

Games With Infinity. The Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges¹

Introduction by John Tranter

On and off for many years, and most energetically in the mid-1970s, Martin Johnston made his living as a “man of letters”, writing poetry because he loved it, and writing essays and book reviews because he had to pay the rent. He reviewed books on topics ranging from chess to surfing, from Bob Dylan to the Hell’s Angels, from witchcraft to science fiction, and he wrote for a wide range of publications and occasions. His wide reading and extraordinary memory made him a natural. Everything he had ever read was available at a moment’s notice, and he had read more widely than most people. As Martin Duwell notes, he was “a superb reviewer, marshalling erudition not to smother the books he reviewed but to illuminate them”.

Along with poetry and chess, speculative fiction was one of Martin’s passions. For him the gap between *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine and *The Name of the Rose* was simply the breadth of the genre. The magical realm of the blind librarian Jorge Luis Borges lay at the centre of that map. Martin was one of the first Australian writers to discover and trace the work of writers like Borges, Calvino, and Cortázar, as their books first began to appear in Australia. The essay on Borges, “Games with Infinity”, was written in the early 1970s, when Martin was in his twenties. At that time Borges was just becoming known in Australia, and the essay was designed partly to introduce his work to a new audience.

John Tranter

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*The misfortune is that no sooner has one
discussed something than he is the thing himself*
Kierkegaard, *Papier I A 333*

1

Three disclaimers. First. This is a moderately reworked version of a paper delivered to Sydney University Literary Society. Relevant events since then: Jonathan Cape have published *The Aleph*, a misleadingly titled (it is not a translation of *El Aleph*) collection of short stories, including a number of early Buenos Aires genre pieces, with an autobiographical fragment and a set of characteristically evasive and/or Delphic notes (“I wanted to write a detective story in the style of Chesterton”). Beyond reinforcing the suspicion that Borges is increasingly returning to the local themes of his earliest stories, and the certainty that he unabatedly enjoys giving critics the finger (“He was very kind to me; he pointed out things in my work I had never even thought of”) this book fills a number of gaps but adds nothing new. Consequently I have, by and large, ignored it. I have also ignored (because I haven’t read them) his collaborative H. Bustos Domecq stories. Another relevant event: Borges, invited to the 1972 Adelaide Festival of Arts (in South Australia), failed to turn up. I, uninvited, failed to turn up also. I’m not sure whether the Festival has affected this paper. Thus the differences between the paper as it stands and as it was first given are generally the product of fermentation and not new knowledge.

Second. The emphasis is ideational and not stylistic. One obvious reason for this is that Borges’s interest and influence outside the Hispanic culture is ideational in the same way as is that of Kafka and much of Rilke. We are not, most of us, particularly well versed in the pros and cons of Gongorism, the heritage of Güiraldes and Quevedo, the proper placing of gaucho usages. I’m certainly not. And the metaphysical, symbolic and imagistic content of Borges’s work is quite enough to keep anyone going. Another reason is:

Third. My Spanish is minimal. The writer with whom I am dealing is therefore Borges-in-English. *Tradittore=traduttore*, granted, but the two Borgeses clearly have a lot in common; a Venn diagram would show a hell of a large shaded area of coextension. In any case, (a) Borges-in-

English is one of the greatest living English writers; (b), I can hide behind Borges himself, whose “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote” seems to me the final statement on translation and is aware of the problems.

2

Three quotations. Best perhaps to open a necessarily tentative and perhaps a little presumptuous discussion such as this with a set of remarks by Borges which may serve to indicate the parameters of his preoccupations and by extension, here, mine.

First, from his Epilogue to his collection of critical and philosophical essays, *Other Inquisitions* (*Otras Inquisiciones*, Buenos Aires 1952; translated 1965):

As I corrected the proofs of this volume, I discovered two tendencies in these miscellaneous essays. The first tendency is to equate religious or philosophical ideas on the basis of their aesthetic worth and even for what is singular or marvellous about them. Perhaps this is an indication of a basic skepticism. The other tendency is to presuppose (and to verify) that the number of fables and metaphors of which men’s imagination is capable is limited, but that these few inventions can be all things to all men, like the Apostle.

Second, from the short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, in *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires 1935-44; translated 1962). Borges is here describing the philosophical systems of the doubly imaginary world of Tlön, a world run on Berkeleyan idealist principles in which *esse est percipi* is literally true:

The metaphysicians of Tlön are not looking for truth, nor even for an approximation of it; they are after a kind of amazement. They consider metaphysics a branch of fantastic literature. They know that a system is nothing more than the subordination of all the aspects of the universe to some one of them...

Third, from the interview with Borges in the *Paris Review*, Winter-Spring 1967. The interviewer has suggested that “Some readers have found that your stories are cold, impersonal, rather like some of the newer French writers. Is that your intention?” And Borges replies:

No. If that has happened, it is out of mere clumsiness. Because I have felt them very deeply. I have felt them so deeply that I have told them, well, using strange symbols so that people might not find out that they were all more or less autobiographical. The stories were all about myself, my personal experiences. I suppose it’s the English diffidence, no?

3

I take it that the connections are reasonably clear, but perhaps they ought to be emphasised anyway. The opinions Borges imputes to the imaginary denizens of an imaginary planet are his own opinions. The world of Tlön is one in which Berkeleyan idealism is *true*; it is also, as Borges carefully points out elsewhere in the story, one in which idealism is *believed in*. The two do not, of course, necessarily, go together; on the one hand such a world-view is as impossible to prove as it is to disprove, and on the other Borges is very much aware - none better - of the fact that in our world one can be fairly certain that no philosophy will correspond to reality in this way.

Russell was of opinion that there is somehow a correspondence of parts, an almost tactile correspondence (one might - metaphorically - say), between, say, a chair and one's perception of a chair; but he did not suggest that the perception is of necessity useful in determining the nature of the chair-in-itself, the quiddity of the chair, just as musical notation or chess notation are not helpful in extrapolating the interrelationships of sound in a Beethoven quartet or the play of forces in a Spassky *bauerstrom*, unless one has at hand the "pantographic" key, the nature of the correspondences between thing and symbol, which is what, so far as perception and interpretation is concerned, we haven't.

Similarly, the early Wittgenstein maintained that a proposition was a model, or picture of reality; but one should remember that it was also Wittgenstein (or rather, Wittgenstein II, as it has become fashionable to call the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* as opposed to the younger and more "positivistic" author of the *Tractatus*) who, walking past a field where football was being played, developed the theory that philosophy was a "language game", a phrase which could easily be one of Borges's (and quite possibly is). In *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Norman Malcolm cites the following incident:

Wittgenstein and P. Sraffa, a lecturer in economics at Cambridge, argued together a great deal over the ideas of the *Tractatus*. One day (they were riding, I think, on a train) when Wittgenstein was insisting that a proposition and that which it describes must have the same "logical form", the same "logical multiplicity", Sraffa made a gesture, familiar to Neapolitans as meaning something like disgust or contempt, of brushing the underneath of his chin with an outward sweep of the finger-tips of one hand. And he asked: "What is the logical form of that?" Sraffa's example produced in Wittgenstein the feeling that there was an absurdity in the insistence that a proposition and what it describes must have the same "form".

Borges, I feel certain, would be with Sraffa, only more so. It would be nice if he could be persuaded to write that long overdue reply to R.P. Blackmur, *Gesture as Language*.

4

With mild apologies: two more quotations suggestive of Borges's (with rather frantic apologies) *Weltanschauung*.

Bertrand Russell, in the *History of Western Philosophy*, on Hegel's chivvying of world history from Pure Being towards the Absolute Idea:

Nor is there any reason, if reality is timeless, why the later parts of the progress should embody higher categories than the earlier parts - unless one were to adopt the blasphemous supposition that the Universe was gradually learning Hegel's philosophy.

The pragmatist philosopher F.C.S. Schiller, in "A Commentary on the Snark" (*Mind*, December 1901):

Now, Lewis Carroll, as a man of sense, did not believe in the Absolute, but he recognised that it could be best dealt with in parables.

5

To return, belatedly, to Tlön. There is in Borges, as there was in Russell ("I have sought knowledge ... I have tried to apprehend the Pythagorean power by which number holds away above the flux" - *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Prologue), a profound, unsatisfied longing, a felt need, for truth: Truth, I mean, in the strictest, the most rigid philosophical sense. Both - almost needless to say - came at last to acknowledge failure and disappointment.

The world of Tlön is, among other things, a deeply ironic wish-fulfilment. Ironic because, firstly, it is an imaginary world, "discovered", as the author puts it, "by the fortunate conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopaedia", and secondly because it is twice a fiction: it is brought out in the story that it has been invented by a secret society of idealists, including Berkeley himself. The irony is only reinforced by the intrusion of Borges's own hopes into the story: objects of Tlön start appearing in our world, Tlön starts taking over:

Contact with Tlön and the ways of Tlön have disintegrated this world. Captivated, by its discipline, humanity forgets and goes on forgetting that it is the discipline of chess players, not of angels. Now,

the conjectural "primitive language" of Tlön has found its way into the schools. Now, in all memories, a fictitious past occupies the place of any other. We know nothing with any certainty about it, not even that it is false. Numismatics, pharmacology and archaeology have been revised. I gather that biology and mathematics are awaiting their avatar ... A scattered dynasty of solitaries has changed the face of the world. Its task continues. If our foresight is not mistaken, a hundred years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of the *Second Encyclopaedia of Tlön*. Then, English, French and mere Spanish will disappear from this planet. The world will be Tlön. I take no notice. I go on revising, in the quiet of the days in the hotel at Androgé, a tentative translation into Spanish, in the style of Quevedo, which I do not intend to see published, of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*.

The intrusion of Tlön does not signify the conversion of one world or the other into something somehow more "real"; it only emphasises the unreality - the epistemological unreality - of the world into which it intrudes. The artist, meanwhile, gets on with his work.

6

Borges's view of things, which I have tried rather obliquely to indicate in the foregoing is, I think probably the most genuinely tragic held by any important writer in our time.

Eliot, before affixing himself to the nipple of the Church's ample breast, was taken by some to be an extreme pessimist, but his philosophy, so far as it was immediately applicable to the affairs of men, was after all essentially a Golden-age one, which is nothing more than utopianism reversed. Things having been beaut once, there is, along these lines, no *logical* reason why they can't be beaut again. Eliot, one notes (after remarking rather snidely that *The Waste Land* may have expressed people's "illusion of being disillusioned"), galumphed off on the proselytising trail, something quite unimaginable in the case of Borges.

Beckett, who is occasionally compared to Borges as a fellow-reductionist, I think speciously, creates people who cannot communicate with one another; but it is an empirical, to a degree a historical *cannot*, it's not built into the nature of things. There are enough open ends in the novels (in *Murphy* the tension between the vaguely Oblo-movomorph hero and the vibrantly alive cityscapes, in *Watt* the Flann O'Brien-like game-dialectic of Watt and Knott, and so. on), and in the plays, or some of them (the profusion of redemption imagery in *Godot*, the very title of *Endgame* - as the great chess theorist Siegbert Tarrasch

said, "Before the endgame the gods have placed the middle game"), to suggest an infinity of alternate human possibilities.

Even existentialism offers such escape-routes from unknowing as Sartre's Marxism, Colin Wilson's *Bier-und-Pretzel-Existentialismus*, Kierkegaard's nocturnal leaping efforts, and the ur-existentialist Dostoevsky's antitheses of the Kirilov/Stavrogin variety. Even Italo Calvino, a metaphysical reductionist if ever there was one and probably closer to Borges in themes and methods than any other contemporary writer, starts with disciplines like mathematics and biology which are *supposed* to be reductive and categorizing and then exploits their unperceived richness (in *Cosmicomics* and *Time and the Hunter*) or gives his *Cloven Viscount* or *Non-existent Knight* a texture of being which is as intricate and accessible as that of his occasional merely human characters.

Borges, on the contrary, starts by questioning all the constructs and interpretations we impose upon reality: language, modes of perception, modes of thought. All, to him, are more or less formalised, which is to say ritualised, orderings of a reality which may have no order at all, or an order which is simply not accessible to us, or which corresponds only accidentally, or never, with our versions of it; we do not, and cannot know. This is not to say that the universe is, in the Ionesco or Martin Esslin sense, 'absurd'; to assert that it is would, from the Borgesian point of view, be as unfounded as to espouse the Great Chain of Being, imitate the metaphysico-theo-logo-cosmo-lonigologist Pangloss, or parrot the *Essay on Man*. We don't know that either. There is, after all, a perfectly good anti-causal pattern to the Absurdist schema of things.

This philosophy of Borges's, if that is not too formulaic a way of putting it, is one that has been approximated to more by poets, novelists and linguistically minded anthropologists than by specialist philosophers; but it is none the less reasonable or self-consistent for that. Claude Levi-Strauss, dealing in the early part of *The Savage Mind* with the opposed models of organising experience exemplified in scientific and in magical thinking, gives the best and most emphatic discussion I know of concerning the extent to which thought is determined by language. The Eskimo, to take a familiar example, has no single word for "ice", he has, rather, literally dozens of words indicating what we would think of as "ice under various conditions, used in various ways, in various relationships to the speaker or to others in space or time" but what he thinks of as quite discrete substances. He lacks, with regard to the concept "ice", the generalising faculty which is at the basis of our scientific thought, but possesses instead an extraordinary - to us

- particularising capacity for, as one example, describing this particular substance which forms a crucial element in his environment. Similarly, many African languages possess vast stocks of minutely differentiating terms for various grasses, herbs, insects and so on, because for them the world is “magically” ordered by barely perceptible differences, associations and analogies between these things, and between them and human affairs, which we would subsume under a Linnaean classification or some such. Polysynthetic and agglutinative languages tend to create indissoluble nexuses out of what we see as quite disparate sets of facts; Borges uses this property to brilliant effect when dealing with the languages of Tlön. A compounding language like Greek or - closer to home - German can construct, *ad lib* almost, words which *are descriptions*; in English this quality is usually lost somewhere back in the etymology. And Ezra Pound’s work on Fenellosa, up shit creek though he may have been to the sinologist, gave English language poets a quite new ideogramatically rich way of seeing.

7

Borges himself quotes, in the essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”, the following exquisite instance of an utterly alien way of ordering the world. It is a list, taken from an ancient Chinese encyclopaedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, of the categories into which animals are to be classified:

(a) those that belong to the Emperor, (h) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification [Borges, I think, must have particularly enjoyed that touch], (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance.

I would have believed this to be one of Borges’s inventions had I not read the Mediaeval Chinese novel *Monkey*, by Wu Ch’eng-en, with its almost unbelievable accounts and catalogues of the heavenly bureaucracy.

In the next paragraph Borges goes on to say:

Obviously there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural. The reason is very simple: we do not know what the universe is. “This world”, wrote David Hume, “...was only the first rude essay of some infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work only of some de-

pendent, inferior deity, and is the object of derision to his superiors; it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity, and ever since his death has run on..." We must go even further; we must suspect that there is no universe in the organic, unifying sense inherent in that ambitious word. If there is, we must conjecture its purpose; we must conjecture the words, the definitions, the etymologies, the synonymies of God's secret dictionary.

Clearly, on this basis, our perceptions and consequently our ideas are absolutely contingent; we have no way of knowing what, if anything, the meaning of any of our actions may be; indeed, in a number of Borges's short stories (notably "Death and the Compass" and "The Garden of Forking Paths", which I want to look at in some detail later) the characters create, or think that they create, elaborate schemes to achieve some specific purpose: when the schemes come to fruition, they find them to mean something quite different.

Superficially, this attitude would seem to imply in Borges a Pyrrhonic view (Pyrrho: the third century B.C. Eleatic philosopher whose scepticism was so radical that he maintained that there could never be rational grounds for preferring one course of action to another; not an appealing philosophy), but Borges's view is complicated by the factor of Time. Whether or not Time is in any real sense "actually there", it acts, or appears to act, upon all of us: we forget, are forgotten, dream, die. Borges's most extraordinary essay, 'A New Refutation of Time', ends with the following passage:

And yet, and yet ... To deny temporal succession, to deny the self, to deny the astronomical universe, are measures of apparent despair and secret consolation. Our destiny (in contrast to Swedenborg's hell and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not frightful because it is unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and ironbound. Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.

8

Which is where the role of the artist - the Maker, *pace*, appropriately, Dunbar and the Greeks (*poietes*), in Borges's preferred term - comes in. Our destiny, on Borges's showing, is a tragic one: we are swept along and away by a Time which we do not understand, through a life we try

vainly to interpret. Our consolation can be, if anything at all, then only the interpretation itself. Since we must construct falsely, let us admit the fact, says Borges, and "play games with infinity"; doing so we are undeceived, and thus to some extent liberated. In the essay "The Wall and the Books" we find the following:

All arts aspire to the condition of music which is nothing but form. Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces worn by time, certain twilights, certain places, try to tell us something, or they say something that we ought not to have lost, or they are about to tell something: this imminence of a revelation which is not produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic act.

In the tenth book of the Republic, Plato propounds the idea that the artist is invidious because all he can hope to produce is the metaphor: an actual table is only an imperfect metaphor of the Form or Idea of the table, the archetypal Table, and a representation of a table in art is only an imperfect metaphor of that. Borges, while naturally disagreeing with Plato's contempt for the artist, and with the ontologically absolutist concept of the Forms, does agree with the proposition that metaphor is all one can achieve; and not much of that.

When in 1921 he returned from Europe to Buenos Aires and formed there the avant-garde *Ultraísta* group of poets - he was then twenty-two - their manifesto stated that their aim was "to reduce poetry to its true element: metaphor". In his book *El Hacedor* (Buenos Aires 1960; translated 1964 as *Dreamtigers*), we find the following brief fable, entitled "A Yellow Rose":

Neither that afternoon nor the next did the illustrious Giambattista Marino die, he whom the unanimous mouths of Fame - to use an image dear to him - proclaimed as the new Homer and the new Dante. But the still, noiseless fact that took place then was in reality the last act of his life. Laden with years and with glory, he lay dying on a huge Spanish bed with carved bedposts. It is not hard to imagine a serene balcony a few steps away, facing the west, and below, marble and laurels and a garden whose various levels are duplicated in a rectangle of water. A woman has placed in a goblet a yellow rose. The man murmurs the inevitable lines that now, to tell the truth, bore even him a little:

Purple of the garden, pomp of the meadow,
Gem of spring, April's eye...

Then the revelation occurred: Marino saw the rose as Adam saw it in Paradise, and he thought that the rose was to be found in its own eternity and not in his words; and that we may mention or allude to a thing, but not express it; and that the tall proud volumes casting a

golden shadow in the corner were not - as his vanity had dreamed - a mirror of the world, but rather one thing more added to the world.

Marino achieved this illumination on the eve of his death, and Homer and Dante may have achieved it as well.

To illustrate the autobiographical nature of that parable, I quote from Borges's Prologue to *A Personal Anthology* (*Antología Personal*, Buenos Aires 1961; translated 1967):

Sometimes I, too, sought expression. I know now that my gods grant me no more than allusion or mention.

9

Given Borges's preoccupation with the constructs we impose upon reality, his own preferred metaphors - obsessive metaphors, one ought perhaps to say - are hardly surprising. Jean Franco lists them in *The Modern Culture of Latin America* as "the labyrinth (at once complex and simple), the book (perhaps, he believes, simply a permutation of a few metaphors) and the library (like the labyrinth, monotonous and yet infinite)". All of these are images of the world as we perceive it. I would add to these the dream, which is closely linked in Borges's writing with the idea of art; the tiger, which is used repeatedly in Blake's sense - as the nearest approach to something that is ineluctably *there*, as the concrete embodiment of pure energy - and the knife.

To take them in inverse order. The Borges scholar Anthony Kerrigan, remarking that "among his several obsessions, Borges has counted a knife. *The Knife*", goes on to suggest that "an obsession with dying is proof of being alive; an obsession with a manner of dying, with being killed or killing, even more, is a creatively morbid concern with the diabolical importance of (someone's) being alive". That, I think, is true so far as it goes; though it should also be pointed out that Borges is human, with a childhood and a family, that he comes from a long line of soldiers, and that he was brought up in Palermo, a Buenos Aires slum which was at that time the haunt of gangs and knife fighters, with a cult of physical bravery which must have appealed vicariously to the frail and bookish Borges; all the more so in later years after he became blind and an invalid. Certainly those street-corner roughs inhabited the weird de Chirico backgrounds of his first stories, and have returned in such more recent ones as "The Intruder". His poem "The Tango" ends with the lines:

The tango spawns a turbid
 Unreal past in certain measure true:
 An impossible recollection of having died
 Fighting, on some corner of a suburb.

Again, the story which he claims as his favourite among his own writings, "The South", deals with a literary, retiring man, Juan Dahlmann, who enters a knife-fight with a drunken thug in a country inn, although "rationally" he need not, and although he knows that "the weapon, in his torpid hand, was no defence at all, but would merely serve to justify his murder". They go out to fight in the open air: "Firmly clutching the knife, which he perhaps would not know how to wield, Dahlmann went out into the plain".

One need not, I feel, be surprised at such a preoccupation in a man who can say of himself, as Borges does in *Dreamtigers*:

Few things have happened to me, and I have read a great many. Or rather, few things have happened to me more worth remembering than Schopenhauer's thought or the music of England's words.

10

But the knife, for all its power, is in itself inert; it is no more than an instrumentality. Like the book, it must be animated by man, it must be applied and interpreted. Perhaps the fullest expression of what Kerri-gan calls Borges's "mythology of dagger thrusts" is the short poem "The Dagger", published in *Encounter* of April 1969:

A dagger rests in a drawer.

It was forged in Toledo at the end of the last century. Luis Melian Lafinur gave it to my father, who brought it from Uruguay. Evaristo Carriego once held it in his hand.

Whoever lays eyes on it has to pick up the dagger and toy with it, as if he had always been looking out for it. The hand is quick to grab the waiting hilt, and the powerful obeying blade slides in and out of the sheath with a click. This is not what the dagger wants.

It is more than a structure of metal: men conceived it and shaped it with a single end in mind. The dagger that last night knifed a man in Tacuarembó and the daggers that rained on Caesar are in some eternal way the same dagger. The dagger wants to kill, it wants to shed sudden blood.

In a drawer of my writing table, among draft pages and old letters, the dagger dreams over and over its simple tiger's dream. On

wielding it the hand comes alive because the metal comes alive, sensing itself, each time handled, in touch with the killer for whom it was forged.

At times I am sorry for it. Such power and singlemindedness, so impassive or innocent its pride, and the years slip by, unheeding.

Thus the dagger is imbued with energy by the purposes of men. The tiger, on the other hand, is something like pure energy in itself; self-seeking, self-defining, dependent upon no-one, it is metaphoric of the *Ding-an-sich* (*und fur-sich*), the impossible thing-in-itself of Kant which Schopenhauer, Kant's follower and Borges's precursor, did away with and, worse, replaced with the omnipresent and malevolent (if somewhat ill-defined) Will. For Borges the tiger is emblematic of the idea he puts into the mouth of Pierre Menard, that "there is no intellectual effort which is not ultimately futile"; it symbolises the final failure of his, Shakespeare's and everyone else's art. In *Dreamtigers* the title story and the poem "The Other Tiger", the ironic epigraph to which is William Morris's "...and the craft that createth a semblance", both directly express this idea. The nineteen-line "Story", "Dreamtigers" ends:

And so, as I sleep, some dream beguiles me, and suddenly I know that I am dreaming. Then I think: this is a dream, a pure diversion of my will, and now that I have unlimited power, I am going to cause a tiger.

Oh incompetence! Never can my dreams engender the wild beast I long for. The tiger indeed appears, but stuffed or flimsy, or with impure variations of shape, or of an implausible size, or all too fleeting, or with a touch of the dog or the bird.

11

The tiger is unattainable; the dream, which is art, is the means of the perpetual attempt to attain it. The dream is perhaps the central image in Borges, embodying the extremes of both hope and fear. When Descartes, in his *Meditations*, conjures up the metaphysical *advocatus diaboli*, the Deceitful Demon, to whisper blasphemous suggestions in his ear, he plunges vertiginously down slopes of continually deeper doubt, until brought up short by the one certainty from which he can rebuild: *Cogito, ergo sum*. Borges will have none of that. In "A New Refutation of Time", citing Hume, whose view of the world he describes with tacit approval as "an indefatigable labyrinth, a chaos, a dread", he asserts that:

It is not licit to speak of the shape of the moon or of its colour; the shape and the colour *are* the moon; nor can one speak of the percep-

tions of the mind, since the mind is nothing more than a series of perceptions. The Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" is invalidated. To say "I think" is to postulate the ego; it is a *petitio principii*. In the eighteenth century Lichtenberg proposed that instead of "I think" we should say impersonally "it thinks", as we say "it thunders" or "it lightens". I repeat: there is not a secret ego behind faces that governs actions and receives impressions; we are only the series of these imaginary actions and these unreal impressions. The series? If we deny spirit and matter, which are continuities, and if we deny space also, I do not know what right we have to the continuity that is time.

And in "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote*" we find:

Why does it make us uneasy to know that the map is within the map and the thousand and one nights are within the book of *A Thousand and One Nights*? Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is a reader of the *Quixote*, and Hamlet is a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the character in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious.

If you accept, and act according to, a set of conventions or constructs about the world, you are liable to find it awkward when the world obdurately refuses to accommodate itself to your system; but if, like Borges, you choose to jettison the lot, you can never be free of the fear that you are being dreamed. Dreamed or written: the freedom and power of dreaming, as *Dreamtigers* implies, is the freedom and power of art; and so with the limitations. We can find precursors of this conception in Berkeley, whose universe is being dreamed by God - everyone knows the relevant limericks - and in Schopenhauer's strange suggestion that we are all fragments of a scattered God, who dissolved himself at the beginning of time because he didn't want to exist; also in Schopenhauer's statement that life and dreams are pages from the same book; to read them in order is to live, and to scan them at random is to dream. Those roles are in turn inverted in F. and G. Hoyle's provocative *October the First is too Late*. And of course there is the Red King's dream in "*Alice*".

The hope/fear nexus involved in the concept of dreaming is stated directly in Borges's story "The Circular Ruins" (*Ficciones*). Here the protagonist retires to the jungle with the intention of dreaming a man into existence (cf. "The Golem" in Borges's *The Book of Imaginary Beings*). After laborious years he does so, only to find out, apparently fortuitously, at the end that he is himself being dreamed. One can understand why Borges refers to the artist as *el hacedor*, the Maker.

Rather more schematic is the poem "Chess", in which the players are themselves the pieces on another, higher board, and so on possibly forever. Borges has remarked that there is no such thing as originality: the same idea crops up in Omar Khayyam, in quite a lot of science fiction (notably John Brunner's *The Squares of the City*, a long novel based on one of the games of the famous 1892 Tchigorin-Steinitz match), and in a Leunig cartoon in the *Sunday Review*, among other places.

The story "Funes, the Memorious" is a characteristically oblique assertion of the positive functions, such as they are, of dreaming and artistic creation. Borges very subtly calls it "a long metaphor of insomnia". Ireneo Funes is "gifted" with a literally perfect eidetic memory, and with total and infallible sensory perception.

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 leatherbound 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...

A circumference on the blackboard, a right-angled 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 a protracted wake. He could perceive I do not know how many stars in the sky.

And what does Funes do with these abilities? He engages upon two projects of a monolithic grandeur and stupidity. Firstly:

He had devised a new system of enumeration ... The first stimulus to his work, I believe, was 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 Pérez*, 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* ... 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 that 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.

Secondly:

He determined to reduce all of his past experience to some seventy thousand recollections, which he would later define numerically.

The point, one comes to realise, is that Ireneo Funes, unable to generalise, is unable to create. True, he is free from the crippling weight of constructs under which we, less gifted, have to peer out at reality; but art is artifice, art, too, is construction: it is a question of positively *asserting* one's limitation. The only difference is one of self-consciousness and of volition. In other words, with Borges you lose both ways.

The situation of the unfortunate Funes is, of course, replete with ironies. Irony is an inevitable concomitant of Borges's thought. The classic model of tragic dramatic irony is that in which a person constructs and adheres to an interpretation of events which, unbeknown to him, point to a conclusion altogether different; that is the situation of Oedipus and of Lear. In Borges's universe it is, virtually by definition, the situation of everybody. In a number of the stories it is made quite explicit; in others - "Funes", "The Immortal", "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" are examples - it provides (or rather, it is) the atmosphere of the stories' evoked worlds.

12

The symbols or metaphors of the book and the library, used as images of the world by this quintessential man of letters, are inherently deeply ironic; all the more so in view of the kabbalistic doctrine (traced with a sort of morbid relish by Borges through Avicenna, the *Sepher Yetzirah*, Francis Bacon, Sir Thomas Browne, Leon Bloy, Mallarmé and Carlyle, among others) that the universe is itself a book. And if a book, then it can perhaps be deciphered and read? The Aztec priest who narrates the story "The Handwriting of God" has been cast by the conquering Spaniards into a dungeon. Separated from him by iron bars, as a grisly sort of double-valued *memento mori* a leopard is caged. After seemingly endless years the priest deciphers the script formed by the animal's spots; it forms the phrase which will make him who utters it omniscient and therefore omnipotent. But the priest will not speak the phrase; for if he does he will know, he will thus *become*, everything and everybody; which is to say, nothing and nobody, like Spinoza's all-pervading God of whom all things in the universe are adjectives. And, as Spinoza also

said, all things desire the continuance of their being: the rock wishes to remain a rock, the tiger a tiger.

In "The Immortal", which is a periphrastic and baroque restatement of the same theme, the tribune Flaminius Rufus drinks of the waters of immortality and comes to realise that "in an infinite period of time, all things happen to all men".

Because of his past or future virtues, every man is worthy of all goodness, but also of all perversity, because of his past or future infamy. Thus, just as in games of chance the odd and even numbers tend towards equilibrium, so also wit and stolidity cancel out and correct each other ... The most fleeting thought obeys an invisible design and can crown, or inaugurate, a secret form ... Seen in this manner, all our acts are just, but they are also indifferent. There are no moral or intellectual merits. Homer composed the *Odyssey*, if we postulate an infinite period of time, with infinite circumstances and changes, the impossible thing is not to compose the *Odyssey*, at least once. No one is anyone, one single immortal man is all men. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, I am hero, I am philosopher, I am demon and I am world, which is a tedious way of saying that I do not exist.

During the telling of this tale Flaminius Rufus becomes Homer, whom we have met as a naked immortal troglodyte, and later Joseph Cartaphilus, an antique dealer of Smyrna. Eventually he finds the compensating river which confers death, and drinks from it. He wants to persist in *his* being, part of the essence of which is its impermanence. The story, appropriately, seethes with allusions to, and quotations from, other writers, a few acknowledged, most not, on the principle that one hardly need bother ask permission of oneself.

The theme of these stories is a recurrent one; "The Babylon Lottery" repeats it in even subtler form. Borges has here, one could say, spatialised eternity, symbolising its processes by the operations of a game of chance, infinitely divisible and infinitely reverberative, and so totally permeating the fabric of life as to be completely imperceptible. The narrator tells his tale while leaving (or fleeing) Babylon; he is an avatar of the priest and the tribune.

Apart from the universe which is a book, Borges memorably creates, in "The Library of Babel", the library which is the universe.

13

A brief excursus on books and libraries before getting on with it.

Borges is currently [this was written in the early 1970s - J.T.] the Director of the National Library of Argentina (in the poem "The Gift" he writes of this appointment, which occurred in 1955 at about the same time as he finally lost his sight: "Let none think I by tear or reproach make light / Of this manifesting the mastery / Of God, who with excellent irony / Gives me at once both books and night..."), but at the time of "The Library of Babel" he held the post of First Assistant ("While there were Second and Third Assistants below me, there were also a Director and First, Second and Third Officials above me") in a minor suburban library. In the "Autobiographical Essay" in *The Aleph* he says that the story "was meant as a nightmare version or magnification of that municipal library, and certain details in the text have no particular meaning. The number of books and shelves that I recorded in the story were literally what I had at my elbow. Clever critics have worried over those ciphers."

Borges the librarian and Borges the maker are not separable. On the personal, emotional effect upon him of the written word, he gives in *The Aleph* this anecdote:

A fellow-academician once took me aside and said in alarm, "What do you mean by publishing a poem entitled "Embarking on the Study of Anglo-Saxon Grammar?" I tried to make him understand that Anglo-Saxon was as intimate an experience to me as looking at a sunset or falling in love.

As a corollary, his erudition is nothing less than staggering. The only analogies I can call to mind are with people like Bacon, Browne, or Montaigne for whom it was not impossible to encompass all the knowledge of their time. An example: When I first read "The Library of Babel" I was struck with the feeling that I'd seen something like it before. After a great deal of fossicking I disinterred the not unarcane Clifton Fadiman anthology *Fantasia Mathematica*, which contains the story "The Universal Library", written in 1907 by the minor German philosopher and even more minor writer Kurd Lasswitz. Thinking that this was a nice piece of evidence for Borges's theory that the same things are thought and written over and over, and feeling also a little self-congratulatory at probably being one up on him, I left it at that. A year later I read an essay by Borges, innocently purporting to be on George Bernard Shaw, which contained not only an acknowledgment

to, and critique of Lasswitz's one-dimensional and sententious tale, but a full account of Lasswitz's predecessors, starting with Raymond Lully in the thirteenth century. I slunk off to pick on somebody my own size.

14

In "The Library of Babel" Borges gracefully and sardonically inverts his viewpoint and places the constructs on the outside. The Library is based on the same principle as Lasswitz's: its books contain every possible permutation and combination of characters. The didactic Lasswitz tells us, which Borges does not, because that is not his point, that the number of volumes in this library would be ten to the two millionth power approximately, a number which I resolutely refuse to imagine except in the manner of Ireneo Funes.

The story begins with the phrase: "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast airshafts between, surrounded by very low railings". Borges is here being rather clearer about his purposes than is his custom, and, indeed, this story is comparatively straightforward throughout. It is a systematic parody of man's philosophies and cosmologies, from Pascal's "Nature is an infinite sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere" (which becomes: "The Library is a sphere whose exact centre is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible") to the mystics and/or Heisenbergians who "would hide in the latrines with some metal disks in a forbidden dice cup and feebly mimic the divine disorder" and the Occam's Razor exponents who "believed that it was fundamental to destroy useless works" and go about burning millions of books.

It is clear that it is impossible, from any conceivable examination of any part of the Library, to extrapolate anything meaningful about the order, design and purpose of the whole. True, there is a sort of lunatic coherence inherent in the fact that all possible books are there; but, as with the cognate concepts of immortality and omniscience, that fact is both monstrous and useless. There must be in the library the book which explains the point of the whole thing; but equally, there must be millions upon millions of books giving fallacious accounts, not to mention millions more justifying each of those. There is no way of knowing. I think one need hardly point out what Borges is getting at in this grim little satire.

15

The library is an image of our constructs; the labyrinth is not only that but also an icon of their consequences.

Borges's primal- or ur-labyrinth is the straight line of Zeno's first paradox of motion, which states that it is impossible to get from A to B, because first you have to get to C, halfway between A and B; and to get to C you must first get to D, half-way between A and C, and so on for ever. This is not as well known as, but considerably more elegant than the second paradox of motion, which is the notorious parable of Achilles and the tortoise. Borges has, however, labyrinths very much more sophisticated than the straight line - the entire imagined world of Tlön is one:

Ten years ago any symmetry with a semblance 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 planet? It is useless to argue 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 is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men.

The city of the Immortals in the eponymous story is a labyrinth; in "Death and the Compass", the detective Lönnrott thinks that he has followed correctly the twistings of a mental labyrinth that will lead him to the murderer he seeks; at the end he discovers that it was the murderer who created the labyrinth, or rather, the data from which Lönnrott would himself construct it, and that its end (in both senses) was Lönnrott death. There is in Borges's work only one labyrinth from which a man emerges having accomplished the purpose for which he entered it; the man is Theseus, and the story is told, significantly, from the point of view of the Minotaur.

16

Probably the most intricate, the most polysemous of Borges's many labyrinths is that which underlies the story of "The Garden of Forking Paths", a story of which I propose to offer one of the perhaps infinite possible analyses.

A nicely Borgesian point about this story, by the way, is that it was the recipient of one of the more singular of Borges's many awards and

honours: second prize in a competition in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* (which rejected "Death and the Compass" outright).

My reading of it is influenced by my reading of three of Borges's other pieces: the fiction disguised as an essay, "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain", and the essays "The Dream of Coleridge" and, once again, "A New Refutation of Time", and implies the acceptance of three idealist propositions stated in the latter.

"An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain" belongs to the same genre as "Pierre Menard" and "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim": the imaginary review. It purports to be precisely what its title indicates, a critical essay on the work of an obscure and eccentric novelist (naturally fictitious) of that name. One of the novels discussed is called *April March*, and the work is made up of thirteen chapters. The first reports the ambiguous dialogue of certain strangers on a railway platform. The second narrates the events on the eve of the first act. The third, also retrograde, describes the events of *another* possible eve to the first day; the fourth, still another. Each one of these three eves (each of which rigorously excludes the others) is divided into three other eves, each of a very different kind. The entire work, thus, constitutes nine novels; each novel contains three long chapters (The first chapter, naturally, is common to all.)

It is perhaps worth mentioning that the Argentinian novelist Julio Cortázar, best known for having written the short story upon which the film *Blow-up* was based has written, in *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*, 1963) a novel not unlike "Quaids", although schematically both more complex and more diffuse. In so doing he has joined Borges and Bioy Casares in what one could call the neo-metaphysical style of Latin American fiction, as opposed to the *realismo magico* of Miguel Angel Asturias and Gabriel García Márquez. End of digression.

"The Dream of Coleridge" recounts the familiar story of the way "Kubla Khan" came to be written: Coleridge's dream, his writing down of the fifty-odd surviving lines, the person from Porlock's interruption, and Coleridge's consequent inability to recapture the rest of the poem.

This occurred (scholars differ) in 1797 or 1798. Borges goes on to remark that in 1836 there appeared the *first* western translation (into French) of the fourteenth-century *Persian General History of the World*, by one Rashid al-Din, in which it is said: "East of Shang-tu, Kubla Khan built a palace according to a plan that he had seen in a dream and retained in his memory". Thus we have a palace (now in ruins)

suggested by a dream; and five centuries later a poem (now fragmentary) suggested by a dream of that palace. "Perhaps", Borges insinuates, "an archetype not yet revealed to man, an eternal object (to use Whitehead's term), is gradually entering the world; its first manifestation was the palace; its second was the poem. Whoever compared them would have seen that they were essentially the same."

In "A New Refutation of Time", which Borges calls "the anachronous *reductio ad absurdum* of an obsolete system", and of which he remarks that its title is self-contradictory, we find, inter alia, these three propositions:

That *esse est percipii*, to be is to be perceived.

That if we can *postulate* in the mind of one individual ("or two individuals who do not know each other, but on whom the same process is acting") two identical moments, then that one repeated term is enough to destroy time and history.

That, as an ethical corollary, he who kills one man destroys the world.

17

"The Garden of Forking Paths" is written in the form of a transcript of a tape-recorded statement by Yu Tsun, a Chinese who is working as a spy for the Germans during the First World War. There is a brief introduction, by Borges or an unnamed persona.

The gist of Yu Tsun's confession is this. He knows the location of a British artillery base in France, and it is essential that he gets this information to his chief in Berlin. But he has just found that his work, his plans, have been discovered by the British - or rather, Irish and thus, like Yu Tsun, acting for personal, not patriotic reasons - counter-agent Richard Madden. He knows there is no escape; there are only a few hours in which to get a message through. He cannot trust the mail, the telephone and so on. The town where the artillery is located is called Albert; Yu Tsun decides that he must kill someone of that name: when the newspaper reports that a certain Mr Albert has been killed by a total stranger called Yu Tsun, his superior will understand the message.

He looks up the 'phone book and finds only one name, that of Dr Stephen Albert, who lives half an hour away by train. He catches the train, and as it leaves the station sees Madden trying unsuccessfully to catch it; the next doesn't leave for forty minutes, so Madden is that far behind. He arrives at Albert's lonely house, which is approached via a

maze-like path; prompted by the path, he meditates on his great-grandfather Ts'ui Pen, Governor of Yunnan, who resigned his post in order to write a vast novel and to create a maze in which all who entered it would be lost. The novel was incomprehensible and unfinished (Ts'ui Pen was assassinated by a stranger) and no one ever found the labyrinth.

Dr Albert, apparently taking Yu Tsun for a different Chinese, welcomes him; he turns out to be a sinologist with an interest in Ts'ui Pen. They fall into conversation and Albert explains to Yu Tsun his discovery that the novel *is* the labyrinth; that the reason why the novel appears chaotic is that, in it, when a man is faced with alternatives, he simultaneously chooses *all* of them, thereby creating bifurcating futures. Ts'ui Pen believed in an infinite series of time, a web "the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore one another through the centuries", which "embraces every possibility". The book is a maze and a riddle, the answer to which is the word that never appears in it: "Time". Suddenly the fascinated Yu Tsun is shocked back to reality when he sees Madden through the window, and shoots Albert dead. Madden arrests him and he is sentenced to death, but reads in the papers of the bombing of the town of Albert; his mission has been successful.

And yet, that introduction. It is there stated that the British advance which depended upon the artillery was postponed for five days; but that this was because of torrential rain, *not* because of bombing. It appears not to make sense.

One goes back to the story. Now, Madden is clearly aware of Yu Tsun's intentions; the fact that he turns up at Albert's house proves it. This seems to imply that Albert is also aware of them; we know he has a telephone because Yu Tsun got his name from the directory, and Madden would certainly have rung and warned him. Yet Albert takes no steps to protect himself, he welcomes Yu Tsun and talks philology and metaphysics with him.

The reason lies in the apparent subplot. The discussion of Ts'ui Pen and his labyrinth has no immediately obvious relevance to the story; in fact, it positively jars. Except for the fact that both Dr Albert and Yu Tsun are connected, one way or the other, with Ts'ui Pen; the fact that Ts'ui Pen was assassinated by a stranger; and the fact that Dr Albert's house is situated in the middle of what is curiously like a labyrinth.

The analogy with “Coleridge’s Dream” is very close. What is happening, in brief, is that like the “eternal object” there, like the objects of Tlön that start appearing in unexpected places in our universe, Ts’ui Pen’s labyrinth is moving into the world; that is the object of the whole charade, of the little labyrinths of Yu Tsun and Albert and Madden.

But further: on the evidence of his behaviour, of his refusal to defend himself in any way, we are forced to assume that Albert, knowing Yu Tsun’s purpose, actually *believes* Ts’ui Pen’s philosophy; he believes that in one of the infinite strands of time Yu Tsun kills him, just as in another, or others, he kills Yu Tsun, and in millions they never meet. The question of death in the sense of personal extinction then becomes irrelevant.

Yu Tsun does not, at least when he forms his plan in the first place, believe Ts’ui Pen’s theories; he is not even aware of them. Earlier in the story he has said: “Whosoever would undertake some atrocious enterprise should act as if it were already accomplished, should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past”. He sees his actions as a unilinear sequence of cause and effect. Another thing that has most certainly not occurred to him (though one imagines that he has read Berkeley, if not Borges) is the idealist tenet that to be is to be perceived; nor has the other, that the destroyer of one man destroys the world.

His careful planning has rebounded upon his head with impeccable symmetry. By getting to Dr Albert’s house ahead of Madden he has ensured that he will be with Albert *alone*. By killing Albert with no witnesses about he has destroyed the world as perceived by Albert, including himself and the consequences of his murder; had Madden seen him murdering Albert - dearly he didn’t - Yu Tsun’s message would have got through to Berlin, because the possible world in which the murder has the consequences Yu Tsun desires would have been preserved in the perceptions of Madden. The fact that Yu Tsun continues to exist after the murder - that Madden finds him and arrests him instead of finding only the corpse, or Albert alive - proves, furthermore, that Ts’ui Pen is right; Yu Tsun, because of the circumstances of the murder, has been shunted off onto another strand of possibility, where the only difference is that the murder doesn’t have its effect, the message doesn’t get through. That must be the difference; in jail or hanged, Yu Tsun can at no point make any significant choices, except suicide.

But Yu Tsun reads about the bombing in the newspapers! Very true; and it is equally true that according to Liddell Hart’s *A History of the World War*, cited in the introduction, the bombing never took place.

The only explanation, and the true one, is that the introduction and Yu Tsun's statement exists in two different worlds. And the reason for this is that the killing of Albert, the labyrinth maker, by a stranger, in its mirroring of the death of Ts'ui Pen, constitutes the single repeated term that destroys time and history. Over and above the possible world which has been destroyed because no longer perceived by Albert, the world which includes that and all other possibilities in the situation has been destroyed by the repetition of the term, by the intrusion of the "eternal object", and another - one of the infinite compossible worlds of Ts'ui Pen - has been substituted.

Although, ofcourse, if you assume that Albert didn't know of Yu Tsun's plan, you have a completely different story again. And in either case, there is still one little problem undealt with: Liddell Hart's *History* actually exists, but it does not include the passage referred to. To settle that one, we would have to know *who wrote the introduction*. Ts'ui Pen might have something to say about that.

18

That last section was an attempt to show the kind of conceptual tail-spin one can go into when dealing with Borges. I know of no writer, not even Empson, so directly exhilarating intellectually, and the thrust of this paper has been towards trying to substantiate that suggestion, to indicate the fascination, in our time of politically, psychologically, sociologically and just plain stylistically obsessed authors, of a writer at the core of whose work is the interplay, graceful or terrifying, of pure ideas.

Borges, not believing - quite consistently - in the intrinsic value of any work of art, has said that writing gains its justification through endless dialogue between writer and reader. In view of which:

19

Four quotations.

(Poetic Nature) all of whose forms and beings are ultimately but acts of the mind, these acts being dearly determined and preserved by their names. In this fashion they (artists) construct worlds perfect in themselves. (Paul Valery, *Eupalinos*)

Situation: someone is writing a novel in which one of the characters goes mad. During the composition he himself becomes mad, and finishes it in the first person. (Kierkegaard, *Papier II A 634*)

Freund, es ist auch genug. Im Fall du mehr willst lesen,
So geh und werde selbst die Schrift und selbst das Wesen.
(Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, VI, 263)

A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face. (Jorge Luis Borges)

20

One disclaimer:

There is no riddle.
Wittgenstein

Martin Johnston