

Unlike say, Borges, he is very much a mystic rather than a sceptic. For an excellent fuller analysis, see Jo Anne Engelbert, *Macedonio Fernández and the Spanish American Novel* (New York University Press, New York, 1978).

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## JORGE LUIS BORGES: FICCIONES

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Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) was born in Buenos Aires into an old-established middle-class Argentine family with English connections. His education, begun in Argentina, was completed in Geneva during World War I with a Swiss baccalaureate; he never attended a university. Moving with his family to Spain, he began publishing avant-garde poetry in 1919 and, after his return to Buenos Aires in 1921, he was soon recognised as one of the leading young poets. His first eight books, from *Fervor de Buenos Aires* in 1923 to *Discusión* in 1932, were collections of poetry and essays. It was not until 1928 that he began to experiment with imaginative prose. In 1935 he published *Historia universal de la infamia*, a set of odd and freakish tales which constitute the prehistory of his fictional work. One of them, however, 'Hombre de la esquina rosada' has become famous as his first mature tale. It was followed by others, chiefly published in *Sur*, Argentina's most prestigious literary magazine. In 1942 these became *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, incorporated into *Ficciones* two years later. From 1938 to 1946 Borges was employed in a municipal library in the suburbs of Buenos Aires but was dismissed for hostility to the Perón regime and for supporting the Allies during World War II. Thereafter he earned his living chiefly by lecturing and teaching. More collections of short stories followed *Ficciones: El Aleph* (1949), *El informe de Brodie* (1970), *El libro de arena* (1975). In the 1950s and 1960s there had been more essays, poetry, criticism and collaborations, notably with another major Argentine writer, Adolfo Bioy Casares (b.1914).

From 1953 to 1973 Borges was Director of the National Library of Argentina and also taught (principally Old English literature) in the University of Buenos Aires. In 1961 he shared with Samuel Beckett the Formentor Prize, the beginning of his real international fame.

After 1955 he was almost totally blind. During the 1960s he once more began to write poetry consistently and published several new collections of verse with great success. By now he was universally recognised as the 'grand old man' of Spanish American letters. More than a score of full-scale critical works and thousands of articles had been written about his work. He had received numerous other prizes and many honorary degrees while lecturing in many parts of the world. Sadly, and inexplicably, he never received the Nobel Prize.

Brought up to be bilingual in Spanish and English, he also spoke French, German and Italian. Before blindness overtook him he had steeped himself in all the major areas of Western literature. He published books on English, North American and Argentine literature, on Dante and on Old Germanic literature, with special reference to the ancient Icelandic sagas, which fascinated him for most of his adult life. He was deeply influenced by Schopenhauer, loved *The Arabian Nights* and constantly reread Stevenson, Chesterton, Kipling, Poe, Henry James and Hawthorne. A sceptic, he was fascinated with religious and metaphysical beliefs and ideas. These have always underpinned his writings and provide the best basis for an approach to his work.

The first eight stories of what was to be *Ficciones* were published as *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* in 1942. Two years later they were followed by six more, making up the first (1944) edition. Three more ('El fin', 'La secta del Fénix' and 'El Sur') were added in the second edition (1956).

To understand why the appearance of these tales was a turning point in the history of modern Spanish American fiction, we need to glance at the evolution of the novel in Spanish America earlier in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> A key date was 1908, when Argentina's Enrique Larreta published *La gloria de don Ramiro*, the last major novel of the previous creative cycle, that of *modernismo*. Written in coruscating prose, it was a self-consciously artistic evocation of the grand old military and religious tradition of the Golden Age of Spain. Somewhat paradoxically, it inaugurated the period we now associate with the six important novels whose popularity for the first time put Spanish American fiction on the map. The other five were: *Los de abajo* (1915) by Mexico's Mariano Azuela, *El hermano asno* (1922) by Chile's Eduardo Barrios, *La vorágine* (1924) by Colombia's José Eustasio Rivera, *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926) by Argentina's Ricardo Güiraldes and *Doña Bárbara* (1929) by Venezuela's Rómulo Gallegos.

The last five writers of the 'famous six' faced a double imperative. On the one hand they sought to incorporate into their work some of the changes in fictional technique which had been appearing in the European novel. On the other hand they aspired to break away from the imitation of the subject matter of European fiction, especially from imitation of the French realist pattern. They wished to deal instead with specifically Spanish American problems, life-styles and values. For this reason Rivera, Güiraldes and Gallegos turned away from urban environments or those of an idealised countryside and set their novels on the great plains or in the jungles of the vast, empty interior. They thus became the foremost representatives of 'nativist' fiction. In the 1940s the 'famous six' were still the established novelists of Spanish America. It was not simply that some of them were still writing; Gallegos published *El forastero* in 1948, while Barrios scored a major hit with *Gran Señor y rajadiablos* as late as 1949. But equally important is the fact that the decade of the 1930s in Spanish American fiction had been an undistinguished one. Its novelists failed to surpass the achievements of their older contemporaries. They really only extended the thematic range of Spanish American fiction so that it now began to include an interest in the ways of life and outlook of the indigenous Indian population, for example, or in the impact of North American economic imperialism. Without actually marking time, the novel had lost its earlier impetus.

Borges was of course exaggerating when in 1972 he said:

Pensemos que en casi toda la América Latina la literatura no es otra cosa que un alegato político, un pasatiempo folklórico o una descripción de las circunstancias económicas de tal o cual clase de población y que aquí en Buenos Aires ya estamos inventando y soñando con plena libertad.<sup>2</sup>

But the thrust of his assertion is clear. His attitude had long been shared by other major novelists. Cuba's Alejo Carpentier, for example, had already written in the 1960s:

Pensé, desde que empecé a tener conciencia cabal de lo que quería hacer, que el escritor latinoamericano tenía el deber de 'revelar' realidades inéditas. Y sobre todo salir del 'nativismo', del 'tipicismo', de la estampa pintoresca para 'desprovincializar' su literatura, elevándola a la categoría de valores universales.<sup>3</sup>

The diagnosis was the same. Mainstream Spanish American fiction

had become stuck in the 1930s in an obsolete creative pattern which was too 'documental', too close to the reality it described.

How was a renovation to be achieved? The prevailing manner of writing was still broadly realistic. With a few honourable exceptions, novelists had been largely content to go on in one way or another reporting reality rather than questioning it. Here was where the change would come about. In part, its roots lay in Surrealism. The Nobel Prizewinner Miguel Ángel Asturias later recognised, like Carpentier, that the European movement, with which both were closely connected in Paris, had opened their eyes to the possibility of exploiting a new dimension of Spanish American reality. For convenience, we can call it Magical Realism. It was based on the astonishment which certain aspects of reality, both historical and contemporary, in the subcontinent can still produce, as well as on the magico-mythical outlook of its indigenous and black inhabitants.

But the true causes of the change lay deeper, in the collapse of confidence in the West of man's ability to perceive 'reality' at all. In a famous affirmation in the twenty-sixth chapter of his masterpiece *El Señor Presidente* (1946) Asturias declared that 'entre la realidad y el sueño la diferencia es puramente mecánica', undermining at one blow our comfortable certainties about our power to understand either ourselves or the world outside ourselves in terms of a one-to-one relationship with 'real' reality. His attitude was increasingly shared by other writers. The leading figure was Borges. He more than anyone else shattered the complacent acceptance by his fellow writers that there was any simple correlation between their sense-impressions and the apparenial world outside. That is why *Ficciones* marks a watershed. After its lessons had been digested, it was no longer possible to go on taking 'reality', social, psychological or of any other kind, for granted. What Borges proposed went far beyond what the now somewhat discredited magical realists proclaimed. Among his more important pronouncements are these from *Otras inquisiciones*: reality is 'inasible' ('Nathaniel Hawthorne'); 'No sabemos qué cosa es el universo' ('El idioma analítico de John Wilkins'); 'Es dudoso que el mundo tenga sentido' ('El espejo de los enigmas'); and 'Los hombres gozan de poca información acerca de los móviles profundos de su conducta' ('Anotación al 23 de agosto de 1944'). Time, he reminds us, is a mystery; our sense of ourselves as individuals is perhaps an illusion; if the 'really real' exists, it is questionable whether human language can express it.

In a world no longer seen as governed by a benevolent Providence, in which no reliable absolutes exist, 'toda estrafalaria cosa es posible' (*Discusión*: 'La duración del infierno'). This is the idea of things, the view of life – as bewildering, but interesting – against which Borges's stories are set. But what of us, mankind, the readers? It has been persuasively argued by Alazraki<sup>4</sup> that, in Borges's view, man's characteristic response to his situation is to select from the flux of sense-impressions those which it is comfortable to live with, screening out, as far as possible, the rest. Thus man creates a mental habitat, a construct of reality in which to take refuge from a chaotic universe. For this last, Borges's favourite metaphor is the labyrinth. Why a labyrinth? And what kind of labyrinth? Seen from above, a maze can be perceived to combine order and chaos. Tidily symmetrical in appearance, its walks appear to lead progressively to the centre and allow a return to the outside. But once inside, direction is rapidly lost; the turnings, though regular, bear no relation to the objective. In addition, a Borgesian labyrinth must be thought of as circular, with no outlet. We are born already inside it. At its centre is death; or, in a few privileged cases, an epiphany, or perhaps the discovery of who we really are. What matters is less the centre, which few consciously reach, but the maze itself, the symbol of existence. It has an appearance of predictable regularity, which then turns out to be baffling; or, seen from the other perspective, it presents us with a series of baffling experiences which nevertheless contain teasing hints of design. Recognition of this duality is important: Borges is no mere vulgar sceptic, but one who is prepared to doubt even his own scepticism. There may possibly be an order governing what we think of as reality. So he writes in 'In Memoriam A.R.' (*El hacedor*) of

El vago azar o las precisas leyes  
Que rigen este sueño, el universo.

But even if 'precise laws' exist to provide explanations, we may have forgotten how to interpret them, or perhaps may never have been programmed to comprehend them.

Borges's best tales, then, are in the nature of fables or parables designed to subvert, often with gentle humour, our comforting presuppositions about ourselves, our place in the universe, or the intelligibility of the universe itself if it is, in fact, more than a dream. In 1965, in a rare moment of revelation – for much of what he has



said about his writings is playfully misleading – Borges remarked:

dans tous mes contes, il y a une partie intellectuelle et une autre partie – plus importante je pense – le sentiment de la solitude, de l'angoisse, de l'inutilité du caractère mystérieux de l'univers, du temps, ce qui est plus important: de nous mêmes, je dirai: de moi-même.<sup>5</sup>

Before attempting to illustrate this view of *Ficciones*, one, that is, which seeks to locate the collection's importance as a landmark in Spanish American fiction in its subversion of received notions about reality and about the writer's ability to express it, it is worth mentioning an alternative interpretation. Sturrock, Del Río and MacAdam,<sup>6</sup> among others, tend to suggest that Borges's stories are not about the enigmatic nature of the 'real' at all, but essentially about the act of writing. We cannot overlook this approach. It is a possible way of reading the stories. But it is at best reductive, since it imposes a narrow range of themes on them. At worst, it is misguided, since it tends to produce interpretations of individual tales which are unpersuasive. However, it does focus our attention on the fact that, with *Ficciones*, Spanish American imaginative writing suddenly becomes more aware of its fictive nature, more ready to foreground and display its own devices. It thus compels the reader to recognise what is being read as what it is: fiction. To this extent *Ficciones* helped to open the way to forms of literature which allude to their own limitations or parody themselves. In fiction we think of Puig, the later Donoso and Cuba's Severo Sarduy. A notable example is Vargas Llosa's *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (1977). Nor can we afford to overlook the contribution of *Ficciones* to a renewed sense of the importance of language in fiction, of works of fiction as *hazañas verbales*, which played such an important role in producing the Boom novelists' *salto de calidad*.

Cognate with the above-mentioned approach is that associated with Isaacs and Dauster,<sup>7</sup> for instance, which suggests that it is art which provides the answer to the chaos of reality, that art imposes order and meaning, and that this is the ultimate metaphor underlying Borges's writings. This too is a tenable position. It appears to resolve the central contradiction of Borges's art: the fact that he uses meticulously structured forms, in prose or verse, to express the possibility that the world is mere blind flux. At first sight it seems undeniable that Borges is privileging the artistic vision. But

it seems hardly in character for him to subvert reality in order to exalt art. Many of his statements poke gentle fun at the role of the creative writer and insist on the limitations of language. For him, art is not an absolute, much less *the* absolute. It seems more likely to be just another construct. Borges does not deny the need for constructs; all he asks is that we should be aware of them for what they are.

Even if the creation of satisfying artistic forms is not an adequate answer to existential chaos and the lack of providential design, Borges's formal achievements, which first became apparent in *Ficciones*, are critically important in another sense. It has sometimes been suggested (by Vargas Llosa<sup>8</sup> among others) that the famous six writers of the early part of this century were in fact 'primitive' in their fictional techniques. This is not strictly true. It is based on the fact that, preoccupied as they were with the discovery and expression of a genuinely Spanish American reality, they tended to see that reality as *unambiguous*, accepting in the realist tradition that what they observed around them on the *llano*, the Pampa, the battlefields of the Mexican Revolution or in the Amazonian jungle was really real. They adjusted their techniques accordingly. Form in literature and art is a metaphor. The characteristic realist novel form, in which an omniscient narrator recounts events and human reactions to them as if the events themselves formed a comprehensible causal sequence, and as if the reactions of the characters were by and large rationally explicable, makes up a reassuring metaphor of an intelligible world.

Borges's world is not such a world. What he had to discover were forms which provided metaphors that are the opposite of reassuring, which do not suggest a predictable world and which in consequence are sometimes less immediately accessible to the reader who is accustomed to passive acceptance of the fictional texts he reads. If reality is an enigma, then the figuring-forth of that enigma must in turn reflect it, not just in terms of theme, but also in terms of form. New wine cannot be put into old bottles: a new, disturbing vision of life cannot be adequately expressed in the old reassuring ways. To take an example: 'El acercamiento a Almotásim' is plainly a work of fiction. But what is its form? It is that of a book review, a conventionally non-fictive form. Similarly, in the postscript to 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', the narrator refers to the story as an article. 'Tres versiones de Judas' is also cast in the form of an article and 'Funes el memorioso' in the form of a contribution to a symposium

of essays. The meaning is self-evident: since we cannot know the really real, there is no difference between fiction and fact; 'created' reality is as real as observed reality and vice versa; any attempt on our part to describe reality is bound to be a fiction.

The world inhabited by the realist novelists is thus radically called into question. The idea of presenting a world in a way which the reader is called upon to recognise as reflecting more or less faithfully a pre-existing reality against which the behaviour of the characters and the truth of the episodes can somehow be checked, and which is somehow more authoritative than the copy, is undermined. The process extends to the reality of ourselves. In a famous passage in 'Magias parciales del Quijote' (*Otras inquisiciones*), Borges writes:

¿Por qué nos inquieta que Don Quijote sea lector del *Quijote*, y Hamlet, espectador de *Hamlet*? Creo haber dado con la causa: tales inversiones sugieren que si los caracteres de una ficción pueden ser lectores o espectadores, nosotros, sus lectores o espectadores, podemos ser ficticios.

When Gabriel García Márquez in *Cien años de soledad* speaks of a place near Macondo where 'hasta las cosas tangibles eran irrales' and makes the village priest – the representative of a God-ordained pattern of reality – say to the last Aureliano: 'Ay hijo. . . . A mí me bastaría con estar seguro de que tú y yo existimos en este momento', he is echoing Borges. Similarly, when Brausen in *La vida breve* (1950), by Uruguay's Juan Carlos Onetti, and one of the first important Boom novels, steps out of reality into his private dream of an imaginary city, Santa María, we are conscious of the presence of Borges in the background.

Such a mode of writing often demands a different reader-response. We enjoy the fiction of the nativist writers chiefly through self-identification with the episodes and characters. But we can hardly identify ourselves with Yu Tsun or Funes or the Indian student of 'El acercamiento a Almotásim', they have too little interior life. How then do Borges's stories appeal? The analogy is with the pleasure we get from detective stories or even crossword puzzles, that is, from problem solving. Many of Borges's best stories are puzzling and teasingly demand to be 'cracked'. At the end of a first reading we tend to want to 'unpack' the stories, to understand them more fully, to figure out a deeper meaning and check it by rereading. The result is an increase in reader-satisfaction, especially if, as is often the case,

we come to recognise several levels of meaning coexisting in the same tale.

This need to collaborate with the author, to involve oneself more deeply with the text, to read more alertly, has been recognised as of major importance in the approach to the new novel,<sup>9</sup> which has followed Borges's lead. To take an example: in the middle of Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* there briefly appears a curious, incestuous, Adam-and-Eve-like couple, in whose hut the narrator dies. The episode is pivotal to the novel as a whole. But it is left to the reader to work out, if he can, the meaning. Critics like Ortega and Freeman<sup>10</sup> have shown that it is one of the keys to the novel's mythical dimension. Once we grasp its importance our reception of the novel changes and our response to it is heightened. It would, of course, be false to assert that Borges alone was responsible for encouraging what Julio Cortázar has called the shift from the 'lector-hembra' to the 'lector-macho'. But if we wished to identify the point at which the shift began to occur, we should have to locate it close to the date of publication of *Ficciones*.

Rejection of old-style realism carries with it, as an obvious consequence, the liberation of fantasy. This too is part of what makes *Ficciones* an important landmark. Fantasy, thereafter, blossoms in Spanish American fiction, either in the form of magical realism or in the less self-consciously American form which it takes, for instance, in Cortázar. But we are not dealing with 'pure' fantasy of the kind which we might perhaps associate with Tolkien or with some kinds of science fiction; that is, fantasy for its own sake. The importance of fantasy in Borges, and by extension in Cortázar, García Márquez or more recently Chile's Isabel Allende, is its relation to what we take to be reality. 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' is a case in point. Like so many of Borges's best tales it changes direction before the end. Most of the story is concerned with a fantastic world which functions as though philosophic idealism, the doctrine that to be is to be perceived, that the mind creates reality, were an accurate description of the way things work. But the ending is different: Tlön is revealed to be a mere verbal creation. All seems well. But then the fantasy begins to invade the 'real' world, a purely verbal construct begins to modify people's lives. Our sense of a secure, predictable universe begins to be undercut.

How does Borges respond? Behind his serene public stance it is not hard to detect hints of despair. But they are offset by an

unalterable attachment to the value of human dignity, often expressed in his work in terms of disinterested physical courage, and also by a whimsical humour which is not the least important attribute of *Ficciones* as a landmark text. Spanish American literature before Borges was, with a few notable exceptions, remarkably unfunny. A solemn sense of the writer's responsibility was the rule. But Borges's work, however sobering its implications, does not exclude a sense of fun. 'La Secta del Fénix', which presents universal human sexual behaviour in terms of the activities of a secret society, is an outstanding example. More characteristic is the put-down of the pretensions of those who assert their ability to decipher some of the contents of the books in the Biblioteca de Babel, that is, to be able to reveal some meaning in human experience. Their conclusion is described as the discovery of a Baltic dialect of Guaraní – the language of the natives in Paraguay – with inflections borrowed from classical Arabic! The ultimate unintelligibility of things is greeted with no tragic outcry, but with an amused smile at those who cannot accept it with a measure of detachment.

We may now turn to the stories themselves. Although it has been suggested that there is a paradigmatic Borges story form, a kind of Borgesian 'ur-text', it is in fact difficult to reduce the stories to any such model. However, in the case of *Ficciones*, we can begin by recognising that the motif of the journey or quest links together 'El acercamiento a Almotásim', 'La Biblioteca de Babel', 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan', 'La muerte y la brújula', and 'El Sur'. In these stories it functions as a metaphor of man's conscious or unconscious desire to reach a deeper level of knowledge or understanding, a desire which Borges treats rather ironically. The knowledge is either not attained, or if attained is not a source of life-affirming values.

'El acercamiento a Almotásim', the earliest of the stories in *Ficciones*, originally published in 1936, sets the pattern. In contrast to 'Hombre de la esquina rosada', Borges's first widely acclaimed tale, which purported to deal in a broadly realistic way with slum hoodlums, it dispenses at once with anything which might seem to have to do with observation of life. The form of the tale, a pseudo-review of a novel, tells us that the story is a fiction based on a fiction. Next we learn that the 'novel' in question is an altered version of an earlier work of which the original is out of reach. We intuit that there is no such original. Thus we are already at several removes

from reality. The formal 'frame' for the story portends the conclusion, for it leads us directly to the notion that nothing exists outside the mind. Inside the frame the story is that of a non-believing Indian student, who is led by a series of seemingly chance events to embark on a pilgrimage in search of the divine. Symbolically the search is circular (portended by the circular tower from which it begins) and merely brings the student back to himself. A footnote complements the earlier implication, that it is the mind which creates 'reality', with the more pantheistic notion that all is in all, that the microcosm includes the macrocosm. But a third idea is also intercalated: that the student's circular quest for the divine is merely the human equivalent of an endless or circular quest for a higher divinity on the part of God himself. The postulation of such a possibility naturally tends to devalue utterly the student's mystical pilgrimage. His aspiration is mocked by God's. All that is left is an infinite spiral.

The quest of the librarian in 'La Biblioteca de Babel' is essentially the same as that of the student. Each seeks an attribute of the divine: the student, goodness; the librarian, truth: an ultimate explanation of things. The difference lies in the more sophisticated setting. The student's India is mere undifferentiated chaos. But the library has the appearance of orderly, predictable and hence reassuring regularity. The implication is obvious: the design implies a designer. But when the books are opened, their contents are unintelligible, albeit they all teasingly use the same alphabet. The library is a clear example of the Borgesian labyrinth: order enfolding chaos. The arrangement of the opening paragraphs is significant. The first emphasises order; the third disorder, via the lack of connection between the letters on the spines of the books and their 'formless and chaotic' contents. But, in between, the librarian has begun his quest. This symbolises man's instinctive aspiration to find an explanation of his existence, in this case the 'master catalogue' of the library, the key to the meaning of the universe. The librarian's comments on the quest expose the delusions to which men fall prey when they seek to reconcile the incomprehensibility of the library's contents, the books (that is, the pure flux of existence), with some over-arching pattern. The fact that the books contain permutations of twenty-five signs implies that man can filter mentally his experiences or sense-impressions into pre-ordained categories. But this does not of itself render them more explicable. Only when we select and rearrange the

result arbitrarily, according to our needs, do we make an intelligible book (a habitable construct of reality). We note that the librarian's 'explanations', which culminate in the contradictory postulate that the library (reality) is both infinite and cyclic at the same time, reveal that he is as deluded as the rest of mankind, his fellow librarians.

Close thematically to 'La Biblioteca de Babel' is 'La lotería en Babilonia'. As the library combines regularity with incomprehensibility, so any kind of lottery combines organisation with blind chance. Both the library and the lottery are therefore variants of the labyrinth as metaphors of existence. Borges's problem in the tale is how to convert the familiar idea of a lottery by gradual stages into such a metaphor. Much of the pleasure of reading the story comes from identifying these stages. We notice that as each modification takes place the lottery becomes not only more like life, but also more logical. The first reform imposes symmetry: as there are winners who receive more cash than they paid, so there are losers who lose more than the cost of the ticket. At the same time money ceases to be the only stake. A second reform renders participation secret, free and obligatory: now Babylonians are born into the lottery as they are born into existence. The identification life = lottery seems already total. But a further reform is still necessary: to subject the workings of the lottery itself to chance and to render it all-embracing. At this point the metaphor is complete; all is 'un infinito juego de azares'. It is, in fact, a double metaphor, for it is the product of the devotion of the Babylonians to logic and symmetry. Borges seems to be implying not only that life is governed by pure chance, but that the more we try to regulate it, the more chaotic it becomes. Man's mental processes serve only to complicate further what is already sufficiently unknowable.

Even before all the reforms have been described, Borges has already begun to shift the emphasis from the lottery itself to the Babylonians and their outlook: that is, from the way life is to the way we look at it. The Babylonians, subjected to a life dominated by blind chance, submerged in total chaos, nevertheless prefer to envisage existence as governed by 'las operaciones de la Compañía'. Like the librarian of Babel, they cannot give up the idea of an ultimate guiding hand. As he sees the unintelligibility of the books as less significant than the regular construction of the library, so they see the workings of chance as a mere interpolation of the

unpredictable into the 'orden del mundo'. Borges is plainly satirising man's determination to postulate a divine pattern behind events. The history of 'la Compañía' (which, he reminds us, is shot through with fiction) is the history of the Church and its teachings about a God who moves in bafflingly mysterious ways.

A second group of tales ('El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan', 'La muerte y la brújula' and 'El Sur') show us men who, unlike the student in 'El acercamiento...' and the librarian of Babel, actually reach the centre of their private labyrinths. But only to find unhappy consequences. 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan' is in appearance an ingenious World War I spy story, in which the protagonist, Yu Tsun, finds an unexpected way to alert his German paymasters to the danger of a British offensive. But once we arrive at the core of the tale, the interview between Yu Tsun and his victim Albert, we realise that the story has acquired a new and profound theme: that of time, the foremost of all Borges's preoccupations. The directions Yu Tsun receives for finding Albert's house suggest to him those for moving through a labyrinth. This in turn reminds him of a baffling novel written by one of his ancestors and mysteriously associated with a labyrinth. The first part of his interview with Albert dispels the mystery: the novel was the labyrinth. By a tragic irony Yu Tsun finds himself compelled to kill the man who has solved a long-standing family puzzle. If the murder had taken place at this point, the spy story would merely have framed a familiar concept, that of the spatial world as a labyrinth, with a cruel irony at its centre. But the recognition vouchsafed to Yu Tsun is different. What really gives us the illusion of understanding reality is not just being able to perceive it spatially. It is our tendency to perceive it in reassuring terms of cause and effect. But such terms are temporal; cause precedes effect. We impose a time scheme, that is, an order, by organising our perceptions chronologically, and thus grant them a seeming intelligibility. But what if our time scheme were based on a false or imperfect premise? Suppose our idea of time were dictated by the need to create a habitable construct of reality and bore no relation to, or were a childish simplification of, time as it equally well might be: not linear and progressive at all, but labyrinthine, with lines of time crisscrossing each other in all directions, only one of them being perceptible to us? Not content with offering us a spatial labyrinth as a symbol of the world, Borges grafts on to it a temporal labyrinth. Prepared for this by the amount of insight he



had enjoyed on his way to Albert's house, Yu Tsun becomes aware of a myriad of time dimensions in which both might exist. As in other Borges tales, what had begun as a mere physical adventure has turned into an intellectual one. But as the awareness is granted, Yu Tsun's pursuer arrives and he is compelled to carry out his murderous plan. The killing of Albert ingeniously solves a concrete problem for his murderer. But what had seemed to Yu Tsun worth the sacrifice of his own life is rendered utterly insignificant by his discovery, and that discovery he owes to his victim. Insight, for Borges, is nearly always insight into the chaos and horror of reality.

But he did not wish, unlike some modern writers, to mirror that chaos in the form of his stories. Asked in 1976 why he enjoyed detective stories, he replied: 'frente a una literatura caótica, la novela policial me atraía porque era un modo de defender el orden, de buscar formas clásicas, de valorizar la forma'.<sup>11</sup> Interesting as the remark is, it is not the whole story. If Borges enjoyed the careful plotting and the intellectually satisfying design of successful detective stories, he also knew from the example of Chesterton that they could readily be adapted to serve as metaphors of search in a puzzling universe. This is why a number of his stories loosely follow the model of a detective story, with an initial problem, an exploration or discussion of possible solutions and a final explanation. The problem of the detective story as a metaphor is that it implies the possibility of arriving at a solution through rational enquiry; this is certainly not Borges's standpoint. Hence his best-known detective story is a deliberate parody of the genre.

'La muerte y la brújula' is in fact a detective story turned inside out. The first indication of this is that the pedestrian, Watson-like Treviranus is right all along in his interpretation of events, while the Holmes figure, Lönnrot, eventually becomes the criminal's victim. Part of the reason for this inversion of roles is given at the end of the first paragraph with the notation: 'Lönnrot se creía un puro razonador.' His dismissal of Treviranus's commonsense suggestions and his resolve to see in two murders and the scenario for a third an intellectual riddle to be solved by rigorously rational means leads him directly and uncritically to his death. So we are entitled to see in the tale an anti-rationalist parable, a warning against trying to force a rationally acceptable interpretation on to the events of experience, which will often refuse to fit the pattern. Once more Borges is preoccupied with man's inveterate tendency to grasp at whatever

offers the hope of imposing an order on the chaos of life. 'Bastaba', he writes in 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', 'cualquier simetría con apariencia de orden – el materialismo dialéctico, el antisemitismo, el nazismo – para embelesar a los hombres.'

So far, so good. But what about Scharlach? Critics from Gallagher to Fama<sup>12</sup> have recognised that in addition to containing an implicit critique of rationalism, the tale can also be seen to have an 'undercurrent místico' like 'El acercamiento a Almotásim'. Lönnrot's quest becomes 'un camino místico'.<sup>13</sup> There are too many references to God (The tetragrammaton (= JHVH), the 'Nombre' (always capitalised), the Trinity (Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Gryphius)) for this to escape notice. Gallagher's view that perhaps 'the criminal is God, and there emerges the image of a God who deliberately plants false clues, who deliberately goads man's intellectual vanity into the belief that he is arriving at a solution only to laugh in his face at the end by killing him'<sup>14</sup> seems to indicate the direction in which the story is pointing. As Borges inverts the pattern of the traditional detective story so that it is the criminal who hunts the detective, so he inverts the traditional Christian image of a benevolent God. This is another feature of *Ficciones* which was to become commonplace in subsequent Spanish American fiction.<sup>15</sup>

In 'El Sur' we once more see the interweaving of two themes. The first is concerned with reaching the centre of one's own private labyrinth. Earlier Borges had written in the tenth chapter of *Evaristo Carriego*: 'Yo he sospechado alguna vez que cualquier vida humana, por intrincada y populosa que sea, consta en realidad de un momento: el momento en que el hombre sabe para siempre quien es.' The magical moment may be a moment of betrayal as in 'Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz' in *El Aleph*, or of discovery of the non-existence of the individual personality as in 'El fin'. In each case there comes a flash of insight. Here what Dahlmann suddenly discovers, in the face of death, is his fundamental Argentine-ness, foreshadowed in the opening paragraph. He chooses to die in a knife fight, that most traditionally Argentine of deaths. We notice that this traditionalist theme is inserted into a wider cultural context, that of the code of honour of the Hispanic race as a whole, since it is this which impels Dahlmann to accept the challenge to fight. Both the national and the racial traditions are implicit in the figure of the old gaucho who throws him the weapon he needs. Since Dahlmann is suspiciously like Borges himself, who was also a librarian and suffered a similar



illness, this theme seems also to include a wish-fulfilment fantasy by a writer who envied the courage of his military ancestors and who freely admitted that much of his fiction was autobiographical. Nor does this exclude the possibility of recognising in Dahlmann's experience a universal significance, since revelatory test experiences come to us all.

The other theme of 'El Sur' brings us back to the subversion of reality. As the tale proceeds, a series of hints are dropped that all may not be as it seems. Borges himself gave the clue by remarking to Irby<sup>16</sup> that possibly everything after the onset of Dahlmann's illness might be a mere hallucination caused by the illness itself. Some critics, notably Phillips and Gertel,<sup>17</sup> regard this as the only way to read the tale. Others, including Alazraki and Hall,<sup>18</sup> insist on the ambiguity of Borges's procedure. How are we to interpret the fact that the owner of the store or snack bar knows Dahlmann's name, the presence of the old gaucho (in 1939!) and the reference back to the clinic in the last sentence of the story, unless Dahlmann is dreaming? Be the answer as it may, the implications remain: the world of wakefulness and that of dreaming are not separate worlds; we cannot readily tell them apart. But if that is so, Dahlmann's discovery of his essential Argentine-ness, his sense of honour and his act of courage are all perhaps part of a hallucination.

There is clearly not only scepticism here, but also a certain irony. Irony implies a measure of detached awareness in the ironist of the way things tend not to turn out as we hope or expect and hence to mock our aspirations. The greater the discrepancy between anticipation and reality, the more bitter the irony. But only if, in the case of fiction, the characters suffer enough to involve us, the readers. In Borges this is rarely the case, for, as we have seen, his characters tend to have little or no emotional life. Where emotions appear, they tend to be 'told' not 'shown', as when we read the detached description of Dahlmann's hellish pain while he is suffering from septicaemia. Consequently, Borgesian irony tends to be resigned and unobtrusive situational irony, suggested, but not insisted upon. The characters accept it with dignity (Lönnrot), remorse (Yu Tsun), even, in the case of the wizard in 'Las ruinas circulares', with initial relief. Irony in literature is a warning not to expect life to conform tidily to our plans. Thus, in 'Las ruinas circulares', 'Funes el memorioso' and 'El milagro secreto', the protagonists are granted, like Lönnrot, a kind of boon, only to find that it mocks the recipient.

The mockery in 'Las ruinas circulares' begins with the adjective in the title. Nothing in a Borges story is ever there by chance, whether it is a reference to a mask factory in 'La lotería en Babilonia' or to the statues (including one of Hermes, with twin faces) in the garden at Triste-le-Roy. There are even certain call-signs such as the word *vértigo*, which always signals the approach of the critical moment, or the number 1001, which implies unreality. Colours, especially grey, yellow and red, are commonly symbolic. In the same way, references to circularity and to circular objects (the moon, the gramophone record, the circle of light of the lamp, the clock face in 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan', the circular tower and circular quest in 'El acercamiento a Almotásim') are always highly significant. Circularity implies futility: in this case the circular ruins prefigure the circular destiny of the wizard.

The boon granted to him is that of creating something 'real' out of a mere dream. This can be interpreted in more than one way. Perhaps it signifies that what seems to be the product of individual creativity is created not *by* the artist or writer in question but *through* him by the collective mind or the mind of God. In that case the story would be an allegory of the production of art. On the other hand, if we shift the emphasis from what is created to the creator, we see that by adding something to reality, he gives proof of his own autonomous existence. These two interpretations can be made into one, as they were by the Spanish author Unamuno in *Amor y pedagogía* (1902), where the proof of existence is the addition of something by the individual to God's pre-ordained plan, as an actor may add an ad lib to a script. What underlies the stories both of Unamuno and Borges is the question of ultimate human reality. For Unamuno there was still a remnant of hope that this was guaranteed by the existence of God. Not so for Borges. His story uses interior reduplication to suggest that the wizard is as unreal as his 'son'. By extension, we too may be unreal. For as we saw in the earlier quotation from 'Magias parciales del Quijote', this undermining of the reality of the self is precisely the effect produced by interior reduplication. The circularity can be extended to include a God who dreams the God who dreams the wizard, by analogy with the God who seeks a God just as the student of 'El acercamiento a Almotásim' in turn seeks him; particularly in view of Borges's poem 'Ajedrez II' (*El hacedor*) which contains the key question:

¿Qué Dios detrás de Dios la trama empieza  
De polvo, y tiempo y sueño y agonías?

However we finally interpret it, 'Las ruinas circulares' is concerned with illusion. So, too, is 'Funes el Memorioso'. One of our intellectual illusions is that greater conscious awareness is always life-enhancing. Both in 'Funes', 'La escritura del Dios' and 'El Aleph' Borges ridicules this supposition, remarking thankfully in the last, after receiving a vision of the totality of the universe: 'felizmente, al cabo de unas noches de insomnio, me trabajó otra vez el olvido'. Earlier in 'La postulación de la realidad' (*Discusión*) he had explained that if we were unable to screen out most of reality, selecting only what we are able to cope with, life would be impossible. The very nature of perception itself is selective. It follows that adaptation to life means learning what to forget. The ironic 'boons' that Funes receives are precisely those of heightened perception and of remembering the totality of what he perceives. This is a Midas story. Which of us has not wished that our perceptions were clearer and our memories more tenacious? As Midas was granted the golden touch so Funes is granted ultra-sharp awareness combined with perfect recollection. The consequence, instead of being enriching, is crushing. Funes becomes a freak, so overwhelmed with perceptions that he is unable to think synthetically, to categorise. He sees the world for what it is: pure chaotic flux.

Hladík in 'El milagro secreto' is also granted his heart's desire: to complete a work of art. Like Dahlmann, Hladík has much in common with Borges, including a sense that art is the secret justification of his existence. In 'Mateo, XXV, 30' (*El otro, el mismo*) Borges reproaches himself:

Has gastado los años y te han gastado  
y todavía no has escrito el poema.

So too Hladík, facing the prospect of the firing squad, longs to finish his drama and is miraculously granted his aspiration. At first it seems that the story is in a different category from 'Las ruinas circulares'. But irony rapidly supervenes. What happens is virtually a parody of a miracle; for a secret miracle is worthless. The function of miracles is to reveal the intervention of a benevolent deity in the workings of the world. Hladík's miracle dies with him; it reveals nothing, and the story of it is a 'fiction'. A further irony arises from

the fact that the drama which is miraculously completed itself subverts the notion of a coherent and meaningful world, since its themes are delirium and circularity. The miracle is once again a mockery. But the story is interesting also from a different point of view. Like 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan' it has at its centre the mystery of time. Time as we usually conceive it is for the sceptical Borges probably no less an illusion than space or matter. 'Negados el espíritu y la materia, que son continuidades', he writes in 'Nueva refutación del tiempo' (*Otras inquisiciones*), 'negado también el espacio, no sé qué derecho tenemos a esa continuidad que es el tiempo.' Time is ultimately discontinuous: an endless succession of discrete, though infinitely fleeting, individual instants. Each of these instants is autonomous and each constitutes time's only reality. The cat in 'El Sur' lives in the eternity of the instant. It is this that is granted to Hladík.

In regard to all the stories so far discussed we perceive the need on the reader's part to distinguish between the actual events of the tales and their deeper implications. 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote' and 'Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain', which are specifically about literary creation, serve to illustrate the contention that this is in fact the way to read Borges's stories. In one sense the theme of 'Pierre Menard...' is close to that of 'Las ruinas circulares'. Menard, like the wizard, is trying by means of the imagination to perform an impossible task: to rewrite *Don Quixote* in the same words that were used by Cervantes, but as an original work. The idea that books are written out of books and not out of observation of life is a clear inference. But it is not the only one. Nor is it enough to notice that words alter their meanings and associations as time goes on, so that no book written in the past can be read today as it once was read. There is more: for Menard to be able to achieve his object there would not only have to be something in the nature of 'eternal return' present in reality, but more particularly a kind of recurrent determinism, since we cannot conceive of the act of creation separately from all that which contributes to the formation of the writer's mind. Herbert Quain's works in their turn remind us of the book/labyrinth of Ts'ui Pên in 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan', which attempted to include all possible endings. Quain's *April-March* attempts to include an arbitrary number of beginnings. In both cases we are not far from the world of Tlön in which novels habitually 'abarcaban un solo argumento con todas las permutaciones

imaginables'. The repetition of the idea is partially motivated by Borges's desire to satirise the artificiality of much realist fiction in which episodes are presented in a linear chronological way. But at a deeper level, to which the reference to 'los demiurgos y los dioses' in 'Examen. . .' directs our attention, Borges is reminding us once more of our ingrained tendency to select from reality and experience in order to make our construct. The form of *April March* symbolises our desire to order events causally. Its plots operate in reverse because we cannot impose predictability on the future. But the result is no less artificial. Man tries to simplify; the 'higher powers', meanwhile, continue to shuffle infinite and infinitely interconnected series of causes and effects, whose complexity fiction cannot even begin to reflect.

We remain with three stories of treachery, guilt and betrayal: 'La forma de la espada', 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' and 'Tres versiones de Judas', together with 'El fin'. The way in which the meeting of a character with one who is in some sense his 'double' (Moon and his comrade, Lönnrot and Scharlach) tends to end in death has been plausibly traced to Stevenson's influence on Borges.<sup>19</sup> But we can still discern that of Chesterton in 'Tema. . .' where, as in 'The man who was Thursday', an unaccountable series of events turns out to have been the work of an individual, Nolan. Nolan succeeds single-handedly in imposing his will on reality. Once more the implications have to do with order and chaos. Nolan imposes an order on historical events, certainly; but what kind of order? On the one hand it is vaguely repetitive, its circularity again suggesting futility. But more importantly it is merely a human construct, partly borrowed from art. By an act of imagination Nolan not only patterns his present, but conditions the behaviour of Ryan in the future. His achievement is grandiose, but it undermines all confidence in our ability to understand the past.

One of Borges's most disconcerting concepts is that which links him to some forms of the Theatre of the Absurd (Beckett, Stoppard): the non-existence of human individuality. Not content with questioning our confidence in the 'real' outside ourselves, he questions too what we hold most dear: our own unique selfhood. Thus in 'La forma de la espada' the originality of the narrative strategy lies in the way Moon, the traitor, tells his story from the standpoint of the victim, only revealing his true identity in the trick ending. Borges hints at the meaning when Moon remarks: 'caso Schopenhauer

tiene razón; yo soy los otros, cualquier hombre es todos los hombres.' We sense that, as in the case of Lönnrot and Scharlach, there is a deliberate attempt to blur the difference between the betrayer and the betrayed. So that if, at one level, this is a crime-and-punishment story in which Moon's expiation of his treachery is his compulsion to seek the contempt of others by the particular way in which he tells his story, this is only the outer level. The inner level is not moral but metaphysical.

This is confirmed by 'El fin'. Here the apparent theme is not treachery but vengeance. The story evokes, with additions and embellishments, two episodes from José Hernández's (1834-86) nineteenth-century narrative poem *Martín Fierro* (1872 and 1879). These are Martín's successful knife fight with a negro and a singing contest later in the poem. Martín's killer after the contest turns out to be the brother of his earlier victim. Again the story has a trick ending in that the identities of the two antagonists are not revealed until the penultimate paragraph, just as Moon's is not revealed until the end of 'La forma de la espada'. This seems to be the point of the tale; but it is not. The climactic closing line returns to the inner theme of the earlier story; '... ahora no era nadie. Mejor dicho era el otro.' Recognition of the fact that there may be no continuity of the personality except through memory, which is fallible, or through ongoing dispositions or traits, which are unreliable, opens the door in this case to the idea that the repetition of an action identifies the agent with whoever committed the act previously. As the negro kills Martín he repeats Martín's action in killing his brother. By the same token, he inherits the weariness, the sense of guilt and the sense of futility which had haunted Martín thereafter, and thus, in a way, 'becomes' Martín.

'Tres versiones de Judas' represents the culmination of the idea. Here Borges applies the concept of the oneness of betrayer and betrayed to the archetypal examples: Christ and Judas. Borges gradually induces us to consider the possibility of inverting the positions in which we usually place Christ and Judas so that the true redeeming sacrifice is made by the God, not as Christ but as Judas. If previously he had tried to subvert our comfortable presuppositions about how the universe works, or about our own individuality, here he slyly questions one of our central spiritual assumptions. *Tout se tient*.

To conclude: *Ficciones* was not a completely isolated phenomenon



of the 1940s, since the process of superseding old-style realism had already begun in Europe before the end of the nineteenth century and in Hispanic letters took a great stride forward early in this century with Unamuno's development of the *nivola*. There were important predecessors of Borges in Spanish America, notably Macedonio Fernández. But the importance of *Ficciones* as a foundation building-block of the new novel in Spanish America is indisputable. Fuentes has placed Borges along with Asturias as the two founding fathers of the Boom.<sup>20</sup> Donoso described himself as 'deslumbrado' by his first reading of Borges and as having rushed to imitate him.<sup>21</sup> The list could easily be extended. Borges was followed by a phalanx of new novelists who shared at least some of his ideas about reality and who were no less resolved to find new narrative strategies to express them. Only in some areas of the post-Boom has confidence in observed reality begun falteringly to revive. But it is still too soon to doubt Cabrera Infante's assertion that: 'No hay un solo escritor hispanoamericano que escriba ahora y que pueda echar a un lado la influencia de Borges.'<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Much of what follows over the next few pages is discussed at greater length in Ch. 1.
- 2 Cited in Fernando Sorrentino, *Siete conversaciones con Jorge Luis Borges* (Pardo, Buenos Aires, 1974), p. 120.
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- 4 Jaime Alazraki, 'Flón y Asterión: metáforas epistemológicas', *Nueva Narrativa Hispanoamericana*, vol. I, no. 2 (1971), pp. 21-33.
- 5 Cited in Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Jorge Luis Borges* (Gallimard, Paris, 1967), p. 20.
- 6 See John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977); Alfred MacAdam, *Textual Confrontations* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1987); Carmen Del Río, *Jorge Luis Borges y la ficción* (Universal, Miami, 1983).
- 7 Frank Dauster, 'Notes on Borges's labyrinths', *Hispanic Review*, vol. 30 (1962), pp. 142-8; N.D. Isaacs, 'The labyrinth of art in four *Ficciones* of Jorge Luis Borges', *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 6 (1969), pp. 383-94.
- 8 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Primitives and creators', *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 3481, 14 Nov. 1968, pp. 1287-8.
- 9 Gustav Siebenmann, 'Técnica narrativa y éxito literario', *Iberoromania*, vol. 7 (1978), pp. 50-66.
- 10 George Ronald Freeman, *Paradise and Fall in Rulfo's Pedro Páramo*

- (CIDOC, Cuernavaca, Mexico, 1970); the gist is more easily available in Spanish as 'La caída de la gracia' in Joseph Sommers (ed.), *La narrativa de Juan Rulfo* (Sepsetentas, Mexico City, 1974), pp. 67-75. Julio Ortega, 'Pedro Páramo', in *La contemplación y la fiesta* (Monte Ávila, Caracas, 1969), pp. 17-30; in English in his *Poetics of Change* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1984), pp. 33-41.
- 11 Cited in Andrés Avellaneda, *El habla de la ideología* (Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1983), p. 43.
  - 12 D.P. Gallagher, *Modern Latin American Literature* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973), p. 102; Antonio Fama, 'Análisis de "La muerte y la brújula" de Jorge Luis Borges', *Bulletin Hispanique*, vol. 85 (1983), pp. 161-73.
  - 13 Fama, 'Análisis de "La muerte . . ."', p. 171.
  - 14 Gallagher, *Modern Latin American Literature*, p. 103.
  - 15 See my 'Inverted Christian imagery and symbolism in modern Spanish American fiction', *Romance Studies*, no. 10 (1987), pp. 71-82.
  - 16 James Irby, 'Encuentro con Borges', *Universidad de México*, vol. 16, no. 10 (1962), p. 8. Also in book form: *Encuentro con Borges* (Galerna, Buenos Aires, 1968), p. 34.
  - 17 Allen Phillips, "'El Sur" de Borges', *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1963), pp. 27-45; Zunilda Gertel, "'El Sur" de Borges', *Nueva Narrativa Hispanoamericana*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1971), pp. 35-55.
  - 18 Jaime Alazraki, *Versiones, Inversiones, Reversiones* (Gredos, Madrid, 1977), pp. 27-45; J.B. Hall, 'Borges' "El Sur": A "Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan"', *Iberoromania*, vol. 3 (1975), pp. 71-7.
  - 19 Daniel Balderston, *El precursor velado: R.L. Stevenson en la obra de Borges* (Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1985), pp. 95-102.
  - 20 Cited in Helmy F. Giacomani, *Homenaje a Carlos Fuentes* (Las Américas, New York, 1971), p. 60.
  - 21 José Donoso, *Historia personal del boom*, 2nd edn (Scix Barral, Barcelona, 1983), p. 33.
  - 22 Guillermo Cabrera Infante, interview with Rita Guibert, *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. 37 (1971), p. 552.