work of a god. In order to perceive the distance between the human and the divine, it is enough to compare those rude tremulous symbols that my fallible hand [garabatea] on the covers of a book, with the organic letters of the interior: punctual, delicate, very black, inimitably symmetrical.

The second: "the number of orthographic symbols is twenty-five"[1]. This constraint allowed, for thirty years, the formulation of a general theory of the Library and the satisfactory resolution of the problem that no conjecture had deciphered: the informal and chaotic nature of almost all of the books. One, that my father saw in a hexagon on circuit fifteen ninety-four consisted in the letters MCV, perversely repeated from this first line until the last. Another (much consulted in this area) is a mere labyrinth of letters, but the penultimate page says "oh time your pyramids". One already knows: for one line of reason or straight news, are leagues of insensible cacophonies, verbal farragos and incoherences. (I know a uneven region whose librarians repudiate the vain and superstitious custom of searching for meaning in the books, and have equipped themselves to search for it in dreams or in the chaotic lines of the hand. They admit that the inventors of writing imitated the twenty-five natural symbols, but maintain that that is a casual application and the books mean nothing in relation to it. This dictate, we will see, is not completely false.)

For a long time it was believed that the impenetrable books corresponded to remote or preterite languages. It is true that the people of antiquity, the first librarians, used an [asaz] language different from that we speak now; it is true that some miles to the right, the language is a dialect, and ninety floors above, it is incomprehensible. All this, I repeat, is true, but four hundred and ten pages of unalterable MCV could not correspond to any language, however dialectical or rudimentary it may be. Some people intimate that each letter could influence the subsequent and that the value of MCV in the third line of page 71 was not that which the same series could have in another position on another page, but this vague thesis did not prosper. Others thought about cryptographies, universally that conjecture has been accepted, although not in the same sense as its authors formulated it.

Fifteen years ago, the chief of a superior hexagon [2] revealed a book as confused as the others, but that had nearly two sheets of homogenous lines. He showed his find to an wandering decipherer, who said it was written up in portuguese; others he claimed were in yiddish. He could identify the language to within a century; a samoyed-lithuanian dialect of the [guarani], with classical arabic inflections. He also deciphered the content: notions of combinatorial analysis, illustrated with examples of variations with unlimited repetition. Those examples allowed one librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This thinker observed that all the books, however diverse, consist of the same elements: the space, the full stop, the comma, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also posits a theory that all travellers have confirmed: "there are not, in the vast Library, two identical books." From these incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves register all possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographic symbols (a number, although very vast,

not infinite) or rather everything that is possible to express: in all languages. All: the minute history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, the faithful catalogue of the library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstrations of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on this gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the version of each book in every language, the interpolations of each book in every book.

When it was proclaimed that the Library included all books, the first impression was of extravagant felicity. Everyone felt themselves masters of an intact and secret treasure. There was no personal or global problem whose eloquent solution did not exist, in some hexagon. The universe was justified, Universe suddenly usurped by the illimitable dimensions of Hope. In those times much was spoken of the Vindications; books of apology and prophecy, that would forever vindicate the actions of everyone in the universe and held prodigious arcana for its future. Thousands of [codiciosos] types abandoned the sweet hexagon of their birth and sent themselves up stairways, urged on by the vain proposition of finding their Vindication. Those pilgrims argued in the straight corridors, professed obscure curses, they strangled each other in the divine stairways, threw the deceiving books to the end of the tunnels, died [despenados] by people in remote places. Others went mad... the Vindications exist (I have seen two which refer to people in the future, at least not to imaginary people) but the searchers forget that the chance that someone will encounter their own, or any perfidious variation on their own, is next to zero.

One waits still and always for the clarification of the basic mysteries of humanity: the origins of the Library and of time. It seems likely that those grave mysteries can explain themselves in words: if the language of the philosophers is not enough, the multiform Library will have produced the unheard language required and the vocabularies and grammars of that language. People have exhausted the library for four centuries now... there are official searchers, inquisitors. I have seen them in the execution of their function: they always come protected; they talk of a stairway without steps that nearly killed them; they speak of galleries and stairways with the librarian; sometimes, they take the closest book and they leaf through it, in search of infamous words. Visibly, no-one hopes to discover anything.

The riotous hope was succeeded by, as is natural, an excessive depression. The certainty that one shelf in one hexagon enclosed precious books and that those precious books were inaccessible, seemed almost intolerable. One blasphemous sect suggested that they cease their searches and that everyone shuffle letters and symbols, until constructing, by means of an improbable gift of chance, those canonical books. The authorities were seen to be obliged to promulgate severe orders. The sect disappeared, but in my childhood I saw old men who had largely hidden in the latrines, with some metal disks in a prohibited tumbler, and debilitatedly imitate the divine disorder.

Others, inversely, believed that the principle was to eliminate useless works. They invaded the hexagons, exhibiting not always false credentials, leafed through a volume fastidiously and condemned entire shelves: to their hygienic fury, ascetic, we owe the insensible loss of millions of books. Their name is execrated, but those who deplore the "treasures" that their frenzy destroyed, neglect two notorious ideas. One: the Library is so enormous that any human

reduction of it is infinitesimal. The other: each unique example admittedly irreplaceable, but (as the Library is total) there are always hundreds of thousands of imperfect facsimiles: works that do not differ by more than one letter or one comma. Counter to general opinion, I dare to imagine that the consequences of the depredations committed by the Purifiers, have been exaggerated by the horror that those fanatics provoked. The delirium of conquering the books of the Carmesi hexagon; books in a smaller format than the natural ones; omnipotent, illustrated, and magic.

We also know of another superstition of that time; that of the Man of the Book. On some shelf in some hexagon (people reason) there must exist a book which is the cipher and perfect compendium of *all the rest*: some librarian has access to it and is analogous to a god. In the language of this region there persist some vestiges of the cult of that remote functionary. Many went on pilgrimage in search of Him. For a century they exhausted the most diverse courses. How to locate the venerable secret hexagon that hosted him? Someone proposed a recursive method: to find book A, consult beforehand a book B that indicates the site of A; to find B, previously consult C, and like that into infinity... on adventures like that I have lavished and consumed my years. It doesn't seem unlikely to me that on some shelf in the universe is a sound and complete book[3]: I plead with the indifferent gods that one person - only one, though it be thousands of years ago - may have examined it and read it. If honour and wisdom and happiness are not for me, may they be for others. That heaven may exist, although my place will be in hell. That I might be [ultrajado] and annihilated, but that in an instant, in a being, Your enormous Library justifies itself.

The impious affirm that nonsense is normal in the Library, and that reason (and even the humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception. They speak (I know it) of "the febrile Library, whose risky volumes run the incessant [albur] of changing into others and that everything affirms it, negates it and confounds it with a divinity that [delira]". Those words, which denounce not only order but also exemplify it, notoriously demonstrate their [pesimo] taste and their desperate ignorance. In effect, the Library includes all the verbal structures, all the variations that the twenty-five orthographic symbols allow, are doubtless capable of a cryptographic justification or allegory; this justification is verbal and, *ex hypothesis*, already figured in the Library. I cannot combine any characters such as

dhcmrlchulj

that the divine library will not have foreseen and which in one of the secret languages does not contain a terrible sense. No-one can articulate a symbol that is not full of tendernesses and fears; that is not in one of those languages the powerful name of god. To speak is to incur tautologies. This pointless, prosaic epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five shelves in one of the uncountable hexagons, and also its refutation. (A number  $n$  of possible languages use the same vocabulary; in some, the symbol *library* has the correct definition "ubiquitous and lasting system of hexagonal galleries", but *library* is "bread" or "pyramid" or some other thing, and the seven words that define it have another value. You who read me, are you sure you understand my language?

Methodical writing distracts me from the present condition of people. The certitude that everything is written annuls us and [afantasma] us. I know of districts where youths prostrate themselves before books and kiss the pages with barbarism, but cannot decipher a single letter. Epidemics, heretical discord, pilgrimages that inevitably degenerate into brigandry, have decimated the population. I believe I have mentioned the suicides, more frequent each year. perhaps age and fear are deceiving me, but I suspect that the human species - the only - is set on self-extinction and the Library will be lost: illuminated, solitary, perfectly immobile, armed with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret.

I have just written *infinite*. I have not interpolated that adjective out of rhetorical habit: I say that it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who judge it limited, postulate that in remote places the corridors and staircases and hexagons must inconceivably end - which is absurd - those who imagine it without limits, forget that it has the possible number of books. I dare to insinuate this solution to the old problem: *the Library is unlimited and periodical*. If an eternal traveller traversed it in whichever direction, they would also verify at the end of centuries that the same volumes repeated themselves in the same disorder (which, repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is cheered by this elegant hope.[4]

1. The original manuscript does not contain figures or capitals. The punctuation has been limited to the comma and the full stop. Those two signs, the space and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet, are the twenty five symbols sufficient to enumerate the unknown.

2. Previously, there was a person for every three hexagons. Suicides and pulmonary illness had distorted this ratio. Memory of unspeakable melancholy: at times I have journeyed through many polished corridors and staircases without finding a single librarian.

3. I repeat: it suffices that a book be possible for it to exist. Only the impossible is excluded. For example, no book is also a staircase, although doubtless there are books which discuss and negate and demonstrate this possibility and others whose structure corresponds to that of a staircase.

4. Leticia Alvarez of Toledo has observed that the vast Library is useless; with rigour, it would be enough to have *one single volume*, of a common format, form in body nine or body ten, which consists of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages. (Cavalieri, on the principles of the seventeenth century, said that all a solid body is the superposition of an infinite number of planes.) the handling of that silky *vademecum* will not be comfortable; each apparent sheet would undouble itself in other analogies; the inconceivable central page will have no reverse.

Funes, the Memorious

By

Jorge

Luis

Borges



I remember him (I scarcely have the right to use this ghostly verb; only one man on earth deserved the right, and he is dead), I remember him with a dark passionflower in his hand, looking at it as no one has ever looked at such a flower, though they might look from the twilight of day until the twilight of night, for a whole life long. I remember him, his face immobile and Indian-like, and singularly remote, behind his cigarette. I remember (I believe) the strong delicate fingers of the plainsman who can braid leather. I remember, near those hands, a vessel in which to make maté tea, bearing the arms of the Banda Oriental; I remember, in the window of the house, a yellow rush mat, and beyond, a vague marshy landscape. I remember clearly his voice, the deliberate, resentful nasal voice of the old Eastern Shore man, without the Italianate syllables of today. I did not see him more than three times; the last time, in 1887. . . .

That all those who knew him should write something about him seems to me a very felicitous idea; my testimony may perhaps be the briefest and without doubt the poorest, and it will not be the least impartial. The deplorable fact of my being an Argentinian will hinder me from falling into a dithyramb - an obligatory form in the Uruguay, when the theme is an Uruguayan.

Littérateur, slicker, Buenos Airean: Funes did not use these insulting phrases, but I am sufficiently aware that for him I represented these unfortunate categories. Pedro Leandro Ipuche has written that Funes was a precursor of the superman, "an untamed and vernacular Zarathustra"; I do not doubt it, but one must not forget, either, that he was a countryman from the town of Fray Bentos, with certain incurable limitations.

My first recollection of Funes is quite clear: I see him at dusk, sometime in March or February of the year '84. That year, my father had taken me to spend the summer at Fray Bentos. I was on my way back from the farm at San Francisco with my cousin Bernardo Haedo. We came back singing, on horseback; and this last fact was not the only reason for my joy. After a sultry day, an enormous slate-grey-storm had obscured the sky. It was driven on by a wind from the south; the trees were already tossing like madmen; and I had the apprehension (the secret hope) that the elemental downpour would catch us out in the open. We were running a kind of race with the tempest. We rode into a narrow lane which wound down between two enormously high brick footpaths. It had grown black of a sudden; I now heard rapid almost secret steps above; I raised my eyes and saw a boy running along the narrow, cracked path as if he were running along a narrow, broken wall. I remember the loose trousers, tight at the bottom, the hemp sandals; I remember the cigarette in the hard visage, standing out against the by now limitless darkness. Bernardo unexpectedly yelled to him: "What's the time, Ireneo?" Without looking up, without stopping, Ireneo replied: "In four minutes it will be eight o'clock, child Bernardo Juan Francisco." The voice was sharp, mocking.

I am so absentminded that the dialogue which I have just cited would not have penetrated my attention if it had not been repeated by my cousin, who was stimulated, I think, by a certain local pride and by a desire to show himself indifferent to the other's three-sided reply.

He told me that the boy above us in the pass was a certain Ireneo Funes, renowned for a number of eccentricities, such as that of having nothing to do with people and of always knowing the time, like a watch. He added that Ireneo was the son of Maria Clementina Funes, an ironing woman in the town, and that his father, some people said, was an "Englishman" named O'Connor, a doctor in the salting fields, though some said the father was a horse-breaker, or scout, from the province of El Salto. Ireneo lived with his mother, at the edge of the country house of the Laurels.

In the years '85 and '86 we spent the summer in the city of Montevideo. We returned to Fray Bentos in '87. As was natural, I inquired after all my acquaintances, and finally, about "the chronometer Funes." I was told that he had been thrown by a wild horse at the San Francisco ranch, and that he had been hopelessly crippled. I remember the impression of uneasy magic which the news provoked in me: the only time I had seen him we were on horseback, coming from San Francisco, and he was in a high place; from the lips of my cousin Bernardo the affair sounded like a dream elaborated with elements out of the past. They told me that Ireneo did not move now from his cot, but remained with his eyes fixed on the backyard fig tree, or on a cobweb. At sunset he allowed himself to be brought to the window. He carried pride to the extreme of pretending that the blow which had befallen him was a good thing. . . . Twice I saw him behind the iron grate which sternly delineated his eternal imprisonment: unmoving, once, his eyes closed; unmoving also, another time, absorbed in the contemplation of a sweet-smelling sprig of lavender cotton.

At the time I had begun, not without some ostentation, the methodical study of Latin. My valise contained the *De viris illustribus* of Lhomond, the *Thesaurus* of Quicherat, Caesar's *Commentaries*, and an odd-numbered volume of the *Historia Naturalis* of Pliny, which exceeded (and still exceeds) my modest talents as a Latinist. Everything is noised around in a small town; Ireneo, at his small farm on the outskirts, was not long in learning of the arrival of these anomalous books. He sent me a flowery, ceremonious letter, in which he recalled our encounter, unfortunately brief, "on the seventh day of February of the year '84," and alluded to the glorious services which Don Gregorio Haedo, my uncle, dead the same year, "had rendered to the Two Fatherlands in the glorious campaign of Ituzaingó," and he solicited the loan of any one of the volumes, to be accompanied by a dictionary "for the better intelligence of the original text, for I do not know Latin as yet." He promised to return them in good condition, almost immediately. The letter was perfect, very nicely constructed; the orthography was of the type sponsored by Andrés Bello: i for y, j for g. At first I naturally suspected a jest. My cousins assured me it was not so, that these were the ways of Ireneo. I did not know whether to attribute to impudence, ignorance, or stupidity the idea that the difficult Latin required no other instrument than a dictionary; in order fully to undeceive him I sent the *Gradus ad Parnassum* of Quicherat, and the Pliny.

On 14 February, I received a telegram from Buenos Aires telling me to return immediately, for my father was "in no way well." God forgive me, but the prestige of being the recipient of an urgent telegram, the desire to point out to all of Fray Bentos the contradiction between the negative form of the news and the positive adverb, the temptation to dramatize my sorrow as I feigned a virile stoicism, all no doubt distracted me from the possibility of anguish. As I packed my valise, I noticed that I was missing the *Gradus* and the volume of

the Historia Naturalis. The "Saturn" was to weigh anchor on the morning of the next day; that night, after supper, I made my way to the house of Funes. Outside, I was surprised to find the night no less oppressive than the day.

Ireneo's mother received me at the modest ranch.

She told me that Ireneo was in the back room and that I should not be disturbed to find him in the dark, for he knew how to pass the dead hours without lighting the candle. I crossed the cobblestone patio, the small corridor; I came to the second patio. A great vine covered everything, so that the darkness seemed complete. Of a sudden I heard the high-pitched, mocking voice of Ireneo. The voice spoke in Latin; the voice (which came out of the obscurity) was reading, with obvious delight, a treatise or prayer or incantation. The Roman syllables resounded in the earthen patio; my suspicion made them seem undecipherable, interminable; afterwards, in the enormous dialogue of that night, I learned that they made up the first paragraph of the twenty-fourth chapter of the seventh book of the Historia Naturalis. The subject of this chapter is memory; the last words are *ujt nihil non iisdem verbis redderetur auditum*.

Without the least change in his voice, Ireneo bade me come in. He was lying on the cot, smoking. It seems to me that I did not see his face until dawn; I seem to recall the momentary glow of the cigarette. The room smelled vaguely of dampness. I sat down, and repeated the story of the telegram and my father's illness.

I come now to the most difficult point in my narrative. For the entire story has no other point (the reader might as well know it by now) than this dialogue of almost a half-century ago. I shall not attempt to reproduce his words, now irrecoverable. I prefer truthfully to make a résumé of the many things Ireneo told me. The indirect style is remote and weak; I know that I sacrifice the effectiveness of my narrative; but let my readers imagine the nebulous sentences which couled that night.

Ireneo began by enumerating, in Latin and Spanish, the cases of prodigious memory cited in the Historia Naturalis: Cyrus, king of the Persians, who could call every soldier in his armies by name; Mithridates Eupator, who administered justice in the twenty-two languages of his empire; Simonides, inventory of mnemotechny; Metrodorus, who practised the art of repeating faithfully what he heard once. With evident good faith Funes marvelled that such things should be considered marvellous. He told me that previous to the rainy afternoon when the blue-tinted horse threw him, he had been - like any Christian - blind, deaf-mute, somnambulistic, memoryless. (I tried to remind him of his precise perception of time, his memory for proper names; he paid no attention to me.) For nineteen years, he said, he had lived like a person in a dream: he looked without seeing, heard without hearing, forgot everything - almost everything. On falling from the horse, he lost consciousness; when he recovered it, the present was almost intolerable it was so rich and bright; the same was true of the most ancient and most trivial memories. A little later he realized that he was crippled. This fact scarcely interested him. He reasoned (or felt) that immobility was a minimum price to pay. And now, his perception and his memory were infallible.

We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table; Funes saw all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine. He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once, and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho. These recollections were not simple; each visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, etc. He could reconstruct all his dreams, all his fancies. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day. He told me: I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world. And again: My dreams are like your vigils. And again, toward dawn: My memory, sir, is like a garbage disposal.

A circumference on a blackboard, a rectangular triangle, a rhomb, are forms which we can fully intuit; the same held true with Ireneo for the tempestuous mane of a stallion, a herd of cattle in a pass, the ever-changing flame or the innumerable ash, the many faces of a dead man during the course of a protracted wake. He could perceive I do not know how many stars in the sky.

These things he told me; neither then nor at any time later did they seem doubtful. In those days neither the cinema nor the phonograph yet existed; nevertheless, it seems strange, almost incredible, that no one should have experimented on Funes. The truth is that we all live by leaving behind; no doubt we all profoundly know that we are immortal and that sooner or later every man will do all things and know everything.

The voice of Funes, out of the darkness, continued. He told me that toward 1886 he had devised a new system of enumeration and that in a very few days he had gone before twenty-four thousand. He had not written it down, for what he once meditated would not be erased. The first stimulus to his work, I believe, had been his discontent with the fact that "thirty-three Uruguayans" required two symbols and three words, rather than a single word and a single symbol. Later he applied his extravagant principle to the other numbers. In place of seven thousand thirteen, he would say (for example) Máximo Perez; in place of seven thousand fourteen, The Train; other numbers were Luis Melián Lafinur, Olimar, Brimstone, Clubs, The Whale, Gas, The Cauldron, Napoleon, Agustín de Vedia. In lieu of five hundred, he would say nine. Each word had a particular sign, a species of mark; the last were very complicated. . . . I attempted to explain that this rhapsody of unconnected terms was precisely the contrary of a system of enumeration. I said that to say three hundred and sixty-five was to say three hundreds, six tens, five units: an analysis which does not exist in such numbers as The Negro Timoteo or The Flesh Blanket. Funes did not understand me, or did not wish to understand me.

Locke, in the seventeenth century, postulated (and rejected) an impossible idiom in which each individual object, each stone, each bird and branch had an individual name; Funes had once projected an analogous idiom, but he had renounced it as being too general, too ambiguous. In effect, Funes not only remembered every leaf on every tree of every wood, but even every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it. He determined to reduce all of his past experience to some seventy thousand recollections, which he would later

define numerically. Two considerations dissuaded him: the thought that the task was interminable and the thought that it was useless. He knew that at the hour of his death he would scarcely have finished classifying even all the memories of his childhood.

The two projects I have indicated (an infinite vocabulary for the natural series of numbers, and a usable mental catalogue of all the images of memory) are lacking in sense, but they reveal a certain stammering greatness. They allow us to make out dimly, or to infer, the dizzying world of Funes. He was, let us not forget, almost incapable of general, platonic ideas. It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term dog embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front). His own face in the mirror, his own hands, surprised him on every occasion. Swift writes that the emperor of Lilliput could discern the movement of the minute hand; Funes could continuously make out the tranquil advances of corruption, of caries, of fatigue. He noted the progress of death, of moisture. He was the solitary and lucid spectator of a multiform world which was instantaneously and almost intolerably exact. Babylon, London, and New York have overawed the imagination of men with their ferocious splendour; no one, in those populous towers or upon those surging avenues, has felt the heat and pressure of a reality as indefatigable as that which day and night converged upon the unfortunate Ireneo in his humble South American farmhouse. It was very difficult for him to sleep. To sleep is to be abstracted from the world; Funes, on his back in his cot, in the shadows, imagined every crevice and every moulding of the various houses which surrounded him. (I repeat, the least important of his recollections was more minutely precise and more lively than our perception of a physical pleasure or a physical torment.) Toward the east, in a section which was not yet cut into blocks of homes, there were some new unknown houses. Funes imagined them black, compact, made of a single obscurity; he would turn his face in this direction in order to sleep. He would also imagine himself at the bottom of the river, being rocked and annihilated by the current.

Without effort, he had learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details.

The equivocal clarity of dawn penetrated along the earthen patio.

Then it was that I saw the face of the voice which had spoken all through the night. Ireneo was nineteen years old; he had been born in 1868; he seemed as monumental as bronze, more ancient than Egypt, anterior to the prophecies and the pyramids. It occurred to me that each one of my words (each one of my gestures) would live on in his implacable memory; I was benumbed by the fear of multiplying superfluous gestures.

Ireneo Funes died in 1889, of a pulmonary congestion.

Note: The Eastern Shore (of the Uruguay River); now the Orient Republic of Uruguay. (Return to top of page.)

Translated by Anthony Kerrigan

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**Theme of the Traitor and the Hero by JORGE LUIS BORGES**

*So the Platonic year  
Whirls out new right and wrong,  
Whirls in the old instead;  
All men are dancers and their tread  
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.*

**W. B. Yeats: The Tower**

Under the notable influence of Chesterton (contriver and embellisher of elegant mysteries) and the palace counselor Leibniz (inventor of the pre-established harmony), in my idle afternoons I have imagined this story plot which I shall perhaps write someday and which already justifies me somehow. Details, rectifications, adjustments are lacking; there are zones of the story not yet revealed to me; today, January 3rd, 1944, I seem to see it as follows:

The action takes place in an oppressed and tenacious country: Poland, Ireland, the Venetian Republic, some South American or Balkan state. . . Or rather it has taken place, since, though the narrator is contemporary, his story occurred towards the middle or the beginning of the nineteenth century. Let us say (for narrative convenience) Ireland; let us say in 1824. The narrator's name is Ryan; he is the great-grandson of the young, the heroic, the beautiful, the assassinated Fergus Kilpatrick, whose grave was mysteriously violated, whose name illustrated the verses of Browning and Hugo, whose statue presides over a gray hill amid red marshes.

Kilpatrick was a conspirator, a secret and glorious captain of conspirators; like Moses, who from the land of Moab glimpsed but could not reach the promised land, Kilpatrick perished on the eve of the victorious revolt which he had premeditated and dreamt of. The first centenary of his death draws near; the circumstances of the crime are enigmatic; Ryan, engaged in writing a biography of the hero, discovers that the enigma exceeds the confines of a simple police investigation. Kilpatrick was murdered in a theater; the British police never found the killer; the historians maintain that this scarcely soils their good reputation, since it was probably the police

themselves who had him killed. Other facets of the enigma disturb Ryan. They are of a cyclic nature: they seem to repeat or combine events of remote regions, of remote ages. For example, no one is unaware that the officers who examined the hero's body found a sealed letter in which he was warned of the risk of attending the theater that evening; likewise Julius Caesar, on his way to the place where his friends' daggers awaited him, received a note he never read, in which the treachery was declared along with the traitors' names. Caesar's wife, Calpurnia, saw in a dream the destruction of a tower decreed him by the Senate; false and anonymous rumors on the eve of Kilpatrick's death publicized throughout the country that the circular tower of Kilgarvan had burned, which could be taken as a presage, for he had been born in Kilgarvan. These parallelisms (and others) between the story of Caesar and the story of an Irish conspirator lead Ryan to suppose the existence of a secret form of time, a pattern of repeated lines. He thinks of the decimal history conceived by Condorcet, of the morphologies proposed by Hegel, Spengler and Vico, of Hesiod's men, who degenerate from gold to iron. He thinks of the transmigration of souls, a doctrine that lends horror to Celtic literature and that Caesar himself attributed to the British druids; he thinks that, before having been Fergus Kilpatrick, Fergus Kilpatrick was Julius Caesar. He is rescued from these circular labyrinths by a curious finding, a finding which then sinks him into other, more inextricable and heterogeneous labyrinths: certain words uttered by a beggar who spoke with Fergus Kilpatrick the day of his death were prefigured by Shakespeare in the tragedy Macbeth. That history should have copied history was already sufficiently astonishing; that history should copy literature was inconceivable. . . Ryan finds that, in 1814, James Alexander Nolan, the oldest of the hero's companions, had translated the principal dramas of Shakespeare into Gaelic; among these was Julius Caesar. He also discovers in the archives the manuscript of an article by Nolan on the Swiss Festspiele: vast and errant theatrical representations which require thousands of actors and repeat historical episodes in the very cities and mountains where they took place. Another unpublished document reveals to him that, a few days before the end, Kilpatrick, presiding over the last meeting, had signed the order for the execution of a traitor whose name has been deleted from the records. This order does not accord with Kilpatrick's merciful nature. Ryan investigates the matter (this investigation is one of the gaps in my plot) and manages to decipher the enigma.

Kilpatrick was killed in a theater, but the entire city was a theater as well, and the actors were legion, and the drama crowned by his death extended over many days and many nights.

This is what happened:

On the 2nd of August, 1824, the conspirators gathered. The country was ripe for revolt; something, however, always failed: there was a traitor in the group. Fergus Kilpatrick had charged James Nolan with the responsibility of discovering the traitor. Nolan carried out his assignment: he announced in the very midst of the meeting that the traitor was Kilpatrick himself. He demonstrated the truth of his accusation with irrefutable proof; the conspirators

condemned their president to die. He signed his own sentence, but begged that his punishment not harm his country.

It was then that Nolan conceived his strange scheme. Ireland idolized Kilpatrick; the most tenuous suspicion of his infamy would have jeopardized the revolt; Nolan proposed a plan which made of the traitor's execution an instrument for the country's emancipation. He suggested that the condemned man die at the hands of an unknown assassin in deliberately dramatic circumstances which would remain engraved in the imagination of the people and would hasten the revolt. Kilpatrick swore he would take part in the scheme, which gave him the occasion to redeem himself and for which his death would provide the final flourish.

Nolan, urged on by time, was not able to invent all the circumstances of the multiple execution; he had to plagiarize another dramatist, the English enemy William Shakespeare. He repeated scenes from Macbeth, from Julius Caesar. The public and secret enactment comprised various days. The condemned man entered Dublin, discussed, acted, prayed, reproved, uttered words of pathos, and each of these gestures, to be reflected in his glory, had been pre-established by Nolan. Hundreds of actors collaborated with the protagonist; the role of some was complex; that of others momentary. The things they did and said endure in the history books, in the impassioned memory of Ireland. Kilpatrick, swept along by this minutely detailed destiny which both redeemed him and destroyed him, more than once enriched the text of his judge with improvised acts and words. Thus the populous drama unfolded in time, until on the 6th of August, 1824, in a theater box with funereal curtains prefiguring Lincoln's, a long-desired bullet entered the breast of the traitor and hero, who, amid two effusions of sudden blood, was scarcely able to articulate a few foreseen words.

In Nolan's work, the passages imitated from Shakespeare are the least dramatic; Ryan suspects that the author interpolated them so that in the future someone might hit upon the truth. He understands that he too forms part of Nolan's plot. . . After a series of tenacious hesitations, he resolves to keep his discovery silent. He publishes a book dedicated to the hero's glory; this too, perhaps, was foreseen.

Jorge Luis Borges

The Secret Miracle

And God made him die during the course of a hundred years and then He revived him and said:

"How long have you been here?"



"A day, or part of a day," he replied.

- The Koran, II 261

On the night of March 14, 1939, in an apartment on the Zelternergasse in Prague, Jaromir Hladik, author of the unfinished tragedy *The Enemies*, of a Vindication of Eternity, and of an inquiry into the indirect Jewish sources of Jakob Boehme, dreamt a long drawn out chess game. The antagonists were not two individuals, but two illustrious families. The contest had begun many centuries before. No one could any longer describe the forgotten prize, but it was rumored that it was enormous and perhaps infinite. The pieces and the chessboard were set up in a secret tower. Jaromir (in his dream) was the first-born of one of the contending families. The hour for the next move, which could not be postponed, struck on all the clocks. The dreamer ran across the sands of a rainy desert - and he could not remember the chessmen or the rules of chess. At this point he awoke. The din of the rain and the clangor of the terrible clocks ceased. A measured unison, sundered by voices of command, arose from the Zelternergasse. Day had dawned, and the armored vanguards of the Third Reich were entering Prague.

On the 19th, the authorities received an accusation against Jaromir Hladik; on the same day, at dusk, he was arrested. He was taken to a barracks, aseptic and white, on the opposite bank of the Moldau. He was unable to refute a single one of the charges made by the Gestapo: his maternal surname was Jaroslavski, his blood was Jewish, his study of Boehme was Judaizing, his signature had helped to swell the final census of those protesting the Anschluss. In 1928, he had translated the *Sepher Yezirah* for the publishing house of Hermann Barsdorf; the effusive catalogue issued by this firm had exaggerated, for commercial reasons, the translator's renown; this catalogue was leafed through by Julius Rothe, one of the officials in whose hands lay Hladik's fate. The man does not exist who, outside his own specialty, is not credulous: two or three adjectives in Gothic script sufficed to convince Julius Rothe of Hladik's pre-eminence, and of the need for the death penalty, pour encourager les autres. The execution was set for the 29th of March, at nine in the morning. This delay (whose importance the reader will appreciate later) was due to a desire on the part of the authorities to act slowly and impersonally, in the manner of planets or vegetables.

Hladik's first reaction was simply one of horror. He was sure he would not have been terrified by the gallows, the block, or the knife; but to die before a firing squad was unbearable. In vain he repeated to himself that the pure and general act of dying, not the concrete circumstances, was the dreadful fact. He did not grow weary of imagining these circumstances: he absurdly tried to exhaust all the variations. He infinitely anticipated the process, from the sleepless dawn to the mysterious discharge of the rifles. Before the day set by Julius Rothe, he died hundreds of deaths, in courtyards whose shapes and angles defied geometry, shot down by changeable soldiers whose number varied and who sometimes put an end to him from close up and sometimes from far away. He faced these imaginary executions with true terror (perhaps with true courage). Each simulacrum lasted a few seconds. Once the circle was closed, Jaromir returned interminably to the tremulous eve of his death. Then he would reflect that reality does not tend to coincide with forecasts about it. With perverse logic he inferred that to foresee a circumstantial detail is to prevent its happening. Faithful to this feeble magic, he would invent,

so that they might not happen, the most atrocious particulars. Naturally, he finished by fearing that these particulars were prophetic. During his wretched nights he strove to hold fast somehow to the fugitive substance of time. He knew that time was precipitating itself toward the dawn of the 29th. He reasoned aloud: I am now in the night of the 22nd. While this night lasts (and for six more nights to come) I am invulnerable, immortal. His nights of sleep seemed to him deep dark pools into which he might submerge. Sometimes he yearned impatiently for the firing squad's definitive volley, which would redeem him, for better or for worse, from the vain compulsion of his imagination. On the 28th, as the final sunset reverberated across the high barred windows, he was distracted from all these abject considerations by thought of his drama, *The Enemies*.

Hladik was past forty. Apart from a few friendships and many habits, the problematic practice of literature constituted his life. Like every writer, he measured the virtues of other writers by their performance, and asked that they measure him by what he conjectured or planned. All of the books he had published merely moved him to a complex repentance. His investigation of the work of Boehme, of Ibn Ezra, and of Fludd was essentially a product of mere application; his translation of the *Sepher Yezirah* was characterized by negligence, fatigue, and conjecture. He judged his *Vindication of Eternity* to be perhaps less deficient: the first volume is a history of the diverse eternities devised by man, from the immutable Being of Parmenides to the alterable past of Hinton; the second volume denies (with Francis Bradley) that all the events in the universe make up a temporal series. He argues that the number of experiences possible to man is not infinite, and that a single "repetition" suffices to demonstrate that time is a fallacy . . .

Unfortunately, the arguments that demonstrate this fallacy are not any less fallacious. Hladik was in the habit of running through these arguments with a certain disdainful perplexity. He had also written a series of expressionist poems; these, to the discomfiture of the author, were included in an anthology in 1924, and there was no anthology of later date which did not inherit them.

Hladik was anxious to redeem himself from his equivocal and languid past with his verse drama, *The Enemies*. (He favored the verse form in the theater because it prevents the spectators from forgetting unreality, which is the necessary condition of art.)

This opus preserved the dramatic unities (time, place, and action). It transpires in Hradcany, in the library of the Baron Roemerstadt, on one of the last evenings of the nineteenth century. In the first scene of the first act, a stranger pays a visit to Roemerstadt. (A clock strikes seven, the vehemence of a setting sun glorifies the window panes, the air transmits familiar and impassioned Hungarian music.) This visit is followed by others; Roemerstadt does not know the people who come to importune him, but he has the uncomfortable impression that he has seen them before: perhaps in a dream. All the visitors fawn upon him, but it is obvious - first to the spectators of the drama, and then to the Baron himself - that they are secret enemies, sworn to ruin him. Roemerstadt manages to outwit, or evade, their complex intrigues. In the course of the dialogue, mention is made of his betrothed, Julia de Weidenau, and of a certain Jaroslav Kubin, who at one time had been her suitor. Kubin has now lost his mind and thinks he is Roemerstadt . . . The dangers multiply. Roemerstadt, at the end of the second act, is forced to kill one of the conspirators. The third and final act begins. The incongruities gradually mount up: actors who seemed to have been discarded from the play reappear; the man who had been killed by Roemerstadt returns, for an instant. Someone notes that the time of day has not advanced: the clock strikes seven, the western sun reverberates in the high window panes, impassioned Hungarian music is carried on the air. The first speaker in the play reappears and repeats the

words he had spoken in the first scene of the first act. Roemerstadt addresses him without the least surprise. The spectator understands that Roemerstadt is the wretched Jaroslav Kubin. The drama has never taken place: it is the circular delirium which Kubin unendingly lives and relives.

Hladik had never asked himself whether this tragicomedy of errors was preposterous or admirable, deliberate or casual. Such a plot, he intuited, was the most appropriate invention to conceal his defects and to manifest his strong points, and it embodied the possibility of redeeming (symbolically) the fundamental meaning of his life. He had already completed the first act and a scene or two of the third. The metrical nature of the work allowed him to go over it continually, rectifying the hexameters, without recourse to the manuscript. He thought of the two acts still to do, and of his coming death. In the darkness, he addressed himself to God. If I exist at all, if I am not one of Your repetitions and errata, I exist as the author of *The Enemies*. In order to bring this drama, which may serve to justify me, to justify You, I need one more year. Grant me that year, You to whom belong the centuries and all time. It was the last, the most atrocious night, but ten minutes later sleep swept over him like a dark ocean and drowned him.

Toward dawn, he dreamt he had hidden himself in one of the naves of the Clementine Library. A librarian wearing dark glasses asked him: What are you looking for? Hladik answered: God. The Librarian told him: God is in one of the letters on one of the pages of one of the 400,000 volumes of the Clementine. My fathers and the fathers of my fathers have sought after that letter. I've gone blind looking for it. He removed his glasses, and Hladik saw that his eyes were dead. A reader came in to return an atlas. This atlas is useless, he said, and handed it to Hladik, who opened it at random. As if through a haze, he saw a map of India. With a sudden rush of assurance, he touched one of the tiniest letters. An ubiquitous voice said: The time for your work has been granted. Hladik awoke.

He remembered that the dreams of men belong to God, and that Maimonides wrote that the words of a dream are divine, when they are all separate and clear and are spoken by someone invisible. He dressed. Two soldiers entered his cell and ordered him to follow them.

From behind the door, Hladik had visualized a labyrinth of passageways, stairs, and connecting blocks. Reality was less rewarding: the party descended to an inner courtyard by a single iron stairway. Some soldiers - uniforms unbuttoned - were testing a motorcycle and disputing their conclusions. The sergeant looked at his watch: it was 8:44. They must wait until nine. Hladik, more insignificant than pitiful, sat down on a pile of firewood. He noticed that the soldiers' eyes avoided his. To make his wait easier, the sergeant offered him a cigarette. Hladik did not smoke. He accepted the cigarette out of politeness or humility. As he lit it, he saw that his hands shook. The day was clouding over. The soldiers spoke in low tones, as though he were already dead. Vainly, he strove to recall the woman of whom Julia de Weidenau was the symbol . . .

The firing squad fell in and was brought to attention. Hladik, standing against the barracks wall, waited for the volley. Someone expressed fear the wall would be splashed with blood. The condemned man was ordered to step forward a few paces. Hladik recalled, absurdly, the preliminary maneuvers of a photographer. A heavy drop of rain grazed one of Hladik's temples and slowly rolled down his cheek. The sergeant barked the final command.

The physical universe stood still.

The rifles converged upon Hladik, but the men assigned to pull the triggers were immobile. The sergeant's arm eternalized an inconclusive gesture. Upon a courtyard flag stone a bee cast a stationary shadow. The wind had halted, as in a painted picture. Hladik began a shriek, a syllable, a twist of the hand. He realized he was paralyzed. Not a sound reached him from the stricken world.

He thought: I'm in hell, I'm dead.

He thought: I've gone mad.

He thought: Time has come to a halt.

Then he reflected that in that case, his thought, too, would have come to a halt. He was anxious to test this possibility: he repeated (without moving his lips) the mysterious Fourth Eclogue of Virgil. He imagined that the already remote soldiers shared his anxiety; he longed to communicate with them. He was astonished that he felt no fatigue, no vertigo from his protracted immobility. After an indeterminate length of time he fell asleep. On awaking he found the world still motionless and numb. The drop of water still clung to his cheek; the shadow of the bee still did not shift in the courtyard; the smoke from the cigarette he had thrown down did not blow away. Another "day" passed before Hladik understood.

He had asked God for an entire year in which to finish his work: His omnipotence had granted him the time. For his sake, God projected a secret miracle: German lead would kill him, at the determined hour, but in his mind a year would elapse between the command to fire and its execution. From perplexity he passed to stupor, from stupor to resignation, from resignation to sudden gratitude.

He disposed of no document but his own memory; the mastering of each hexameter as he added it, had imposed upon him a kind of fortunate discipline not imagined by those amateurs who forget their vague, ephemeral, paragraphs. He did not work for posterity, nor even for God, of whose literary preferences he possessed scant knowledge. Meticulous, unmoving, secretive, he wove his lofty invisible labyrinth in time. He worked the third act over twice. He eliminated some rather too-obvious symbols: the repeated striking of the hour, the music. There were no circumstances to constrain him. He omitted, condensed, amplified; occasionally, he chose the primitive version. He grew to love the courtyard, the barracks; one of the faces endlessly confronting him made him modify his conception of Roemerstadt's character. He discovered that the hard cacophonies which so distressed Flaubert are mere visual superstitions: debilities and annoyances of the written word, not of the sonorous, the sounding one . . . He brought his drama to a conclusion: he lacked only a single epithet. He found it: the drop of water slid down his cheek. He began a wild cry, moved his face aside. A quadruple blast brought him down.

Jaromir Hladik died on March 29, at 9:02 in the morning.

## Three Versions of Judas

by Jorge Luis Borges

"There seemed a certainty in degradation." - T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

In Asia Minor or in Alexandria, in the second century of our faith (when Basilides was announcing that the cosmos was a rash and malevolent improvisation engineered by defective angels), Nils Runeberg might have directed, with a singular intellectual passion, one of the Gnostic conventicles. Dante would have destined him, perhaps, for a fiery sepulcher; his name might have augmented the catalogues of heresiarchs, between Saturnibus and Carpocrates; some fragment of his preaching, embellished with invective, might have been preserved in the apocryphal *Liber adversus omnes haereses* or might have perished when the firing of a monastic library consumed the last example of the *Syntagma*. Instead, God assigned him to the twentieth century, and to the university city of Lund. There, in 1904, he published the first edition of *Kristus och Judas*; there, in 1909, his masterpiece *Dem hemlige Frälsaren* appeared. (Of this last mentioned work there exists a German version, called *Der heimliche Heiland*, executed in 1912 by Emil Schering.)

Before undertaking an examination of the foregoing works, it is necessary to repeat that Nils Runeberg, a member of the National Evangelical Union, was deeply religious. In some salon in Paris, or even in Buenos Aires, a literary person might well rediscover Runeberg's theses; but these arguments, presented in such a setting, would seem like frivolous and idle exercises in irrelevance or blasphemy. To Runeberg they were the key with which to decipher a central mystery of theology; they were a matter of meditation and analysis, of historic and philologic controversy, of loftiness, of jubilation, and of terror. They justified, and destroyed, his life. Whoever peruses this essay should know that it states only Runeberg's conclusions, not his dialectic or his proof. Someone may observe that no doubt the conclusion preceded the "proofs" For who gives himself up to looking for proofs of something he does not believe in or the predication of which he does not care about?

The first edition of *Kristus och Judas* bears the following categorical epigraph, whose meaning, some years later, Nils Runeberg himself would monstrously dilate: Not one thing, but everything tradition attributes to Judas Iscariot is false. (De Quincey, 1857.) Preceded in his speculation by some German thinker, De Quincey opined that Judas had betrayed Jesus Christ in order to force him to declare his divinity and thus set off a vast rebellion against the yoke of Rome; Runeberg offers a metaphysical vindication. Skillfully, he begins by pointing out how superfluous was the act of Judas. He observes (as did Robertson) that in order to identify a master who daily preached in the synagogue and who performed miracles before gatherings of thousands, the treachery of an apostle is not necessary. This, nevertheless, occurred. To suppose an error in Scripture is intolerable; no less intolerable is it to admit that there was a single haphazard act in the most precious drama in the history of the world. Ergo, the treachery of Judas was not accidental; it was a predestined deed which has its mysterious place in the economy of the Redemption. Runeberg continues: The Word, when It was made flesh, passed from ubiquity into space, from eternity into history, from blessedness without limit to mutation and death; in order to correspond to such a sacrifice it was necessary that a man, as representative of all men, make a

suitable sacrifice. Judas Iscariot was that man. Judas, alone among the apostles, intuited the secret divinity and the terrible purpose of Jesus. The Word had lowered Himself to be mortal; Judas, the disciple of the Word, could lower himself to the role of informer (the worst transgression dishonor abides), and welcome the fire which can not be extinguished. The lower order is a mirror of the superior order, the forms of the earth correspond to the forms of the heavens; the stains on the skin are a map of the incorruptible constellations; Judas in some way reflects Jesus. Thus the thirty pieces of silver and the kiss; thus deliberate self-destruction, in order to deserve damnation all the more. In this manner did Nils Runeberg elucidate the enigma of Judas.

The theologians of all the confessions refuted him. Lars Peter Engström accused him of ignoring, or of confining to the past, the hypostatic union of the Divine Trinity; Axel Borelius charged him with renewing the heresy of the Docetists, who denied the humanity of Jesus; the sharp-edged bishop of Lund denounced him for contradicting the third verse of chapter twenty-two of the Gospel of St. Luke.

These various anathemas influenced Runeberg, who partially rewrote the disapproved book and modified his doctrine. He abandoned the terrain of theology to his adversaries and postulated oblique arguments of a moral order. He admitted that Jesus, "who could count on the considerable resources which Omnipotence offers," did not need to make use of a man to redeem all men. Later, he refuted those who affirm that we know nothing of the inexplicable traitor; we know, he said, that he was one of the apostles, one of those chosen to announce the Kingdom of Heaven, to cure the sick, to cleanse the leprous, to resurrect the dead, and to cast out demons (Matthew 10:7-8; Luke 9:1). A man whom the Redeemer has thus distinguished deserves from us the best interpretations of his deeds. To impute his crime to cupidity (as some have done, citing John 12:6) is to resign oneself to the most torpid motive force. Nils Runeberg proposes an opposite moving force: an extravagant and even limitless asceticism. The ascetic, for the greater glory of God, degrades and mortifies the flesh; Judas did the same with the spirit. He renounced honor, good, peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, as others, less heroically, renounced pleasure.<sup>1</sup> With a terrible lucidity he premeditated his offense.

In adultery, there is usually tenderness and self-sacrifice; in murder, courage; in profanation and blasphemy, a certain satanic splendor. Judas elected those offenses unvisited by any virtues: abuse of confidence (John 12 :6) and informing. He labored with gigantic humility; he thought himself unworthy to be good. Paul has written: Whoever glorifieth himself, let him glorify himself in God (I Corinthians 1:31); Judas sought Hell because the felicity of the Lord sufficed him. He thought that happiness, like good, is a divine attribute and not to be usurped by men.<sup>2</sup>

Many have discovered post factum that in the justifiable beginnings of Runeberg lies his extravagant end and that *Dem hemlige Frälsaren* is a mere perversion or exacerbation of Kristus och Judas. Toward the end of 1907, Runeberg finished and revised the manuscript text; almost two years passed without his handing it to the printer. In October of 1909, the book appeared with a prologue (tepid to the point of being enigmatic) by the Danish Hebraist Erik Erfjord and bearing this perfidious epigraph: In the world he was, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not (John 1:10). The general argument is not complex, even if the conclusion is monstrous. God, argues Nils Runeberg, lowered himself to be a man for the redemption of the

human race; it is reasonable to assume that the sacrifice offered by him was perfect, not invalidated or attenuated by any omission. To limit all that happened to the agony of one afternoon on the cross is blasphemous.<sup>3</sup> To affirm that he was a man and that he was incapable of sin contains a contradiction; the attributes of impeccabilitas and of humanitas are not compatible. Kemnitz admits that the Redeemer could feel fatigue, cold, confusion, hunger and thirst; it is reasonable to admit that he could also sin and be damned. The famous text "He will sprout like a root in a dry soil; there is not good mien to him, nor beauty; despised of men and the least of them; a man of sorrow, and experienced in heartbreaks" (Isaiah 53:2-3) is for many people a forecast of the Crucified in the hour of his death; for some (as for instance, Hans Lassen Martensen), it is a refutation of the beauty which the vulgar consensus attributes to Christ; for Runeberg, it is a precise prophecy, not of one moment, but of all the atrocious future, in time and eternity, of the Word made flesh. God became a man completely, a man to the point of infamy, a man to the point of being reprehensible - all the way to the abyss. In order to save us, He could have chosen any of the destinies which together weave the uncertain web of history; He could have been Alexander, or Pythagoras, or Rurik, or Jesus; He chose an infamous destiny: He was Judas.

In vain did the bookstores of Stockholm and Lund offer this revelation. The incredulous considered it, a priori, an insipid and laborious theological game; the theologians disdained it. Runeberg intuited from this universal indifference an almost miraculous confirmation. God had commanded this indifference; God did not wish His terrible secret propagated in the world. Runeberg understood that the hour had not yet come. He sensed ancient and divine curses converging upon him, he remembered Elijah and Moses, who covered their faces on the mountain top so as not to see God; he remembered Isaiah, who prostrated himself when his eyes saw That One whose glory fills the earth; Saul who was blinded on the road to Damascus; the rabbi Simon ben Azai, who saw Paradise and died; the famous soothsayer John of Viterbo, who went mad when he was able to see the Trinity; the Midrashim, abominating the impious who pronounce the Shem Hamephorash, the secret name of God. Wasn't he, perchance, guilty of this dark crime? Might not this be the blasphemy against the Spirit, the sin which will not be pardoned (Matthew 12:3)? Valerius Soranus died for having revealed the occult name of Rome; what infinite punishment would be his for having discovered and divulged the terrible name of God?

Intoxicated with insomnia and with vertiginous dialectic, Nils Runeberg wandered through the streets of Malmö, praying aloud that he be given the grace to share Hell with the Redeemer.

He died of the rupture of an aneurysm, the first day of March 1912. The writers on heresy, the heresiologists, will no doubt remember him; he added to the concept of the Son, which seemed exhausted, the complexities of calamity and evil.

<sup>1</sup> Borelius mockingly interrogates: Why did he not renounce to renounce? Why not renounce renouncing?

<sup>2</sup> Euclides da Cunha, in a book ignored by Runeberg, notes that for the heresiarch of Canudos, Antonio Conselheiro, virtue was "a kind of impiety almost." An Argentine reader could recall analogous passages in the work of Almafuerite. Runeberg published, in the symbolist sheet *Sju*

*insegel*, an assiduously descriptive poem, "The Secret Water": the first stanzas narrate the events of one tumultuous day; the last, the finding of a glacial pool; the poet suggests that the eternalness of this silent water checks our useless violence, and in some way allows and absolves it. The poem concludes in this way: *The water of the forest is still and felicitous, And we, we can be vicious and full of pain.*

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Abramowicz observes: "Jesus, d'apres ce scandinave, a toujours le beau role; ses deboires, grace a la science des typographes, jouissent d'une reputation polyglotte; sa residence de trente-trois ans parmi les humains ne fut, en somme, qu'une villegiature." Erfjord, in the third appendix to the *Christelige Dogmatik*, refutes this passage. He writes that the crucifying of God has not ceased, for anything which has happened once in time is repeated ceaselessly through all eternity. Judas, now, continues to receive the pieces of silver; he continues to hurl the pieces of silver in the temple; he continues to knot the hangman's noose on the field of blood. (Erfjord, to justify this affirmation, invokes the last chapter of the first volume of the *Vindication of Eternity*, by Jaromir Hladik.)

### **Excerpted from *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* by Jorge Luis Borges**

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5/30/2006

## The Aleph

O God! I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a King of infinite space...  
*Hamlet*, II, 2

But they will teach us that Eternity is the Standing still of the Present Time, a *Nunc-stans* (as the schools call it); which neither they, nor any else understand, no more than they would a *Hic-stans* for an Infinite greatness of Place.  
*Leviathan*, IV, 46

On the burning February morning Beatriz Viterbo died, after braving an agony that never for a single moment gave way to self-pity or fear, I noticed that the sidewalk billboards around Constitution Plaza were advertising some new brand or other of American cigarettes. The fact pained me, for I realised that the wide and ceaseless universe was already slipping away from her and that this slight change was the first of an endless series. The universe may change but not me, I thought with a certain sad vanity. I knew that at times my fruitless devotion had annoyed her; now that she was dead, I could devote myself to her memory, without hope but also without humiliation. I recalled that the thirtieth of April was her birthday; on that day to visit her house on Garay Street and pay my respects to her father and to Carlos Argentino Daneri, her first cousin, would be an irreproachable and perhaps unavoidable act of politeness. Once again I would wait in the twilight of the small, cluttered drawing room, once again I would study the details of her many photographs: Beatriz Viterbo in profile and in full colour; Beatriz wearing a



mask, during the Carnival of 1921; Beatriz at her First Communion; Beatriz on the day of her wedding to Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz soon after her divorce, at a luncheon at the Turf Club; Beatriz at a seaside resort in Quilmes with Delia San Marco Porcel and Carlos Argentino; Beatriz with the Pekingesep lapdog given her by Villegas Haedo; Beatriz, front and three-quarter views, smiling, hand on her chin... I would not be forced, as in the past, to justify my presence with modest offerings of books -- books whose pages I finally learned to cut beforehand, so as not to find out, months later, that they lay around unopened.

Beatriz Viterbo died in 1929. From that time on, I never let a thirtieth of April go by without a visit to her house. I used to make my appearance at seven-fifteen sharp and stay on for some twenty-five minutes. Each year, I arrived a little later and stay a little longer. In 1933, a torrential downpour coming to my aid, they were obliged to ask me for dinner. Naturally, I took advantage of that lucky precedent. In 1934, I arrived, just after eight, with one of those large Santa Fe sugared cakes, and quite matter-of-factly I stayed to dinner. It was in this way, on these melancholy and vainly erotic anniversaries, that I came into the gradual confidences of Carlos Argentino Daneri.

Beatriz had been tall, frail, slightly stooped; in her walk there was (if the oxymoron may be allowed) a kind of uncertain grace, a hint of expectancy. Carlos Argentino was pink-faced, overweight, gray-haired, fine-featured. He held a minor position in an unreadable library out on the edge of the Southside of Buenos Aires. He was authoritarian but also unimpressive. Until only recently, he took advantage of his nights and holidays to stay at home. At a remove of two generations, the Italian "S" and demonstrative Italian gestures still survived in him. His mental activity was continuous, deeply felt, far-ranging, and -- all in all -- meaningless. He dealt in pointless analogies and in trivial scruples. He had (as did Beatriz) large, beautiful, finely shaped hands. For several months he seemed to be obsessed with Paul Fort -- less with his ballads than with the idea of a towering reputation. "He is the Prince of poets," Daneri would repeat fatuously. "You will belittle him in vain -- but no, not even the most venomous of your shafts will graze him."

On the thirtieth of April, 1941, along with the sugared cake I allowed myself to add a bottle of Argentine cognac. Carlos Argentino tasted it, pronounced it "interesting," and, after a few drinks, launched into a glorification of modern man.

"I view him," he said with a certain unaccountable excitement, "in his inner sanctum, as though in his castle tower, supplied with telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, wireless sets, motion-picture screens, slide projectors, glossaries, timetables, handbooks, bulletins..."

He remarked that for a man so equipped, actual travel was superfluous. Our twentieth century had inverted the story of Mohammed and the mountain; nowadays, the mountain came to the modern Mohammed.

So foolish did his ideas seem to me, so pompous and so drawn out his exposition, that I linked them at once to literature and asked him why he didn't write them down. As might be foreseen, he answered that he had already done so -- that these ideas, and others no less striking, had found their place in the Proem, or Augural Canto, or, more simply, the Prologue Canto of the poem on

which he had been working for many years now, alone, without publicity, with fanfare, supported only by those twin staffs universally known as work and solitude. First, he said, he opened the floodgates of his fancy; then, taking up hand tools, he resorted to the file. The poem was entitled *The Earth*; it consisted of a description of the planet, and, of course, lacked no amount of picturesque digressions and bold apostrophes.

I asked him to read me a passage, if only a short one. He opened a drawer of his writing table, drew out a thick stack of papers -- sheets of a large pad imprinted with the letterhead of the Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur Library -- and, with ringing satisfaction, declaimed:

Mine eyes, as did the Greek's, have known men's  
towns and fame,  
The works, the days in light that fades to amber;  
I do not change a fact or falsify a name --  
The *voyage* I set down is... *autour de ma chambre*.

"From any angle, a greatly interesting stanza," he said, giving his verdict. "The opening line wins the applause of the professor, the academician, and the Hellenist -- to say nothing of the would-be scholar, a considerable sector of the public. The second flows from Homer to Hesiod (generous homage, at the very outset, to the father of didactic poetry), not without rejuvenating a process whose roots go back to Scripture -- enumeration, congeries, conglomeration. The third -- baroque? decadent? example of the cult of pure form? -- consists of two equal hemistichs. The fourth, frankly bilingual, assures me the unstinted backing of all minds sensitive to the pleasures of sheer fun. I should, in all fairness, speak of the novel rhyme in lines two and four, and of the erudition that allows me -- without a hint of pedantry! -- to cram into four lines three learned allusions covering thirty centuries packed with literature -- first to the *Odyssey*, second to *Works and Days*, and third to the immortal bagatelle bequeathed us by the frolicking pen of the Savoyard, Xavier de Maistre. Once more I've come to realise that modern art demands the balm of laughter, the scherzo. Decidedly, Goldoni holds the stage!"

He read me many other stanzas, each of which also won his own approval and elicited his lengthy explications. There was nothing remarkable about them. I did not even find them any worse than the first one. Application, resignation, and chance had gone into the writing; I saw, however, that Daneri's real work lay not in the poetry but in his invention of reasons why the poetry should be admired. Of course, this second phase of his effort modified the writing in his eyes, though not in the eyes of others. Daneri's style of delivery was extravagant, but the deadly drone of his metric regularity tended to tone down and to dull that extravagance.

[Among my memories are also some lines of a satire in which he lashed out unsparingly at bad poets. After accusing them of dressing their poems in the warlike armour of erudition, and of flapping in vain their unavailing wings, he concluded with this verse:

But they forget, alas, one foremost fact -- BEAUTY!

Only the fear of creating an army of implacable and powerful enemies dissuaded him (he told me) from fearlessly publishing this poem.]

Only once in my life have I had occasion to look into the fifteen thousand alexandrines of the *Polyolbion*, that topographical epic in which Michael Drayton recorded the flora, fauna, hydrography, orography, military and monastic history of England. I am sure, however, that this limited but bulky production is less boring than Carlos Argentino's similar vast undertaking. Daneri had in mind to set to verse the entire face of the planet, and, by 1941, had already dispatched a number of acres of the State of Queensland, nearly a mile of the course run by the River Ob, a gasworks to the north of Veracruz, the leading shops in the Buenos Aires parish of Concepción, the villa of Mariana Cambaceres de Alvear in the Belgrano section of the Argentine capital, and a Turkish baths establishment not far from the well-known Brighton Aquarium. He read me certain long-winded passages from his Australian section, and at one point praised a word of his own coining, the colour "celestewhite," which he felt "actually *suggests* the sky, an element of utmost importance in the landscape of the Down Under." But these sprawling, lifeless hexameters lacked even the relative excitement of the so-called Augural Canto. Along about midnight, I left.

Two Sundays later, Daneri rang me up -- perhaps for the first time in his life. He suggested we get together at four o'clock "for cocktails in the salon-bar next door, which the forward-looking Zunino and Zungri -- my landlords, as you doubtless recall -- are throwing open to the public. It's a place you'll really want to get to know."

More in resignation than in pleasure, I accepted. Once there, it was hard to find a table. The "salon-bar," ruthlessly modern, was only barely less ugly than what I had expected; at the nearby tables, the excited customers spoke breathlessly of the sums Zunino and Zungri had invested in furnishings without a second thought to cost. Carlos Argentino pretended to be astonished by some feature or other of the lighting arrangement (with which, I felt, he was already familiar), and he said to me with a certain severity, "Grudgingly, you'll have to admit to the fact that these premises hold their own with many others far more in the public eye."

He then reread me four or five different fragments of the poem. He had revised them following his pet principle of verbal ostentation: where at first "blue" had been good enough, he now wallowed in "azures," "ceruleans," and "ultramarines." The word "milky" was too easy for him; in the course of an impassioned description of a shed where wool was washed, he chose such words as "lacteal," "lactescent," and even made one up -- "lactinacious." After that, straight out, he condemned our modern mania for having books prefaced, "a practice already held up to scorn by the Prince of Wits in his own grafeful preface to the *Quixote*." He admitted, however, that for the opening of his new work an attention-getting foreword might prove valuable -- "an accolade signed by a literary hand of renown." He next went on to say that he considered publishing the initial cantos of his poem. I then began to understand the unexpected telephone call; Daneri was going to ask me to contribute a foreword to his pedantic hodgepodge. My fear turned out unfounded; Carlos Argentino remarked, with admiration and envy, that surely he could not be far wrong in qualifying with the epithet "solid" the prestige enjoyed in every circle by Álvaro Melián Lafinur, a man of letters, who would, if I insisted on it, be only too glad to dash off some charming opening words to the poem. In order to avoid ignominy and failure, he suggested I make myself spokesman for two of the book's undeniable virtues -- formal perfection and scientific rigour -- "inasmuch as this wide garden of metaphors, of figures of speech, of

elegances, is inhospitable to the least detail not strictly upholding of truth." He added that Beatriz had always been taken with Álvaro.

I agreed -- agreed profusely -- and explained for the sake of credibility that I would not speak to Álvaro the next day, Monday, but would wait until Thursday, when we got together for the informal dinner that follows every meeting of the Writers' Club. (No such dinners are ever held, but it is an established fact that the meetings do take place on Thursdays, a point which Carlos Argentino Daneri could verify in the daily papers, and which lent a certain reality to my promise.) Half in prophecy, half in cunning, I said that before taking up the question of a preface I would outline the unusual plan of the work. We then said goodbye.

Turning the corner of Bernardo de Irigoyen, I reviewed as impartially as possible the alternatives before me. They were: *a*) to speak to Álvaro, telling him the first cousin of Beatriz' (the explanatory euphemism would allow me to mention her name) had concocted a poem that seemed to draw out into infinity the possibilities of cacophony and chaos: *b*) not to say a word to Álvaro. I clearly foresaw that my indolence would opt for *b*.

But first thing Friday morning, I began worrying about the telephone. It offended me that that device, which had once produced the irrecoverable voice of Beatriz, could now sink so low as to become a mere receptacle for the futile and perhaps angry remonstrances of that deluded Carlos Argentino Daneri. Luckily, nothing happened -- except the inevitable spite touched off in me by this man, who had asked me to fulfill a delicate mission for him and then had let me drop.

Gradually, the phone came to lose its terrors, but one day toward the end of October it rang, and Carlos Argentino was on the line. He was deeply disturbed, so much so that at the outset I did not recognise his voice. Sadly but angrily he stammered that the now unrestrainable Zunino and Zungri, under the pretext of enlarging their already outsized "salon-bar," were about to take over and tear down this house.

"My home, my ancestral home, my old and inveterate Garay Street home!" he kept repeating, seeming to forget his woe in the music of his words.

It was not hard for me to share his distress. After the age of fifty, all change becomes a hateful symbol of the passing of time. Besides, the scheme concerned a house that for me would always stand for Beatriz. I tried explaining this delicate scruple of regret, but Daneri seemed not to hear me. He said that if Zunino and Zungri persisted in this outrage, Doctor Zunni, his lawyer, would sue *ipso facto* and make them pay some fifty thousand dollars in damages.

Zunni's name impressed me; his firm, although at the unlikely address of Caseros and Tacuarí, was nonetheless known as an old and reliable one. I asked him whether Zunni had already been hired for the case. Daneri said he would phone him that very afternoon. He hesitated, then with that level, impersonal voice we reserve for confiding something intimate, he said that to finish the poem he could not get along without the house because down in the cellar there was an Aleph. He explained that an Aleph is one of the points in space that contains all other points.

"It's in the cellar under the dining room," he went on, so overcome by his worries now that he forgot to be pompous. "It's mine -- mine. I discovered it when I was a child, all by myself. The cellar stairway is so steep that my aunt and uncle forbade my using it, but I'd heard someone say there was a world down there. I found out later they meant an old-fashioned globe of the world, but at the time I thought they were referring to the world itself. One day when no one was home I started down in secret, but I stumbled and fell. When I opened my eyes, I saw the Aleph."

"The Aleph?" I repeated.

"Yes, the only place on earth where all places are -- seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending. I kept the discovery to myself and went back every chance I got. As a child, I did not foresee that this privilege was granted me so that later I could write the poem. Zunino and Zungri will not strip me of what's mine -- no, and a thousand times no! Legal code in hand, Doctor Zunni will prove that my Aleph is inalienable."

I tried to reason with him. "But isn't the cellar very dark?" I said.

"Truth cannot penetrate a closed mind. If all places in the universe are in the Aleph, then all stars, all lamps, all sources of light are in it, too."

"You wait there. I'll be right over to see it."

I hung before he could say no. The full knowledge of a fact sometimes enables you to see all at once many supporting but previously unsuspected things. It amazed me not to have suspected until that moment that Carlos Argentino was a madman. As were all the Viterbos, when you came down to it. Beatriz (I myself often say it) was a woman, a child, with almost uncanny powers of clairvoyance, but forgetfulness, distractions, contempt, and a streak of cruelty were also in her, and perhaps these called for a pathological explanation. Carlos Argentino's madness filled me with spiteful elation. Deep down, we had always detested each other.

On Garay Street, the maid asked me kindly to wait. The master was, as usual, in the cellar developing pictures. On the unplayed piano, beside a large vase that held no flowers, smiled (more timeless than belonging to the past) the large photograph of Beatriz, in gaudy colours. Nobody could see us; in a seizure of tenderness, I drew close to the portrait and said to it, "Beatriz, Beatriz Elena, Beatriz Elena Viterbo, darling Beatriz, Beatriz now gone forever, it's me, it's Borges."

Moments later, Carlos came in. He spoke dryly. I could see he was thinking of nothing else but the loss of the Aleph.

"First a glass of pseudo-cognac," he ordered, "and then down you dive into the cellar. Let me warn you, you'll have to lie flat on your back. Total darkness, total immobility, and a certain ocular adjustment will also be necessary. From the floor, you must focus your eyes on the nineteenth step. Once I leave you, I'll lower the trapdoor and you'll be quite alone. You needn't fear the rodents very much -- though I know you will. In a minute or two, you'll see the Aleph --

the microcosm of the alchemists and Kabbalists, our true proverbial friend, the *multum in parvo!*"

Once we were in the dining room, he added, "Of course, if you don't see it, your incapacity will not invalidate what I have experienced. Now, down you go. In a short while you can babble with *all of Beatriz' images.*"

Tired of his inane words, I quickly made my way. The cellar, barely wider than the stairway itself, was something of a pit. My eyes searched the dark, looking in vain for the globe Carlos Argentino had spoken of. Some cases of empty bottles and some canvas sacks cluttered one corner. Carlos picked up a sack, folded it in two, and at a fixed spot spread it out.

"As a pillow," he said, "this is quite threadbare, but if it's padded even a half-inch higher, you won't see a thing, and there you'll lie, feeling ashamed and ridiculous. All right now, sprawl that hulk of yours there on the floor and count off nineteen steps."

I went through with his absurd requirements, and at last he went away. The trapdoor was carefully shut. The blackness, in spite of a chink that I later made out, seemed to me absolute. For the first time, I realised the danger I was in: I'd let myself be locked in a cellar by a lunatic, after gulping down a glassful of poison! I knew that back of Carlos' transparent boasting lay a deep fear that I might not see the promised wonder. To keep his madness undetected, to keep from admitting he was mad, *Carlos had to kill me.* I felt a shock of panic, which I tried to pin to my uncomfortable position and not to the effect of a drug. I shut my eyes -- I opened them. Then I saw the Aleph.

I arrive now at the ineffable core of my story. And here begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols: to signify the godhead, one Persian speaks of a bird that somehow is all birds; Alanus de Insulis, of a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere; Ezekiel, of a four-faced angel who at one and the same time moves east and west, north and south. (Not in vain do I recall these inconceivable analogies; they bear some relation to the Aleph.) Perhaps the gods might grant me a similar metaphor, but then this account would become contaminated by literature, by fiction. Really, what I want to do is impossible, for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal. In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive. Nonetheless, I'll try to recollect what I can.

On the back part of the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance. At first I thought it was revolving; then I realised that this movement was an illusion created by the dizzying world it bounded. The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery

cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me; I saw in a backyard of Soler Street the same tiles that thirty years before I'd seen in the entrance of a house in Fray Bentos; I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam; I saw convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of sand; I saw a woman in Inverness whom I shall never forget; I saw her tangled hair, her tall figure, I saw the cancer in her breast; I saw a ring of baked mud in a sidewalk, where before there had been a tree; I saw a summer house in Adrogué and a copy of the first English translation of Pliny -- Philemon Holland's -- and all at the same time saw each letter on each page (as a boy, I used to marvel that the letters in a closed book did not get scrambled and lost overnight); I saw a sunset in Querétaro that seemed to reflect the colour of a rose in Bengal; I saw my empty bedroom; I saw in a closet in Alkmaar a terrestrial globe between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly; I saw horses with flowing manes on a shore of the Caspian Sea at dawn; I saw the delicate bone structure of a hand; I saw the survivors of a battle sending out picture postcards; I saw in a showcase in Mirzapur a pack of Spanish playing cards; I saw the slanting shadows of ferns on a greenhouse floor; I saw tigers, pistons, bison, tides, and armies; I saw all the ants on the planet; I saw a Persian astrolabe; I saw in the drawer of a writing table (and the handwriting made me tremble) unbelievable, obscene, detailed letters, which Beatriz had written to Carlos Argentino; I saw a monument I worshipped in the Chacarita cemetery; I saw the rotted dust and bones that had once deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo; I saw the circulation of my own dark blood; I saw the coupling of love and the modification of death; I saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth; I saw my own face and my own bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon -- the unimaginable universe.

I felt infinite wonder, infinite pity.

"Feeling pretty cockeyed, are you, after so much spying into places where you have no business?" said a hated and jovial voice. "Even if you were to rack your brains, you couldn't pay me back in a hundred years for this revelation. One hell of an observatory, eh, Borges?"

Carlos Argentino's feet were planted on the topmost step. In the sudden dim light, I managed to pick myself up and utter, "One hell of a -- yes, one hell of a."

The matter-of-factness of my voice surprised me. Anxiously, Carlos Argentino went on.

"Did you see everything -- really clear, in colours?"

At that moment I found my revenge. Kindly, openly pitying him, distraught, evasive, I thanked Carlos Argentino Daneri for the hospitality of his cellar and urged him to make the most of the demolition to get away from the pernicious metropolis, which spares no one -- believe me, I told him, no one! Quietly and forcefully, I refused to discuss the Aleph. On saying goodbye, I embraced him and repeated that the country, that fresh air and quiet were the great physicians.

Out on the street, going down the stairways inside Constitution Station, riding the subway, every one of the faces seemed familiar to me. I was afraid that not a single thing on earth would ever again surprise me; I was afraid I would never again be free of all I had seen. Happily, after a few sleepless nights, I was visited once more by oblivion.

*Postscript of March first, 1943* -- Some six months after the pulling down of a certain building on Garay Street, Procrustes & Co., the publishers, not put off by the considerable length of Daneri's poem, brought out a selection of its "Argentine sections". It is redundant now to repeat what happened. Carlos Argentino Daneri won the Second National Prize for Literature. ["I received your pained congratulations," he wrote me. "You rage, my poor friend, with envy, but you must confess -- even if it chokes you! -- that this time I have crowned my cap with the reddest of feathers; my turban with the most *caliph* of rubies."] First Prize went to Dr. Aita; Third Prize, to Dr. Mario Bonfanti. Unbelievably, my own book *The Sharper's Cards* did not get a single vote. Once again dullness and envy had their triumph! It's been some time now that I've been trying to see Daneri; the gossip is that a second selection of the poem is about to be published. His felicitous pen (no longer cluttered by the Aleph) has now set itself the task of writing an epic on our national hero, General San Martín.

I want to add two final observations: one, on the nature of the Aleph; the other, on its name. As is well known, the Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Its use for the strange sphere in my story may not be accidental. For the Kabbala, the letter stands for the *En Soph*, the pure and boundless godhead; it is also said that it takes the shape of a man pointing to both heaven and earth, in order to show that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher; for Cantor's *Mengenlehre*, it is the symbol of transfinite numbers, of which any part is as great as the whole. I would like to know whether Carlos Argentino chose that name or whether he read it -- applied to another point where all points converge - - in one of the numberless texts that the Aleph in his cellar revealed to him. Incredible as it may seem, I believe that the Aleph of Garay Street was a false Aleph.

Here are my reasons. Around 1867, Captain Burton held the post of British Consul in Brazil. In July, 1942, Pedro Henriquez Ureña came across a manuscript of Burton's, in a library at Santos, dealing with the mirror which the Oriental world attributes to Iskander Zu al-Karnayn, or Alexander Bicornis of Macedonia. In its crystal the whole world was reflected. Burton mentions other similar devices -- the sevenfold cup of Kai Kosru; the mirror that Tariq ibn-Ziyad found in a tower (*Thousand and One Nights*, 272); the mirror that Lucian of Samosata examined on the moon (*True History*, I, 26); the mirrorlike spear that the first book of Capella's *Satyricon* attributes; Merlin's universal mirror, which was "round and hollow... and seem'd a world of glas" (*The Faerie Queene*, III, 2, 19) -- and adds this curious statement: "But the aforesaid objects (besides the disadvantage of not existing) are mere optical instruments. The Faithful who gather at the mosque of Amr, in Cairo, are acquainted with the fact that the entire universe lies inside one of the stone pillars that ring its central court... No one, of course, can actually see it, but those who lay an ear against the surface tell that after some short while they perceive its busy hum... The mosque dates from the seventh century; the pillars come from other temples of pre-Islamic religions, since, as ibn-Khaldun has written: 'In nations founded by nomads, the aid of foreigners is essential in all concerning masonry.'"



Does this Aleph exist in the heart of a stone? Did I see it there in the cellar when I saw all things, and have I now forgotten it? Our minds are porous and forgetfulness seeps in; I myself am distorting and losing, under the wearing away of the years, the face of Beatriz.

*El Aleph*, 1945. Translation by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni in collaboration with the author.