

The
Unresolvable
Plot

Reading
contemporary fiction

ELIZABETH DIPPLE

Routledge
New York and London
1988

Borges: the old master

Many of Jorge Luis Borges's readers - especially those interested in critical theory - see his prose works as self-conscious allegories commenting discreetly on the ontological status of fiction itself. This is an élitist way of fitting him into present fashions, but it is just to go along with those admirers who call Borges - the great reader who by his driftingly ingenious fictions teaches others to read - the old master of several sorts of literary Postmodernism. He is equally master of the art of writing a densely allusive and formidable new genre which, with typical humility, he continued to call the short story until the end of his life. Like Nabokov and Beckett, his early career is firmly fixed in high Modernism; unlike them he did not continuously advance to newer styles, but remained with his best work - the style of fiction, poetry, and meditation he established in the 1940s and 1950s, when his greatest work occurred. Borges's case, more than that of any other writer, indicates the problem of trying to distinguish between Modernism and Postmodernism in a historical way, and a textual study of his fictions takes the reader toward an exemplary rather than a theoretical view of what literary Postmodernism might actually be.

His competitor in both experimental categories - Postmodernism and brief fiction - is, of course, Samuel Beckett, whose recent return to the briefest of prose fictions - or dramas, or whatever they are - is characterized by increasing linguistic complications. On the one hand Beckett's late work expands the possibilities of language, and on the other it reasserts the Pirandelloesque desire of the author to evanesce, to use language forms endlessly and strangely in order to join finally the great silence toward which all of Beckett's protagonists yearn. Beckett stands alone and lonely at the end of the great Modernist-Kafkaesque-Joycean voice, refracting where Joyce and Kafka had joined, and grimly using literature's terminality in a way that paradoxically refreshes the idea of fiction as a free and licit genre-less mode.

Borges, on the other hand, took on a significantly different task in his fertile use of the bookish past to reopen a consciously literary world of readerly

The unresolvable plot

possibility. Beckett's work at the end of his career may be more in keeping with some types of Postmodernism, defined for literature by such critics as John Barth or Ihab Hassan and, in a culturally broader way, Jean-François Lyotard. His final breaking of conventional ideas like verbal expressiveness, form, content, intention, and meaning – all of the concepts, that is, that have to do with residual semantics as opposed to linguistic play and its immediate referents – accord with Postmodernism's longing to smash the pieties of literary history. Although Beckett may seem to have the edge in the experimental linguistic realm as well as in the philosophical skepticism essential to Postmodernism, the proliferating definitions of Postmodernism – at least those concerned with language and literature – accommodate Borges's fictions gracefully and eagerly. His work also gives practical and concrete evidence of the semantic richness possible within the inexhaustibility of any fiction, including and perhaps especially the metafiction of Postmodernism.

Of these two major writers who in 1961 shared the International Publishers' Prize, Borges is the one whose recent influence has shone more brightly for writers who succeeded him – including Calvino, whose theories about the task of fiction are, as I argue in a later section, more closely aligned with Beckett's. When the American John Barth first chose to define Postmodernism as a literary idea in 1967 in his seminal essay, "The literature of exhaustion," Borges's techniques and Barth's private interpretation of them allowed that essay to set a standard for other authors whom Barth wished to place within his perception of the Postmodernist mode. Barth's idea that the genres of literature are exhausted and must be played against parodically by any genuinely original contemporary writer was extrapolated directly from Borges's endless reflections on his own literary masters, and the subsequent creative parodic play that arose from these reflections.

Before Barth's use of Borges in this essay, the Argentinian's reputation was established beyond Latin America, and has steadily increased as contemporary critical schools of narratology belatedly stress what his fictions had already elegantly explored during the waning of the Modernist period. More significant than Borges's placement in the Postmodernist canon, perhaps, is the fact that his international reputation, dormant for too long, grew with astonishing rapidity and continues unabated. It is not simply that he is the writer most indisputably present on all reading lists of contemporary literature, but his impact is notably visible over a wide spectrum: on Latin American writers (even those who disagree with and often disapprove of him), on the French *nouveaux romanciers*, on American experimentalism, on Italian writers like Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco.

The case of Umberto Eco is of particular interest when discussing both Borges and the term Postmodernism, because in his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* Eco indicates the confusion inherent in the inappropriate and inaccurate use of the term itself:

Borges: the old master

Actually, I believe that postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category – or, better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating. We could say that every period has its own postmodernism, just as every period has its own mannerism (and, in fact, I wonder if postmodernism is not the modern name for mannerism as a metahistorical category). I believe that in every period there are moments of crisis like those described by Nietzsche in his *Thoughts Out of Season*, in which he wrote about the harm done by historical studies. The past conditions us, harries us, blackmails us. The historic avant-garde . . . tries to settle scores with the past.

In architecture and the arts, Postmodernism began as a rather poor historical term for aggressive artistic production that attempted to assert the end of and freedom from the great period of Modernism that dominated the first half of the twentieth century. Quickly seeing its own disjunctive world-weariness, it connects with the proliferation of a series of comparable new *fin-de-siècle* jargon words with metahistorical overtones – post-nuclear, post-Freudian, post-humanist, post-cultural, etc. As a term, Postmodernism keeps trying to settle scores with the past; it tries with predestined futility to separate itself definitively from Modernism, to become something like a new Romantic movement with its own discrete types of irony and renewed parataxis. Fumbling as it must over the creation of new forms, Postmodernism now embraces all writers whose self-conscious structures can be defined as narcissistic narratives (see Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative*), that is, narratives that are endlessly self-reflexive in particular parodic modes not quite shared by Modernism.

Eco is also interesting in any discussion of Borges in that he deliberately invokes and parodies Borges in the novel, *The Name of the Rose*. The issues here are not simple, because the parody exists at several levels, from simple naming – his villain is the blind old would-be librarian, Jorge of Burgos – to the most complex reflections of images and narrative stratagems used by the Argentinian writer. The verbal similarity between the names Jorge Luis Borges and Jorge of Burgos constitutes a sort of game. Because the reader of *The Name of the Rose* knows that Borges was blind, infinitely bookish, and a jealous guard of the idea of labyrinths, mirrors, and libraries, Eco cleverly invokes his benign and admirable image as a red herring that will distract the imprecise reader from unravelling the detective plot with undue haste.

In a book of such strong intertextual stress, moreover, the evocation of Borges reminds the reader that *The Name of the Rose* is not merely a quasi-medieval fiction. It exists significantly in a post-Borgesian world, where the pressure is from the far past but also from the very near past – indeed from a writer alive and revered when *The Name of the Rose* was written and published. Eco, when asked as he frequently is why he evokes Borges negatively, simply says that certain debts must be paid. Many readers of Eco over-read those debts as, for example, Walter E. Stephens (1983) does when he posits Borges's

The unresolvable plot

fictions as the primary "anterior text" for Eco's novel. This partial view must be countered by saying that Borges's works are not singularly primary for Eco, or they are so only in ways that stress the medieval roots of both Borges and Postmodernism, a point that Eco is eager to make.

Like Borges (and indeed, like many formalist critics including Todorov) Eco sees the detective novel as a dominant metaphysical mode, the unraveling of which leads to major epistemological illustrations through which the author can impose his/her will, or at least demonstrate it to the reader. As metafiction has developed since the 1960s, this aspect of detective plot – of narrative within solvable mazes – has been major, and Borges's *modus operandi* a dominant influence. And like Borges, Eco contrasts the readable, solvable labyrinth with the endless mazes that are not made by humans but imposed by the mysteries of the universe. For Borges, however, the term "divine" is ironic, but not as alien as it is for Eco, whose essential scientism makes the world more readable (in spite of its infinite maze-like openness) than it is for Borges; similarly, "infinite" for Borges indicates a vast idealist slippage of time and space in a way that the Peircean Eco does not envisage.

When we come to the shared images of the two writers – the labyrinth, the library, the mirror – we cannot claim any particular influence of the older on the younger, but rather a commonality of response to literatures and cultures for these two writers who extend their reading far back into the lettered world of books where these ancient metaphors were endlessly repeated. No doubt the evocation of Borges is also interesting to Eco because of the tendency in contemporary studies to abjure obligations to the Christian past and its images, to refuse to pay debts or to recognize the richness present in the history of an idea. In the symbolic person of Borges, the most mandarin of contemporary writers, Eco finds a touchstone of cultural bookishness.

Bookish as he is, Borges writes amazingly short pieces, and in the process of doing so has been instrumental in legitimizing and defining a new genre within metafiction; indeed he has almost created the standard or background for the category of metafiction as it has been so eagerly seized by French and Italian theorist-writers, and more boisterously by American experimentalists from John Barth and Donald Barthelme to Steve Katz and Ronald Sukenick. The anomaly here is, of course, that Borges does not boast of himself as an innovator within genre, but rather as a perpetuator of the short story. Influenced though he is by the power of Kafka's oneiric vision, Borges criticizes all long novels – including Kafka's and Henry James's with their strong internal power – as tediously drawn out and unreadable. For Borges, the whole point or metaphor of each of Kafka's long books can instantly be perceived as inevitable. Borges expressed the problem of Kafka's entrapment in the mechanical in an interview with Fernando Sorrentino in 1972, translated by Clark M. Zlotchew:

Borges: the old master

I think Kafka, like Henry James, more than anything else felt perplexity, felt that we're living in an inexplicable world. Then too, I think Kafka became tired of the mechanical element in his novels. That is, of the fact that from the very beginning we know that the surveyor won't ever get inside the castle, that the man will be convicted by those inexplicable judges. And the fact that he didn't want to have those books published is proof of this. Besides, Kafka told Max Brod that he hoped to write happier books Of course I think Henry James is a much better writer than Kafka because his books aren't written mechanically like those of Kafka. That is, there isn't a plot that develops according to a system that the reader can figure out.

Kafka's weariness with the mechanical task of expansion from short idea into long novel is to one degree or another repeated in Borges's estimation of all novelists – indeed he has even claimed (no doubt falsely) that he himself never finished reading a novel except for the adventure stories of Robert Louis Stevenson. Certainly his own fictions – and in giving us the name *Ficciones* as the title of one of the collections he has named the genre of which he is master – are sparse in the extreme, tightly written with a high level of resonance at the adverbial and adjectival level, and slightly baroque in their architectonic frame. Each one is endlessly evocative, presenting a kind of whispered outline that the active mind of the reader must fill in. The suggestiveness of language, idea, and image demands its expansion through the perceptivity of the reader's mind. Unlike the narrowly confined traditional short story, these fictions are large, amenable to the most capacious and creative readerly imagination, and infinitely, vertiginously (to use some of Borges's favorite words) mysterious. His imitators can only parody him, and that at a fairly low level; ironically, some of the detractors of the aged Borges claim that in old age even he himself could only weakly parody what he achieved so brilliantly in middle age.

Be that as it may, Borges comes before us as the librarian who reads – believing this to be the first of all literary acts – and, in doing so, he finds inevitably ancient words and images, adventures and ideas. Through these he is driven to write, to create an endless sequence of repetition and intertwining between the two apparently dissimilar acts of writing and reading. He writes out of his reading (of books more frequently than of the world), as he believes all writers must, in order in turn to be read so that another rewriting will necessarily take place. He thus presents his own prose and poetry as part of the long string of inevitable verbal formations from Homer through the history of literature to Borges himself, and hence onward to his heirs. By this process, the concept of literature creating literature – one of the definitions of intertextuality – is automatic and irreversible for him.

Demonstrations of this compulsive unitary theory that joins reading to writing, through quasi-logical necessity, are ubiquitous in Borges's work, but are clearest in his story, "The Immortal," now published in *Labyrinths*, and his parable entitled "The Maker" in *Dreamtigers*. It is significant that this parable

The unresolvable plot

was important enough to Borges that he used it as the title of the collection of fiction and poetry published in Buenos Aires in 1960 as *El Hacedor*. The decision to retitling it *Dreamtigers* in English moves attention from Borges's stress on the unitary identity of all "makers" – both writers and readers – to his habit of concentrating on one of his handful of resonant images, in this case the tiger of creation and perception.

In "The Immortal," Homer is the immortal immured in time and deformed by the architecturally maddening city of literature. He is now a barbaric, exhausted figure who long ago abandoned the edifices of words and lives primitively, wordlessly, and intemporally. In a subhuman state, Homer cannot die, but lives wilfully separated from illusioned, hopeful mortals who falsely believe in their active lives because they are unaware of the death-in-life that comes with the infinite repetitions built into all literature. As Borges's narrator grimly tells us:

Death (or its allusion) makes men precious and pathetic. They are moving because of their phantom condition; every act they execute may be their last; there is not a face that is not on the verge of dissolving like a face in a dream. Everything among the mortals has the value of the irretrievable and the perilous. Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act (and every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, or the faithful presage of others that in the future will repeat it to a vertiginous degree. There is nothing that is not as if lost in a maze of indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can happen only once, nothing is preciously precarious. The elegiacal, the serious, the ceremonial, do not hold for the Immortals. Homer and I separated at the gates of Tangier; I think we did not even say goodbye.

(trans. James E. Irby)

According to Homer's vision, all serious readers and writers know that every human gesture or image is repeated again and again until through its eternal repetition it loses its force and ultimately becomes a merely tedious device of human sensibility. In writing such a passage, Borges argues that the bookish, literate mind must accept its own anonymity or non-subjectivity. This is rendered inevitable because of the history of literature, which is also the continuous reiteration of an eternal return. Not only does Borges claim several times that any person reading a line of Shakespeare becomes Shakespeare at that moment, but he repeatedly evokes Valéry to prove the unity of the Word under whose aegis all men are one, and all authors, especially Borges, are only readers. This ontological assumption of an eternal present imposed upon readers and writers undoes both history and fiction, at the same time as it wearily celebrates their compulsive permanence.

*

In *A Universal History of Infamy* (1972) Borges ranks reading and writing thus:

Sometimes I suspect that good readers are even blacker and rarer swans than good writers. Will anyone deny that the pieces attributed by Valéry to his

Borges: the old master

pluperfect Edmond Teste are, on the whole, less admirable than those of Teste's wife and friends? Reading, obviously, is an activity which comes after that of writing; it is more modest, more unobtrusive, more intellectual.

(trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni)

Borges's humility is central whenever he discusses the task of the writer, and the relative paucity of his production, the brevity of his fictions, the repetitions of themes and images, and the habit of republishing key stories in several collections all contribute to the impression of a small career aggrandized by genius. The result of his repetitions has been confusing or misleading for his readers on many levels. At the simple level of editions and published collections, readers find major fictions repeated in *Ficciones* (1962), *Labyrinths* and *Dreamtigers* (1964), *A Personal Anthology* (1967), and *The Aleph* (1970). Yet each collection is replete with new material, so that the dedicated reader must go through all the volumes Borges allowed to be published by various editors and translators (the situation of repetition is not notably different in the Spanish editions), with the result that (s)he is performed again and again confronted insistently by the major works. Borges had several editors, and was always easily manipulated by them – although it is also clear that he tried to get his favorite fictions published often.

Critically speaking, this repetition of fictions in collection after collection leads to the ineluctable, probably just, conclusion that the central impact of Borges's fictional work depends on a few dozen stories, mostly dating from the late 1930s to the mid-1950s. Another ironic by-product of this repetition in publication is that the reader feels rather melancholy in picking up collections of later writing like *In Praise of Darkness* (1974) or *The Book of Sand* (1977) where the old favorites, by now engraved on the memory, are omitted, making some critics feel, in a way that would have delighted Borges, as though the old Borges were an imposter trading on the famous name of a Borges rendered familiar by reiteration.

The superficial peculiarities of repetition of the major fictions in the published collections are not, of course, commensurate with the deeper levels of repetition within the corpus and texture of Borges's work. In a famous little essay entitled "Pascal's sphere," he claims that "[p]erhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors," and Borges has elsewhere frequently been willing to catalog his own repeated metaphors from his past in reading and writing: the mirror, the labyrinth, the library, the book, the tiger, the Minotaur, the knife. Their recurrence needs no comment, nor does their ancient history-of-ideas familiarity as literary and philosophical symbols. But Borges finds other sorts of metaphors elsewhere, and indeed symbolic objects for him are merely devices on which larger metaphors can be hung as a fiction progresses. From a thematic-metaphoric point of view, a more arrogant persona than any he projected could lay claim to being considered a philosophical writer. But such a false pretence is alien to Borges,

The unresolvable plot

and the reader is accurately told that the reiterated sallies into the nature of time and reality are merely playful exercises in the nature of metaphor, the major device of human perception within an unstable mental world. Repeatedly, Borges makes it clear that it is his task as a writer to examine and re-examine that instability. It is also, as he sees it, the task of literature itself.

He begins cunningly with the best metaphor of all – versions of himself, and indeed his work everywhere shows that the idea of the self of the fictionist can be partially identified with the status of fiction at a larger level. At every point, he demonstrates the slippery incoherence of any sort of existential identification of the self, and moves rapidly from there to the instability of “reality” and to possible-impossible refutations of time. Because the ironies of self-identification are central, many of the fictions play with the idea of the *Doppelgänger*, and Borges’s thematic borrowings from Conrad, Stevenson, and Dostoevsky do not pass unacknowledged. The idea of the duality of the self, of its unstable partition in terms of both sensibility and history, is frequently applied to a character named Borges, whom the reader has the illusion of knowing.

The narrating persona of the fictions is thus often both a supposedly autobiographical self and an elaborately created persona indistinguishable from that self. The reader is left to ponder the question of whether (s)he is dealing with a standard fictional device or with the metaphysical problem of the existence and nature of the “real” Borges. The easy way out is to claim that Borges is always and only writing about the ontological nature of fiction – but this is not the best way. A partial clue is given in the story, “The Aleph,” where a text-note by “Borges” claims the tale to be an outrageous amalgam of historical facts and parodic elements, all liberally laced with fictional creation. Since the idea of a mystical, total, world-spatial spot like the aleph would be possible for the skeptical Borges only as a metaphysical metaphor, the degree to which anything else in the story, including the character called Borges, can be trusted is open to question.

In many other stories where first-person narrators are identified as Borges, the same rich ambiguity pertains, and creates a semi-provable counterbalance to the negative judgment some critics have made of him as a coldly aloof, totally intellectualized writer. For the interesting thing about Borges as persona in all of his writing – stories, poems, and essays – is the projected warmth and sense of tragic presence. This very presence may be a contrived fiction, and particularly so in the light of Borges’s repeated statements of human nonreality and instability. More than any other contemporary writer, Borges has rendered himself a creature of the page. Even when he appeared in the last years of his life on American campuses, in his frailty, blindness, and peculiar eagerness to answer the silliest of undergraduate questions about his life and times, the most justly conceived impression of him was that of an animated book. He sat on the stage, quoting long and eloquently from the poems of his masters as frequently as from his own work. The cultural implication of a mind made of

Borges: the old master

literature is one that all his writing imposes on the reader: if Borges exists, he is literature; if we read, we are literature too, just as we are all Shakespeare when we read a Shakespearean line.

At the same time as Borges can be seen as a metaphor for literature itself, he remains a human being anchored by an oppressive sense of reality and historical time. At the end of his most important quasi-philosophical essay, “A new refutation of time,” where only the fleetingly instantaneous present as opposed to past or future is perceived as real, he expresses the temporal and existential paradox:

And yet, and yet . . . Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. Our destiny (as contrasted with the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys 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. ,

(trans. James E. Irby)

To be Borges is more than to be a writer trapped by a stylized literary persona, and an Argentinian placed in history, and in no way can Borges see himself or his work as singular. In a little one-page parable entitled “Borges and I,” the persona refers to “the other one, the one called Borges” to whom things happen. This alter ego who is a famous writer pre-empts all of Borges’s tastes and characteristics, “but in a vain way that turns them all into the attributes of an actor”; the historically “real” Borges who walks the streets of Buenos Aires says, “I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me.” But this other person, this writer who skews and renders vain the life, pleasures, and tastes of the real man, is only a part of literary history and only a part of the historical Borges:

It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and the tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him.

(all quotations from this parable trans. James E. Irby)

Borges is aware, however, that the division between himself as a world-historical being on the one hand and a writer on the other cannot be made distinct even by the sleight-of-hand that is this parable’s method. At the end of the page the wistful words, “I do not know which of us has written this page,” indicate the unwelcome unity of the plural self, as well as the fragility of the idea of authorship and the very being or authenticity of life or literature.

In *The Book of Sand*, Borges includes a late fiction entitled “The Other” which the narrating persona places in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1969. The basic

image of the story is the old one of life as a dream, much used by Borges and his earlier avatars. In an aura of oneiric unreality the 70-year-old Borges is forced to share a park bench on the bank of the Charles River with a hostile and alien 19-year-old youth, who believes he is in Geneva, as the young Borges indeed was in 1918. (An elegant Borgesian footnote to this tale is that the old Borges returned to Geneva to die in 1986.) With considerable repugnance, the elderly Borges recognizes this other being as another sort of double – the self he was over fifty years ago. The two talk about shared childhood experiences that they interpret in radically different ways, with the older man disapproving of the tastes and airs of his previous self and the younger incapable of believing that this old stranger could be an image of his own future. The fantastic time-travel involved is in a sense memory-based for the old Borges (although he is in no way a celebrant of memory, and points out that he had forgotten how irritating and limited he was as a young man). But for the young man the situation is impossible, involving the creation of an inconceivable self in an inconceivable future. The fact that every person is many people as time refracts itself into the evanescent instances of many, many presents is central to Borges's conception of the self and a constantly repeated metaphor within his work.

But the multiplicity and ambiguity of the self depend primarily on the idea or shifting metaphor of time, and indeed it is justified to claim that all Borges's work includes in one way or another an ingeniously repeated refutation of time as the reigning tyrant it has been in western civilization. Subserving to this concentration on the subject of time and concurrent with it in all his writing is a critique of reality from the idealist point of view. When he argues in "Time and J.W. Dunne" against Dunne's system in which the future is seen through dream experience to co-exist simultaneously with the present and hence the past, Borges dodges the indelible attraction that seminal but peculiar book (*An Experiment With Time* – first published in 1927) exerted on the Modernist mind, influencing writers as disparate as Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Joyce, and Graham Greene. He disagrees with Dunne's ease in conflating time and reducing its mysteries, and he is delightedly skeptical about the unitive aspect of the eternal that such a system imposes:

Dunne assures us that in death we shall learn how to handle eternity successfully. We shall recover all the moments of our lives and we shall combine them as we please. God and our friends and Shakespeare will collaborate with us.

With such a splendid thesis as that, any fallacy committed by the author becomes insignificant.

(trans. Ruth L.C. Simms)

Time is mysterious rather than real for Borges, because of his toying with idealist tendencies, first taken skeptically from the eighteenth-century Bishop Berkeley and then modified by Schopenhauer. Among Borges's repetitions are his frequent references to these two philosophers, who together with Josiah Royce focus his sense of how the mind exists in a real world. In Borges's

paradox, the real world is undoubtedly out there, but it is only partially perceived as a product of the subjective mind. Knowledge for Borges is thus an accumulated set of extrapolations from the way in which experience is read and assembled by the individual perceiving consciousness. As a result, many of his fictions fruitfully demonstrate how the pressures of subjective interpretations can alter the feeling of reality or ontological interpretation of the world. In this respect, two of his fictions, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "Funes the Memorious," are of particular importance – the first because it describes the permutations and combinations of an idealist universe which is the joint project of many subjective demiurgic minds, the second because it shows how a compulsive, even physical mental narrowness of perception can pervert all acceptable standards of how to live in the world.

In his essay, "Partial magic in the Quixote," Borges presents his central claim that "Every novel is an ideal plane inserted into the realm of reality," and through this definition he implies that the "realism" of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century polemics is chimerical. In elaboration of this point, he elsewhere presents a parable entitled "A Yellow Rose." In this brief exercise, the mannerist poet Marino, on his deathbed suddenly sees the terrifying gap between his overwrought description of a flower and its utterly real existence "as Adam might have seen it in Paradise." This essay is the ultimate denial of realism in literature, as Marino's vision demonstrates:

And he sensed that [the rose] existed in its eternity and not in his words, and that we may make mention or allusion of a thing but never express it at all; and that the tall proud tomes that cast a golden penumbra in an angle of the drawing room were not – as he had dreamed in his vanity – a mirror of the world, but *simply one more thing added to the universe.*

(italics added; trans. Anthony Kerrigan)

When the narrator adds the words, "this illumination came to Marino on the eve of his death, and, perhaps, it had come to Homer and Dante too," Borges implies that when literature and its progenitors are cured of the worldly vanity of realism, then even the greatest writers must in honesty realize that mimesis is impossible. They cannot imitate accurately, but simply add something else to the world; through their art, they insert a subjective or ideal plane into the realm of reality. The value of this depends on the quality of the author's vision, as well as his/her architectonics.

This insertion of an ideal plane is precisely the operative process of the difficult, comical, detail-ridden story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." This longest and, for some readers, most important of Borges's fictions begins typically in the mirror-and-book-haunted realms of reality, in a country house visited by him and his long-time collaborator, Bioy Casares. Throughout his life a fan of encyclopedias, particularly the *Britannica*, Borges with his friend turns to a volume of the *Anglo-American Encyclopedia* to look up a country called Uqbar to which Bioy Casares has just made reference. No entry can be

found in spite of Bioy Casares's firm memory of having read about it in this encyclopedia. But a few days later in Buenos Aires, it magically turns up in four added pages in another copy of the same encyclopedia. In the heavily deterministic fictive world of the story, this is the beginning of a series of apparently chance happenings, all concerning books and sections of books that describe a vague, unreal, but thoroughly articulated place.

Like the Zembla of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, it is possible to locate Uqbar somewhere in a quasi-geographical place (in the Near East in Borges's case, in north-western Russia in Nabokov's), but it is somehow not there, and not accessible to experiential reality. The librarian-as-detective is dominant in the tale, as Borges – always fascinated by occult ideas and mystical systems like the Jewish Kabbalah and the doctrines of the Rosicrucians – hunts down the nature and origins of this place, country, or imaginary planet that goes under any one of the triple names – Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius, almost as though this were its address instead of the fiction's title. The gradual shaping of this new world creates a second reality which it is the tale's task to adumbrate.

Various acquaintances in the tale progressively provide the sleuth character, "Borges," with the hidden encyclopedias and secret books describing this mythical place (it is notably not a utopia or "nowhere," however, because the force of its mental reality finally renders it tangible). It becomes obvious that this created world is the predetermined product of a quasi-occult group of scholars from many fields. In demiurgic fashion, they construct a world of slithering idealism where all language, thought, science, and material elements are the largely whimsical or wish-fulfilling subjective projections of the collective minds of their makers. On the one hand a deeply comic world fulsomely satisfying idealist dreams and playing hilariously with philosophical speculations, Tlön also projects material objects which grotesquely mirror and parody those of the primary reality in which human beings on earth believe they dwell. All the devices used by people in speculative ontological considerations are touched upon, and all "real" objects – from pencils and coins to the Realist notion of God – are given new material being. In fact, material manifestations are constantly altered and multiplied as people through their subjective idealism multiply the need for such controlled materials. Thus there are objects called "hrönir" that proliferate when the quantity of material objects expands according to the mentalist needs of individual people: a single lost pencil, for example, will be found by many people in many forms, each corresponding to the ideal pencil of each of the finders.

But Borges is not interested in merely amusing his readers with the comic creation of an *orbis tertius* with extended schizophrenic overtones. His sense of the alteration and corruption of the world by subjective thought is foremost here and, as he explores it, this fiction comes as close to bitter political statement as anything Borges, generally literarily apolitical in spite of his troubles with the Perón government, has ever written. At the end of the fiction,

Borges's narrating persona sits alone in a world taken over by Tlön's power, working on an unpublishable translation of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Buriall* – a book of ashes and history that links to the futility a writer like Borges must have felt at the outset of World War II, when history fell apart.

All fictions create secondary worlds, and Borges self-reflexively parodies such compulsive secondary creations. But if, as this tale argues, perception of and activity in the world are altered by human minds, it then behooves us to see the results parodically presented as they are here. As the bibliographical sleuthing activity of the Borges character progresses (there is absolutely no plot beyond this), strange material intrusions from the imagined realm into our world begin. We are told that the fantastic objects in Tlön have been so thoroughly imagined, projected, and accepted by their creators that they gradually appear in the daily world of ordinary experience. The first thing to materialize is a quivering compass packed in a French princess's silverware; one object, a small cone of bright metal and unbelievable weight actually finds its way to the narrator who recognizes its mysterious aspect: "These small, very heavy cones (made from a metal which is not of this world) are images of the divinity in certain regions in Tlön." These incarnations are followed by the total possession of the real world by this created fantasy world, so that even as the tale is being told, the "real" world is perverted and changed into Tlön, through Borges's ironically conceived brainwashing.

The idea that whatever genuine reality the inhabitants of the world can perceive might be lost by mentalist constructions and idealist theories is put in fantastic terms in this tale of takeover. But Borges as narrator is quick to point out that it is no more fantastic to believe in the mad subjective world of Tlön than to observe the rate at which equally mad political and social theories have been absorbed and believed in during the twentieth century:

Almost immediately, reality yielded on more than one account. The truth is that it longed to yield. 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?

(trans. James E. Irby)

According to the implications of this fiction, the human mind is debased by its complete dedication to system and order, and the false imposition of any orderly theory is always powerful enough to convert the world. This is one way of accounting for the political outrages of the century, and Borges does not hesitate in making the connection. At the same time, he uses this desperate slavery of human minds to systematic order to demonstrate human terror when confronted by the actual world – that is, by the unsettled and vertiginously labyrinthine ways of genuine experience. The world we inhabit – and Borges's fiction is essentially devoted to versions of and commentary on this world – is infinite, unknowable, and frightening. If all forms and theories illustrate our

The unresolvable plot

search for order, they must be overcome by further thought, and by a real entrance into and surrender to the inhuman, terrifying maze of reality, where the truth, whatever it is, can barely be perceived and certainly not understood:

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 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 over again that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels.

Although the courage to enter the unknown realm of “angels” is asked for, Borges is obviously not optimistic about humankind’s bravery.

The mind’s capacities to enter Borges’s vertiginous world of the “divine” (which is not to be interpreted as the religious, but as the empirically real) are limited by its passion for order, and in Borges’s fiction there are many admonishing *exempla* against too much order. The artificial mentalist world of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” has a recognizable rational base, but like the universe perceived and infinitely remembered by the tragicomic figure of Funes in “Funes the Memorious,” it is perverted by mental excess. Unlike the creation of Tlön, Funes cannot conceive of or make an idealist world, because his mind – partly as the result of an accidental fall from a horse – is perversely limited as an infinite taxonomic storehouse of memory. His incalculable capacity to perceive differentiations means that he cannot simply remember a particular dog, for example, but must remember every hair and angle, and distinguish between the dog at 3:14 seen from the side and the dog at 3:15 seen from the front. The generic idea of dog is impossible for Funes, and indeed he is discontented with an inaccurate language system that does not have a separate name for every leaf and every tree.

The weight of the knowledge given to Funes by indefatigable memory makes conceptual thought impossible, as all mental functions are crowded out by the task of distinguishing endlessly among the leaves on a grapevine, or the multiple perceptions of every moment of time. In “Funes the Memorious” Borges again presents a comically inappropriate world vision, one dominated by a traditionally admired part of human consciousness – memory – and shows how an extended, absurdly precise application of it can lead to an impossible sense of the world. Because Borges is always somehow talking about the nature of fiction, the intolerable predicament of “Funes the Memorious” can also be seen as an allegorical representation of Borges’s rejection of literary realism according to the demands of the nineteenth-century empiricist style, and there is considerable urgency in his use of a short story to reject the delusions of the 800-page book that extended empirical realism produced over a longish period of literary history.

*

Borges: the old master

Nevertheless, the quarrel with empiricism – and hence realism – remains central. In one of his late Minotaur fictions entitled “There Are More Things,” Borges’s narrator says:

To see a thing one has to comprehend it. An armchair presupposes the human body, its joints and limbs; a pair of scissors, the act of cutting. What can be said of a lamp or a car? The savage cannot comprehend the missionary’s Bible; the passenger does not see the same rigging as the sailors. If we really saw the world, maybe we would understand it.

(trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni)

For Borges, understanding the world maze is beyond human reach, because any perception of an object or event is partial and subjective. Taking this circumstance as a *donnée*, Borges urges on his readers the humble knowledge that we must live in perplexity. This does not preclude the need to interpret, however, and most of Borges’s fictions and essays are ironic forays into hermeneutics. As his narrators present their materials and spurious conclusions, the reader is left with a haunting sense that nothing has been answered – that, in fact, the point of the whole exercise is unanswerability. All remains in the realm of the infinite or perhaps the divine, a term that Borges always uses with cool respect tempered by adamant skepticism. At one point in “The Congress” Borges asks whether there is anything holy on earth, or anything that is not, and this double attitude defines his approach to something like a skewed religious response. Any statement apparently connected to belief is immediately countered or its impact withheld by contextual skepticism. But it is nevertheless true that Borges equates the real, the vertiginous, the mysterious, the infinite, the unnameable and the unknowable with the divine; he also indicates that he does not know what this equation might mean.

If knowledge of the world must be partial even for the most ingenious, (Borges amuses us with his fiction, “Averroës’ Search,” where the medieval Arab genius, translating Aristotle, is unable to discover the meaning of the culturally alien Greek concepts of tragedy and comedy), then any reading of a circumstance, event, object, or text is only one of many possible interpretations. Hence the false certainties locked within the form of detective fiction are automatically destroyed. Both detective stories and adventure tales – Borges’s two favorite modes – therefore lose their simplicity and certitude; they are, rather, placed in the position of having to be infinitely reworked in order to present the *mise-en-abyme* series of endless mirrorings and alternatives necessary in reading a text or reacting to a situation.

This impossible struggle with the paradoxes of accuracy and completeness dominates Borges’s imagination throughout his career, as he presents images of infinity within enclosed form. Like all his dominant subjects, it is imaged repeatedly – from the concept of the novel as maze in the early tale, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” to the idea of the endless book in the late fiction, “The Book of Sand.” A particularly clear manifestation of struggle and

repetition occurs in the parodic murder mystery, "Death and the Compass." Here the detective novel is reduced to its classic features, with a brilliant sleuth and an equally brilliant criminal; the clues demand a scholarly grasp of the Kabbalah and especially the four letters of the unspeakable name of God – the Tetragrammaton.

The detective, Erik Lönnrot, is modeled on Poe's Auguste Dupin and is secretly opposed by the gunman Red Scharlach (Sherlock?), whose name is planted at the beginning of the tale, but whose provenance does not in any obvious way connect him with the Kabbalist reading Lönnrot imposes on the murders. Lönnrot's *a priori* system of reading the clues can be compared to William of Baskerville's error in *The Name of the Rose*; in Borges's case the criminal ingeniously sets a plot to entice Lönnrot to the deserted villa, Triste-le-Roy, where he is killed in vengeance for the earlier imprisonment of Scharlach's brother. The first murder, from which Lönnrot much too cleverly and wrongly extrapolates the Kabbalistic key, in fact had nothing to do with Scharlach, but the latter reads his adversary well and knows that he will continue to impose this wrong pattern on all future events. With this knowledge as Scharlach's starting point, it is simply a case of entrapping Lönnrot in the maze of his own hyperactive ingenuity.

The fiction ends ironically with the murderer/non-murderer outwitting the detective, but Borges adds his own particular modification or twist, thus taking the thrust of the story out of the realm of detective plots almost completely. Whereas murder mysteries typically depend on their own narrowly formal closure, Borges turns this tale quickly into an unending *mise-en-abyme* situation acquiesced to by both antagonists. Theirs is not a unique story, but a repetition; another version of their combat will inevitably be played in another life or realm. It is understood that the combat has little to do with detectives, murderers, or revengers, but rather gives aesthetic form to competing attempts to reach a perfect, indeed the ultimate and infinite labyrinth. Before Scharlach shoots him, the defeated Lönnrot insists that although he failed to recognize the rectilinear labyrinth, it remains too simple, and he demands the Eleatic labyrinth of Achilles and the tortoise, of which Borges has written often:

"In your labyrinth there are three lines too many," he said at last. "I know of one Greek labyrinth which is a single straight line. Along that line so many philosophers have lost themselves that a mere detective might well do so, too. Scharlach, when in some other incarnation you hunt me, pretend to commit (or do commit) a crime at A, then a second crime at B, eight kilometers from A, then a third crime at C, four kilometers from A and B, half-way between the two. Wait for me afterwards at D, two kilometers from A and C, again halfway between both. Kill me at D, as you are now going to kill me at Triste-le-Roy."

"The next time I kill you," replied Scharlach, "I promise you that labyrinth, consisting of a single line which is invisible and unceasing."

(trans. Donald A. Yates)

The idea of return, repetition, and alternative plots that haunts Borges's work at every level has both an aesthetic design and a heuristic function. If all stories must be retold, all lives relived, and all books reinterpreted again and again, the reader must be aware of his/her partial aspect within a vast cosmogony of understanding. The dominant sense in Borges's essays, poems, and fictions is that the human mind is only at the beginning of things, that the structures of the world and of literature are not exhausted, but are misinterpreted through an arrogance imposed by logically rationalist and/or idealistically fantastic centuries. But Borges is no problem-solver, and his consistently ironic skepticism, directed at all orderly theories, indicates that there is no proper way to think in order to straighten the contorted roads of human experience.

*

The resonant symbols and catchphrases most often employed by Borges are rooted partly in Argentinian and world history (including Christian, Hebrew, Islamic, and Chinese), but most frequently come from written images of the far past. As in the case of Eco, Borges's erudition – his life as a reader – makes systems of thought from that past available to him, and gives him the devices with which he can fashion a new mode of literature. In "Pascal's sphere," published in his essay collection, *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*, Borges takes up Pascal's deformation of the idea of the divine as spherical. He particularly stresses the medieval pseudo-hermetic quotation picked up by Alanus de Insulis in the twelfth century: "God is a sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere."

This essay is only one of several adumbrations of this idea in Borges's work; in tracing the history of the idea in this essay, he shows how the certainties of the Middle Ages with their Realist God could render the phrase harmless. But for Pascal in the lonely insecurity of the Renaissance – the historical period that laid the bases of skepticism for the modern mind – its infinitude has become "effroyable." Borges's conclusion both explains his theory of repetition and indicates his commitment to a quasi-historical task: "Perhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors." Every writer – like Pascal in this case – picks up the old metaphors anew, and his/her originality consists in what the Renaissance called "invention" – the new combinational aspects and specific genius that lead a literature forward.

Even more telling than the uncertainty of the centre and circumference of God asserted in this medieval quotation is Borges's frequent evocation of a major statement from St Paul (I Corinthians 13:12). In his essay "The mirror of the enigmas" in *Other Inquisitions*, Borges turns pointedly to Paul's mystical statement about seeing only partially while in the world. The phrase in question, as translated into Latin by St Jerome, is "*per speculum in aenigmate*" (the King James Bible translates it as "through a glass darkly" – modern translations of it are unspeakable); the words can be taken as an overarching

The unresolvable plot

description of the work and sensibility of Borges. The importance of mirrors as imaging, multiplying, and refracting is central for Borges, who adumbrates the curious phrase “in aenigmatē” by turning subtly to two sources he quotes often – the *Autobiography* of Thomas de Quincey and the fragmentary works of Leon Bloy. As a reading of Borges would lead one to expect, the key to interpretation is the uncertainty felt throughout the centuries by Paul and the other great heresiarchs with whom Borges identifies – Blake, Swedenborg, de Quincey, Bloy. The word “enigma” signals the nature of all perception, and reminds us that literature’s task is not to deliver medieval certainties but to ponder the mystery.

In an essay in *Prose for Borges* (1972), Emir Rodríguez Monegal painstakingly traces Borges’s career as a reader, indicating how his writerly qualities modified that process. He uses collaborative evidence from Borges’s mother to fortify his theory that a head injury suffered by the writer during Christmas 1938 and followed by a delirious high fever led Borges to begin writing a new sort of fantasy fiction in which the vertiginous was central. The theory of brain-fever can be bolstered by a strong Freudian response to his father’s recent death. Whatever the actual circumstances, however, there is no doubt that from 1939 onwards Borges’s writing took on the utter originality that formed reputation. Although he presents himself always as a reader as well as a writer, he bases both tasks on a radical, imaginative, skeptical questioning. The fundamental fascination of Borges’s essays and stories always begins in his capacity to see oddness everywhere. As a reader, he stresses as does Nabokov the physical pleasure of reading, and as a writer he attempts to convey it by concealing mechanical aspects and playing as many variations as possible. As he puts it in the Preface to *Obra Poética*:

This preface might be termed the aesthetics of Berkeley . . . because it applies to literature the same argument Berkeley applied to the outer world. The taste of the apple (states Berkeley) lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself; in a similar way (I would say), poetry lies in the meeting of poem and reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on the pages of a book. What is essential is the aesthetic act, the thrill, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading. . . . Literature’s magic is worked on us by various artifices, but once the reader finds them out they wear off. Out of this comes the continual need for greater or lesser variations, which may recover a past or prefigure a future.

(trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni)

Although Borges is talking about poetry here, the essential statement holds also for his prose. The reader’s necessary response to his language, as well as to his somersaulting plot turns, creates this excitement, although it is in crucial ways hard to locate Borges’s conception of a reader other than himself. This difficulty in locating another reader does not mean that Borges in a disheartened way feels that an ideal reader cannot exist, but rather that (s)he is a

Borges: the old master

shifting consciousness altered by time and history; like the great Averroës who cannot conceive of comedy and tragedy, all readers are locked within their culture and moment.

In a famous story that ironically parables his historical point of view, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” Borges makes his much quoted remark about enriching “the halting and rudimentary art of reading.” Most of his critics take for granted that Borges, not his parodic Menard, has indeed pointed the way to enriching this “rudimentary art.” Unless one wishes to accuse him of being mechanically baroque (as he himself claimed his early fictions are) or decadent (in the Tolstoyan sense of playing games until the reader sees through them and tires of them), there seems to be little doubt that the estimation of him as an enricher is true and enormously justifies his career. Yet it is strange praise for a writer who, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s terminology, is distinctly monologic (a negative aesthetic term redeemed in Borges’s case by irony) rather than dialogic.

For Borges, all readers as well as all writers are subject to their historical period as well as to their own consciousness. Thus Pierre Menard can write words in the twentieth century that are identical to Cervantes’ words in the seventeenth, but the resulting passage is completely transformed by history and literary tradition into another sort of fiction. Borges as reader can only read according to his temporal constraints, and by implication all other readers must see themselves constantly in a new and unique situation where their experience is fresh and unrepeatable. Nevertheless, history both interferes with texts and undoes itself as it melts away before the primacy of a verbal construct. Paradoxically, every repetition of identical words is a change; every reader is both part of a timeless eternal return and adamantly not so because of the trap of history and time-bound sensibility.

It has become a commonplace to refer to Borges as the most learned of contemporary writers, and John Barth, for example, argues that the former librarian had read everything. This myth overestimates Borges in the wrong way, and in fact draws attention away from certain sorts of repetition that are central to understanding his role as a reader as well as a writer. Borges is often a rather shaky scholar, and lapses into errors such as attributing ideas to Francis Bacon or another Renaissance writer like Sir Thomas Browne, for example, rather than to their proper medieval sources. Because this is combined with his wry habit of creating sources and fulsome bibliographical references in the fictions, the reader must learn a firm distrust of Borges’s scholarly references.

But his inaccuracies are irrelevant: for him the library is not a scholarly taskmaster, but a serendipitous quotidian experience that sets his mind and art in motion, and he should be judged as an artist rather than a scholar. His reiterated dependence on a small group of writers and thinkers reveals the degree to which he studied a limited number of masters – Cervantes, Quevedo, León Bloy, Carlyle, Schopenhauer, Berkeley, Josiah Royce, De Quincey,

The unresolvable plot

Stevenson, Whitman, Novalis, Chesterton, and all sorts of books on the occult. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, inasmuch as Borges has read and written essays, poems, and fictions on many others, but it is important to mention the writers to whom he most frequently returns as touchstones for his work. This tendency to magnify a narrow nucleus of sources is related to his own thematic repetitions and indeed to his writerly instinct for combining new defeats with old misreadings. It is a notable characteristic of Borges's stories that their major impact has to do with defeats that are based on various false kinds of knowledge or misapprehensions. The fictions are interesting because their protagonists are irremediably wrong, or mad, or deluded, and by analogy the reader sees him/herself caught up in comparable misreadings of the world.

In recent years, however, Borges half-playfully described his work as monotonous, and in 1962 characterized his early, famous fictions as baroque and vain. In the Preface to *Doctor Brodie's Report*, he says:

The same few plots, I am sorry to say, have pursued me down through the years; I am decidedly monotonous . . . I have given up the surprises inherent in a baroque style as well as the surprises that lead to an unforeseen ending.

(trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni)

The mellowing of the late fictions, to which Borges says he has added the themes of old age and morality, indeed reduces their impact, although there is no change in the skepticism, images, and mystery that were there from the beginning. It is possible to divide his career into three phases: youthful, undeveloped writing to 1938, the great period from 1938 to 1953 or so, and a subsequent decline, and certainly there is no doubt that the writing of his middle period has a breathtaking excitement of formal aesthetic achievement and originality that has not been repeated. But there is also an unusual thematic and perceptual consistency in all his work that Borges never violated.

Norman Thomas di Giovanni, who worked in close rapport with Borges in Buenos Aires for ten years while translating the works into English, reports the author's excitement upon having his story, "The Circular Ruins," reread to him late in life, and his regret that he could no longer write at that level of genius. Because some of Borges's readers have been dismissive of his work for its mandarin aspect and accuse him of remoteness, it is best to recall the manic, restless excitement with which Borges himself claimed to compose that tale. In *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds* (1986), Cortázar – also an Argentinian – describes the passion of a writer of successful fantastic stories:

It may be exaggerating to say that all completely successful short stories, especially fantastic stories, are products of neurosis, nightmares or hallucinations neutralized through objectification and translated to a medium outside the neurotic terrain. This polarization can be found in any memorable short story, as if the author, wanting to rid himself of his creature as soon and as absolutely as possible, exorcizes it the only way he can: by writing it . . . [F]or his part, a good

Borges: the old master

reader will always distinguish those that come from an ominous undefinable territory from those that are the product of a mere *métier*.

Borges's readers acknowledge this "ominous undefinable territory" in the fictions, and "The Circular Ruins," one of his most resonant fantasies, succeeded in impressing even its humble author. If there is an archetypal Borges fiction, this is it, and to write about it is merely to travel a route repeatedly traversed by the best readers and critics of this phenomenal writer.

Every major Borgesian idea is present in "The Circular Ruins," whether by direct reference or shadowy allusion. In an essay on Bernard Shaw in *Other Inquisitions*, Borges says of good literature:

Literature is not exhaustible, for the sufficient and simple reason that a single book is not. A book is not an isolated entity: it is a narration, an axis of innumerable narrations. One literature differs from another, either before or after it, not so much because of the text as for the manner in which it is read. If I were able to read any contemporary page – this one, for example – as it would be read in the year 2000, I would know what literature would be like in the year 2000.

The inexhaustible aesthetic resonance of this story is complemented by the fact that it is also about the infinite repetitions of creation throughout history. As a narration, it is "an axis of innumerable narrations" that must be read variously according to temporal constraints. "The Circular Ruins" has the aura of an ancient, even primitive tale focused on an imaginary present. A purposive creator arrives by boat at a mythic, archetypal spot marked by circular ruins beside a long, strong river. His task has been imposed by an unidentified agent; because the creator is a man in need of physical sustenance, necessities are automatically given by unimportant, uncharacterized peasants. Essentially he like Borges is alone in his universe. The history and provenance of the circular ruins, including the fire god that once governed them, are not given. The work of creating a human being – a sort of golem or homunculus – by dreaming it and then inserting this dream into the reality of the world, is parallel to the task of a demiurge, a god – or a novelist. Like many artists, this dreamer is inept in his first attempts, because he begins with an *a priori* notion of where and how a human being can be imagined. He wrongly looks for a student by dreaming an illusory college, and concentrates on a young man who turns out to be inadequate. Having erred, the dreamer-creator faces the most difficult recognition an artist must face:

He comprehended that the effort to mold the incoherent and vertiginous matter dreams are made of was the most arduous task a man could undertake, though he might penetrate all the enigmas of the upper and lower orders: much more arduous than weaving a rope of sand or coining the faceless wind. He comprehended that an initial failure was inevitable. He swore he would forget the enormous hallucination which had misled him at first, and he sought another method.

(trans. James E. Irby)

The new creative method demands that sympathetic and absolute attention be paid, and slowly his oneiric imagination articulates the heart, the limbs, and, most touching and difficult of all, the innumerable hairs on the man's head. This time the dreamer is successful, as the realistic novelist is when (s)he concentrates utterly and selflessly on his/her creation and nurses it into life. Like Cervantes or Marino in the essays discussed above, the author/creator succeeds in inserting this dreamed, idealist being into the plane of reality. Proud of his "son," the dreamer trains him in his task - which is identical to his own - and sends him down the endless river to the next set of circular ruins where this golem will repeat the steps of his creator's creation. But until the dramatic end of the tale, the creator, like all human beings, fails to see himself also as unreal, as a dream dreamt by a dreamer who in his turn was dreamt by a dreamer, and so on throughout history and prehistory to eternity. Only when he is forced to walk through fire and is not burned does he realize that he, like his created son, is unreal; similarly this son will believe in his own reality until it is denied him, in an endless cycle of repetition from the past into the future.

Like Kafka who felt the pressure of the oneiric, Borges presents a subtle argument about the artificial unreality of reality in this fiction, and through it argues that like Hamlet, like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, from whom the epigraph is taken, like Scheharazade, we may be fictions ourselves. The very basis of our lives in reality - whatever that is - may be merely imagined by a dreamer prior to ourselves as in "The Circular Ruins." But under any circumstances, it is largely unknowable. This oneiric unreality at one level comes simply from philosophical idealist thought, but it also has specific application to the ancient idea of artistic creation as a microcosm of divine creation. All works of art are imagined, dreamt at a deep level of concentration, but they are artificial; "realism" is therefore always a vain and impossible undertaking. One of Borges's favorite terms or ideas is that of the heresiarch - the arch heretic who questions all before him, and particularly all forms of established dogma. For Borges, the artist and writer (who is far from the abstract and frivolous game-player he has occasionally been accused of being), reality itself is an infinite *mise-en-abyme* that cannot be traced to any secure source and requires a brilliant heresiarch to demonstrate its infinite resonances. The reader who learns something of this has been taught by a Postmodern master, by the Borges whose bookish life has been dedicated to this elaboration.

Nabokov's ardors and pale fires

Vladimir Nabokov was born in the same year as Borges, 1899; literary tradition quickly linked them with each other and assigned Calvino to them as their younger brother. The three are thematically, tonally, and formally unlike, but they share an intellectualization of affect, a distaste for the pretensions of conventional realism, and an allusive habit that places high demands on the competence of the reader. In each case, the relationship of the text to the reader under the aegis of vast learning, ironic games, and experimental techniques is a central factor and, of the three, Nabokov is the most notably competitive and even hostile. Placing him in a proper context in contemporary fiction is a subtle task, and one that requires a just hand and an allowance for aesthetic arguments unlike those of any major writer in the mid to late twentieth century.

With Nabokov's death in 1977, the Anglo-American world lost its pre-eminent practitioner of literary gamesmanship and a writer of endlessly varied innovative techniques. Because of his twenty-year stay in the United States, Nabokov enjoyed being referred to as an American writer; his real homeland, however, is not the US, a lost Russia, pre-war Berlin and France, or cosy Switzerland, but international literature. His startling originality expresses itself in this spontaneous internationalism and keeps him from alignment with any past or present tradition: tagging him as a Postmodernist or experimentalist or even a Russian dependent is, like most tagging, a reductively culpable step that underestimates his specific free-floating originality.

As absolutely bookish as Borges, Eco, or Calvino, Nabokov adheres to a myth of experience through which coherent plot action is made to renovate the images and parody the forms of the rich literary past of the western world. His characters appear to participate in "reality" - a term Nabokov says should always be put in quotation marks - and many critics have fallen into the trap of trying to subject them to conventional methods of literary analysis. Nabokov's readers always perforce read more than the text they are given: if they fail to apprehend the allusive density of the stories or novels - which goes beyond