Literary Philosophers

Borges, Calvino, Eco

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Borges, Calvino, Eco:
The Philosophies of Metafiction

Introduction

To understand the transformations of literature, particularly in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, requires accounting for the metadimensionality of literary texts. The term "metadimension" means that some literary texts problematize the relationship between the narrative process and its internal self-reflection or its dialogical external interpretation. Examining these relationships reveals the extent of their variation in formal modalities, discursive emphasis, semantic finalities, and intertextual games.

The prefixion of fiction by "meta" rests on the assumption that in some of its discourses, literature has developed operational ways of questioning itself and dealing with its unlimited semiosis, that is to say with the meaning-making process. Although the Greek prefix "meta" (*after*) has a predecessor in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (which came after his natural science works, *after* "physics"—"metaphysica"), the Greek borrowing does not have the same denotation in reference to "metafiction." Paradoxically, what is metafictional (with its adjectival suffix) may deal with the metaphysical, but this is not necessarily one of its prerequisites. Metafiction pertains to a critically exposed attitude toward the representational process and the autonomous language of metafiction. Hence an obvious semantic displacement produces itself with respect to the prefix "meta," which means "above" or "about" rather than just "after." Thus a novel about a novel writing (e.g., Gide's *The Counterfeiters*) is a metanovel.

Because a surprisingly broad terminological extension has been conferred on the meaning of metafiction, particularly in postmodern criticism, I propose to explore the following aspects of its very rich problematics in the following areas: in the diversity of its forms and discourses and their relationship to the logical concept of formal languages and of metalanguage; in the manner in which it determines the metamorphosis of literature; and in the diverse philosophies of metafiction reflected in the works of Borges, Calvino and Eco.

What Is Metafiction?

Throughout the twentieth century, the relationship between narrative form and metafictional distance or the self-reflexive has been systematically explored, enhanced, and put to the test by writers such as André Gide, Samuel Beckett, Arno Schmidt, Giorgio Manganelli, Donald Barthelme, Philippe Sollers, Julian Rios, John Fowles, John Barth, Oswald Wiener, Walter Abish, Thomas Pynchon, Giuseppe Pontiggia, Claude Simon, and Julio Cortazar. What emerges from their metafictions is the idea that metafiction is not a homogeneous monoreferential discourse arising out of a limited series of problems linked to the narrative or novelistic process. Metafiction is rather a polyvalent problematization of the critical, reflexive, analytical, or playful perspective of that which is narrated reflected upon itself. Three examples illustrate this process: *The Counterfeiters* by André Gide, *Mercier et Camier* by Samuel Beckett, and *Pourquoi. Une voix de fin silence II* by Roger Laporte.

In Gide's well-known novel, the narrative conveyed in the plot is discursively paralleled and problematized in Edouard's *Diary*. This parallel structure clearly constitutes the metafictional level of the novel's narrative (the Profitandieu, Molinier, and Veda Azaïs families). What Gide refers to as "mise-en-abîme" is tantamount to "metafiction," the reduplication and transformation of the narrative into a "para" or beyond narrative. Edouard's *Diary* mirrors the *Counterfeiters*. It is a novel within the novel that deconstructs the naturalistic novel that Gide considered impure and that he sought to replace with the pure novel. At the same time, metafiction in *The Counterfeiters* is a critique of the novel as a record of the slices of life and a proposal for a musically oriented pure verbal construction.

In Beckett's *Mercier et Camier*, the author plays with the narrative by inserting summaries, which follow each chapter. The summaries briefly restate the narrative of each preceding chapter. In problematizing the reflexive relationship between the affirmative discourse of each chapter's narrative and its quasitautological paraphrase in the summaries, the author creates an ironic distance. Thus, Beckett appears to interrogate the problem of how to write about writing in order to understand what the narrative process means.

In Laporte's *Pourquoi. Une voix de fin silence II (Why. A voice of cunning silence II)*, metafiction is inscribed into the discourse of the narrator who is at the same time a self-narrator of his own writing. Metafiction becomes indistinguishable from the fiction *tout court*. It is paradoxical that Laporte wrote about writing, metafictionally inasmuch as his subject is writing itself. Thus the constant interrogation of writing, such as it is, is expressed in its very immediacy. Laporte's fiction and his autosubjective narrative, the referents of which are metafiction and the narrator's self, are therefore good examples of

an interiorized, self-reductive, and self-theorized metafiction. Systematically submitted here to the mirroring commentary is the very impulse of writing. To ask "Why?" does not lead to any conclusive outcome. Instead, the metafiction repeats the pace of instinctual creative energy, and in so doing, reveals textures with mystical undertones. The book is dedicated to "All my Jews" and concludes, "My progression, constantly broken, is it the remote trace, never completely exact, of the cruel migration of the pole in the heart studded with stars?"[1]

These three examples illustrate different metafictional strategies. Their radicality ranges from Gide's pure novel to Laporte's internalization of almost mystical scriptural passion. Beckett's game of tautological summarizing of the identical draws the reader's attention to the possibility of the summary's replacement of narration or imposes upon it a purposely reductive transformation. The tautologically oriented commentary is a Beckettian demonstration of a deadlock of literary discourse. Metafiction is here a tool of self-revelation for fiction.

Definition of Metafiction

Clear-cut definitions of metafiction are difficult to find. Even in critical works dedicated to metafiction, we stumble over numerous affirmations, statements, and quasidefinitions that circumscribe the concept from various points of view without providing an all-encompassing, descriptive, and functionally operational definition. Hence the recognition of the fact that metafiction may be or should be contextualized and only then deeply scrutinized.

In quoting some affirmations on metafiction, I draw attention here to some aspects of the complex problem of theorizing and historicizing. My observations on Borges, Calvino, and Eco, from the perspective of metafiction, are intended as a commentary on and as a critique of those theorizations of metafiction the main purpose of which seems to be to inscribe it into the area of postmodern literature. Metafiction and postmodernism at the intersection of history and ideology constitute a broad range of enigmas. Postmodern literary criticism tends to overcome and to classify modernism and/or modernity, the one-sidedness of its critical vision and polyvalence of literary writings, the many-sidedness of its critical analysis, and some specific critical codes at the origin of its critical extrapolations.

Inger Christensen defines metafiction as

> fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making. This definition indicates that only those works are considered metafiction where the novelist has a message to convey and is not merely displaying his technical brilliance.[2]

In a work specifically devoted to metafiction, Patricia Waugh observes

Metafiction may concern itself, then, with particular conventions of the novel, to display the process of their construction.

Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion.

Metafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them. Very often realistic conventions supply the 'control' in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves.[3]

Polyfunctionality and different definitional aspects of metafiction emerge from many of Waugh's observations. Yet, the major difficulty in grasping the relevance of metafiction in terms of form, thematization, and messages lies in the fact that its language is not univocal, as in the language of the novel. Therefore, as Waugh remarks, metafiction is "an elastic term which covers a wide range of fictions."[4] Although I agree with this observation, I would like to stress that metafiction, like literature, relies on specific notions, concepts, and discourses. It cannot escape complexity and the mixture of signs. Nor can it rely on a clear definition of its metalanguage. It appears that a plurality of meanings may emerge from any textually or discursively marked metafictional operation.

With respect to the problem of the metalanguage of metafiction, I draw upon Alfred Tarski's definition of metalanguage from his 1933 study on "The Semantic Conception of Truth."

It is desirable for the metalanguage not to contain any undefined terms except such as are involved explicitly or implicitly in the remarks above, i.e.: terms of the object-language; terms referring to the form of expressions of the object-language, and used in building names these expressions and terms of logic. In particular, we derive *semantic terms* (referring to the object-language) to be introduced into the metalanguage only by definition.[5]

Metafiction remains in a relationship to the language of literature in terms of a presupposed analogy where it remains metalanguage. And the language of literature equals "object-language." This analogical equation is practically impossible to pursue because what we call the language of literature involves a considerable number of terms, which cannot be unequivocally defined. Narrative, novel, character, point of view, realism, postmodernism, modernity do not belong to a unitary conceptual space. Object-language and metalanguage seen in terms of literature and metafiction cannot refer to a consensual body of notions and understandings.

Because it is our intention to understand the evolution of narrative forms through metafiction and to understand metafiction through fiction in the context of Borges's, Calvino's, and Eco's metafictional and fictional texts, we will therefore consider metafiction a heuristic tool to facilitate discovery of complex systems of signs. Metafiction should be taken as both manifestations of deconstruction and of a cognitive process.

Epistemology of Metafiction

The salient question engages an epistemology of metafiction. The bases for our reflection and scrutiny are a series of open-ended entities constituted by narrative, fiction, the novel, event, plot, time, and character. These entities are set apart through the metafictional process and serve as conceptual unities to be metafictionalized as they undergo a critical, analytical, or playful treatment. The storyteller of fiction is transformed into the metafiction's teller (narrator?) and commentator. Goethe's celebrated formula from *Dichtung und Wahrheit* "Lust zu fabulieren" (Joy of telling the story) becomes "Lust zu um-fabulieren" (Joy to undo the act of telling the story). With respect to open-ended totalities, I recall Calvino's timely and correct observation in his essay on "The Novel as Spectacle."

Nowadays one may have the impression that narrative reached at the same time a climax of its eclipse with the creators and the zenith of its favor with the critics-theorists.

(Si direbbe che raccontare stia toccando contemporaneamente il culmine della sua eclisse dai testi creativi e il culmine dell'interesse critico-analitico.)[6]

This proliferation of commentaries leads to a situation in which we are confronted with different philosophies of metafiction instead of with a unique metafictional vision of the narrative discourse. Metafiction represents a specific worldview, thereby defining the writer's epistemological position vis-à-vis narration and representation as well as toward the general or particular meanings of a given literary work. Any metafiction involves an interpretative bias and may be viewed in terms of philosophy, that is, as a coherent interrogation about truth understood in Heideggerian terms, as *Ent-deckung* or unveiling.

It is my premise that Borges, Calvino, and Eco embody different types of metafictional processes. Their philosophies of metafiction variously reflect the finalities of literature and the diversity of metafictional meanings, the infinitude of narrative modalities, and the dialectics of metafictional distances.

Borges

Among many definitions and descriptions of Borges's way of writing and deciphering the meaning of the world, I cite Calvino's reference to the author of *Ficciones*. Borges epitomizes for Calvino the intellectual writer. At the same time, the very intellectual quality and method of Borges's writing entail the process of "plurireadability of the real" (plurileggibilità della realità). The world is therefore subject to interpretation in terms of constantly varying perspectives. Calvino's considerations of Borges are to be found in the chapters on "Quickness" and "Multiplicity" in *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*. In referring to Borges's idea that no book is ever written as an original literary work, Calvino captures the essence of Borges's writing.

> The idea that came to Borges was to pretend that the book he wanted to write had already been written by someone else, some unknown hypothetical author—an author in a different language, of a different culture—and that his task was to describe and review this invented book.[7]

Calvino expresses admiration for Borges's style, rhythm, and narration, and for his quickness and multiplicity. More particularly, he notes:

> Borges has created a literature raised to the second power and, at the same time, a literature that is like the extraction of the square root of itself. It is a "potential literature" to use a term applied later on in France.[8]

In the chapter on "Multiplicity," Calvino describes Paul Valéry's original and unique pursuit of the "Total Phenomenon, that is, the Totality of conscience, relations, conditions, possibilities, and impossibilities."[9] For Calvino, Borges is the author who has

> perfectly achieved Valéry's aesthetic ideal of exactitude in imagination and in language, creating works that match the rigorous geometry of the crystal and the abstraction of deductive reasoning.[10]

Calvino's observations enable us to capture the sense of the metafictional operations achieved by Borges throughout his work. In Borges, the relationship between fiction and metafiction reduces itself to what I describe as the principle of cognitively cooperative interrelational telescoping of fiction into metafiction and of metafiction into fiction.

At the core of Borges's writing lies the postulate of an unfinished condition of interpretativeness of the world. This postulate is based on the idea and the intricate practice of the interencompassing of a countless variety of worlds, temporalities, facts, texts, statements, histories, and narratives. He achieves a

in its multiciplicity of forms. Borges's story tactically telescopes philosophical, interpretative, and argumentative discourse and can at any moment effectuate a detour through philosophy. It is the vehicle or enigmatic medium of virtually all phenomena. The very hybridity of Borges's text imparts that the reading process becomes a wandering through the labyrinth. Any path is a forking path. Any temporal perspective, objectively grasped, is a series of temporal bifurcations. Hence, the vertiginous idea of the infinite multiplicity of times. As the narrator of "The Garden of Forking Paths" puts it in the excerpt quoted by Calvino,

> Una red creciente y vertiginosa de tiempos divergentes, convergentes y paralelos (a growing and bewildering network of divergent, convergent and parallel forms of time).[11]

In Borges's vision of time, the Aristotelian definition of time as "the cipher of movement" transforms itself into an understanding of time as the absolute parallelism of the concomitant and yet not interrelated subjective temporalities. The ciphers of movement of these subjective temporalities are not palpable. From the point of view of literary criticism, this conception of time relativizes the Bakhtinian idea of chronotope. The necessary chronotopical coming together of space and time, according to Bakhtin's concept, is subject to considerable modification since divergence, convergence, and parallelism of times do not entail a precise identification in each time of its respective adjacent space. The subjective position of each time does not presuppose the precise occupation of a point in space. Temporal subjectivities can project themselves into an indeterminate place of the boundless universe.

The mental experience of time seems to negate its objective calculus. Consequently, time is neither the cipher of movement nor a permanent and fatal partner of space, as a polyvalent and subjectively experienced movement presupposes a "displacement" of time. In the following commentary on Borges's "Tlön," Solange Fricaud provides relevant confirmation of the inadequacy of time and space conceived in terms of chronotope.

> On Tlön, time is a pure flowing of thought, without any parallelism with Space. The Leibnizian idealism or the Kantian one is further reduced from dualism to monism. If, in the tradition of philosophical idealism, Time and Space function as two forms of the human mind, measurable in terms of the Newtonian physics—one can calculate the speed and the place of a mobile object—on Tlön there is no correspondence to assign between Time and Space. Borges imagines a sort of pure Time without any spatial signification, but instead of discovering the internal duration of consciousness (as Saint Augustine, Pascal, Bergson), the author emphasizes the succession of the instants not related by the memory since there is no conservation of the same object in Space.[12]

Literary discourse à la Borges is the brilliant confirmation of its infinite imaginary potentialities. It confirms, within the realm of metafiction, the idea of playful manipulation of such open-ended entities as literature, story, plot, history, character, meaning, point of view, and interpretation. Within this unique configuration of the serious and playful, of an infinite gallery of mirrors and the centrality of the narrator's voice, the reader may find some principles that serve to fulfill the objectives of Borgesian discourse. I identify them as (1) the principle of the hermeneutical infinite, (2) the principle of the cosmological infinite, and (3) the principle of metaknowledge.

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "The Garden of Forking Paths," "The Circular Ruins," and "The Library of Babel" (just to mention a few well-known stories) constitute, like mirrors and labyrinths, both fixed and stochastic universes. They facilitate the play of the interpretative game involving semiotics, philosophy, myths, theology, literature, and history. But all the possible meanings that may be established with the help of the above-mentioned disciplines and approaches remain working hypotheses, enigmas, and conjectures.

The world created by the Borgesian imagination is an aleatory structure based on the vertiginous expansion of the reflexive, the inventive, and the paraphysical and metametaphysical. In its deepest impulse, it is a deconstructive gesture that concerns the problem of sign. Nicolas Rosa observes that in Borges

> Sign ceases to represent and to express in order to signify by itself: that is to say in order to put into relief the work of writing (para poner en evidencia el trabajo de la escritura). It reminds us of Joyce. In this problematics, a text does not stay in any relation of manifestation or of reflection. It is possible to read it as social production, as a particular language where an individual subject does not speak *as an individual subject*, but as the combinatory structure of a subject who utters himself or herself through the laws of a system (que se enuncia en las leyes de un sistema). We have to ask ourselves on all levels how Borges instrumentally uses the codes which he receives from the semiotic reality, that is to say language, economy, science, culture, etc., which are the dominant elements of his structuration in order to investigate his ideology.[13]

These observations provide a useful basis for a discussion of the principle of the hermeneutical infinite. Because the sign becomes a convergence of different codes, it is above all a formal structure. It is polysemic, opaque, and not representative. The signs of short stories underlaid by narration and by narrative, by the active participation of the characters in the action, and above all by the voice of the narrator do not provide the necessary clues to reach a clear configuration of meaning. Borges's short stories render every-

thing complex. In the final analysis, they are the conjectural discourse of presuppositions, ambiguities, and polysemic constructions. The hermeneutical infinite signifies that any interpretation of Borges's texts opens up a labyrinth. Unlike Heidegger's conceptions, the universes constructed by Borges are not visions of a represented world. They are musical scores in which the composer-narrator, either by narrating or quoting, conveys various hypotheses, points of view, sentential formulas, maxims, and different philosophical opinions. In this intergalactic configuration of signs proliferating in various directions, the narrative is not a discursive paradigm for the intelligibility of the world. It is rather a tool of complexification. Stories such as "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" give us sufficient information to perceive the hermeneutical infinite. On the one hand, they present the impossibility of capturing the complex entanglement of facts, judgments, evoked affirmations, and quoted opinions, and on the other hand, the impossibility of logical interpretation. What the narrator is saying exceeds the reader's competence:

> Every mental state is irreducible: the simple act of giving it a name—i.e. of classifying it—introduces a distortion, a "slant" or "bias." One might well deduce, therefore, that on Tlön there are no sciences—or even any "systems of thought." The paradoxical truth is that systems of thought do exist, almost countless numbers of them. Philosophies are much like the nouns of the northern hemisphere; the fact that every philosophy is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has allowed them to proliferate. There are systems upon systems that are incredible but possessed of a pleasing architecture or a certain agreeable sensationalism. The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility—they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy. They know that a system is naught but the subordination of all the aspects of the universe to one of those aspects—*any* one of them. Even the phrase "all the aspects" should be avoided, because it implies the impossible addition of the present instant and all those instants that went before. Nor is the plural "those instants that went before" legitimate, for it implies another impossible operation.[14]

Metafictional Basis of Borges's *Ficciones*

Once more I would like to emphasize the metafictional basis and framing of Borges *ficciones*. To paraphrase Cervantes' claim, "Soy el primero que he novelado en lengua de Castilla," we can attribute the following affirmation to Borges. "Soy el primero que he ficcionado asi en español." ("I am the first one who has fictionalized like this in Spanish.") Though Borges's literary discourse is unique, it is undeniable that it has roots in literature. Writers

such as Robert Browning, Leopoldo Lugones, Macedonio Fernández, Kafka, Horacio Quiroga, Edgar Allen Poe, Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, and Alfonso Reyes are among his precursors. But Borges's synthesis is based on a metafictional discourse that retells literature as an already scrutinized body of institutional, stylistic, semiotic, and fictional possibilities. As an open-ended entity of potentialities, literature becomes for Borges a laboratory of cognitive experimental maneuvers. A new vision and dynamics of literature result from the experiment. Before I summarize this process with some synthetic and problematizing formulas, I must recall that together with the principle of the hermeneutical infinite, two other principles determine the Borgesian metafictional rewriting of literary discourse. I refer to the principles of the cosmological infinite and of metaknowledge.

The principle of the cosmological infinite presupposes that Borges invents numerous imaginary and possible worlds. Their boundaries are unverifiable. Those worlds fulfill themselves in time rather than in space. Borges continuously plays with verisimilitude in the context of a conjectural or purely a-referential narrative reality. These narratively dreamed worlds acquire the ambiguous status of the absolute labyrinth-boundedness. In *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the narrator comments on the labyrinth to be constructed and described by the Chinese writer Ts'ui Pên. The narrator recalls that Ts'ui Pên devoted thirteen years to "these heterogeneous tasks, but the hand of a stranger murdered him—and his novel was left incoherent and no-one found the labyrinth." The narrator concludes in an imaginary manner:

> I pictured it as infinite—a labyrinth not of octagonal pavillions and paths that turn back upon themselves, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms.... I imagined a labyrinth of labyrinths, a maze of mazes, a twisting, turning, ever-widening labyrinth that contained both past and future and somehow implied the stars. Absorbed in those illusory imaginings, I forgot that I was a pursued man; I felt myself, for an indefinite while, the abstract perceiver of the world.[15]

Labyrinth epitomizes the principle of the cosmological infinite. It encompasses the idea of complex spatiality and of an "abstract perceiver of the world."

The principle of metaknowledge functions as an intense textual circulation of various knowledges and information. Such knowledges are factual, doxological, conjectural, provocative, and occasional without any subordination of one to the other. These configurations of knowledge refer to "Borges" as a central subject of utterance and as a semiotic coordinator of all references conveyed by his stories. He detains the metaknowledge, that is to say a place of petition and of reorganization of the information circulating in his work. As a subject of this metaknowledge, Borges reveals new cognitive

perspectives of the world's understanding. His discourse is by no means unilateral. Nor is his vision fixed on the narration alone. It is altogether a mixed and hybrid narrative, paranarrative, and metanarrative vision, and a constantly expanding epistemological quest for knowledges either potentialized or subordinated to another knowledge.

Through a way of writing, which constantly implicates the idealism of time, spatial uncertainty, the hermeneutical infinite, and metaknowledge, Borges interrogates the institutional rules of literature. Borges's fiction challenges and annuls the rule of representation, the rule of the author's hegemonic position, the rule of sufficient meaning, and the rule of the privileged passionate capacity of being a literary creator. Thus, in Borges, the romantic conception of literature is overcome by the idealistic vision of Time. In "The Examination of Herbert Quain's Work," a story with a metafictional title, Borges summarizes four metaphorical texts by Quain: in "God of the Labyrinth," "April March," "The Secret Mirror," and "Statements." Borges concludes that literature, in its putative kinship to the idea of labyrinthine time, is not a privileged human activity. Nor is it the original gesture of the author as genius. In "Pierre Menard, Author of *Quixote*," the narrator synthesizes his idea of literature through the paradoxical rewriting of *Don Quixote* by the fictive Pierre Menard.

> "Thinking, meditating, imagining," he also wrote me, "are not anomalous acts—they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional exercise of that function, to treasure beyond price ancient and foreign thoughts, to recall with incredulous awe what some *doctor universalis* thought, is to confess our own languor, or our own *barbarie*. Every man should be capable of all ideas, and I believe that in the future he shall be."[16]

Various conceptions of modernity converged in the recognition of the transgressive and dialectical as crucial elements of the repetitive gesture of transformation and of innovation. Modernity was similarly based on the recognition of its telos. Borges, for whom a teleology of literature has lost all relevance, discards it. In Borges emerges the a-temporal, the a-modern, the antitransgressive, and also the a-representational. The "why" of literature is no longer linked to representation and to subjectivity. The narrator in Borges is a cybernetic machine absorbing and spewing quotations, knowledges, and paradoxes. The world is no longer an alterity of text or its beginning. Situated beyond any classificatory intention, Borges's discourse has the right not to say something and not to affirm it ultimately. It has the right to invent anything and to doubt everything. By his discourse he overcomes representational ambition, and by the strength of his writing, literature transforms itself into this utterable but indeterminate "something." No theory, neither the most modern nor postmodern, could discipline this eternal return of the

Borges's fictions of fiction establish a boundary and a fascinating imitation of the extraterritorial. In terms of transgressive modernity, this extraterritorial imitation is a limit that cannot be transgressed. Borges's metafictional reflexivity eradicates both the mimetic and intentional fallacy. Those who follow Borges will and must, consenting or not, depend on the Borgesian intertextuality understood as an open-ended multiplicity of textual universes and metafictional operations. To conduct a story is no longer an innocent enterprise.

Calvino

Such are precisely the cases of Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco, who in their distinctive ways venture into the same complex territory of new critical parameters. Borges's lesson could be interpreted in the following way: he displaced and disintegrated some the most important literary dogmas (such as those grounded in the secular tradition of literary discourse from Aristotle until the twentieth century). His idealistic theory of Time opened the way to countless inventive (a)fabulations. Under the impact of Borges's philosophy of metafiction, the system of traditional narrative criteria became obsolete.

Calvino's achievement is his remarkable inventiveness in the realm of the imaginary leading to the creation of forms and signs encompassing both narrative and novel, literary criticism, and philosophical thinking about literature. Calvino's philosophy of metafiction may be characterized thus: he is above all a writer of semiotic consciousness; his interdisciplinary command of literature enables him to inventively use such literary structures as fable, story, plot, novel, and narration; and his literary discourse is always at least second-degree, dynamically conceived and practiced metafiction. For Calvino, writing fiction as a metafiction means reusing preexisting literary or discursive patterns in order to reach a new meaning and to convey a new message. But this reutilization does not prevent Calvino from achieving his own *ars combinatoria*.

> We could recycle used images in a new context and that changes their meaning. Postmodernism may be seen as the tendency to make ironic use of the stock images of the mass media, or to inject the taste for the marvelous inherited from literary tradition into mechanisms that accentuate its alienation.[17]

As a writer of semiotic consciousness, Calvino is committed to literary process in terms of semiosis, that is, the process of meaning making through the interaction of signs as referred objects and their *interpretans* in a constant discursive movement. Literature for Calvino is moreover a communicative process. In Calvino's writing the sign, in a way understood as a referential and

contribution to the renewal of the literary landscape (thanks to Borges) is a literary and discursive inventiveness that enabled him to establish certain maximal paradigms of varying types of literary discourse. In a certain sense, he put Borges's intuitions into practice. For Calvino, literature is a machine of cognition. I identify and characterize a few of his most significant texts.

Il castello dei destini incrociati (The Castle of Cross Destinies)

In this text shaped by a ludic paradigm, the principle of the overwhelming game acts as a tool to utter and to narrativize an *ars combinatoria*. This gives way to a vision of the world in which, between life-world-literature-fiction and game, the vision establishes itself as a pleasure principle. In this work, Calvino proceeds by narratively using what he calls "fantastic iconology."

> What I was trying to do in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies (Il castello dei destini incrociati)* is a kind of "fantastic iconology," not only with the tarot but also with great paintings. In fact I attempted to interpret the paintings of Carpaccio in San Giorgio degli Schiavoni in Venice, following the cycles of St. George and St. Jerome as if they were one story, the life of a single person, and to identify my own life with that of this George-Jerome. This fantastic iconology has become my habitual way of expressing my love of painting. I have adopted the method of telling my own stories, starting from famous pictures or at any rate pictures that have made an impact on me.[18]

Se una notte d'inverno un viagiatore (If on a Winter's Night a Traveler)

Calvino calls this a hypernovel; there is a metanarrative structuring of the novel along with a metacommunicative process of reading the novel. In fact, the couple of readers committed to the reading of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* symbolize both the process of understanding and the mechanical process of identification through reading.

Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore is a self-reflexive and metafictional novel *in statu nascendi*. Calvino himself defines it in the following terms:

> My aim was to give the essence of what a novel is by providing it in a concentrated form, in ten beginnings; each beginning develops in very different ways from a common nucleus, and each acts within a framework that both determines and is determined.[19]

Lezioni americane

This last text written before he died, an unfinished book, is Calvino's last will and testament. The English edition is entitled *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. The work is about literature and the world and is a metafictionally

understood fiction. Surprisingly, to characterize literature, Calvino uses scientific notions from physics such as lightness and quickness, and other epistemological notions such as exactitude and multiplicity. Calvino's rich reflections weave an ideal, almost utopian text, an absolute text of literature that he defines as follows:

> Over-ambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function. Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialized, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various "codes," into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world.[20]

Calvino's philosophy of metafiction presupposes achieving a complete practical knowledge of literature in order to practice it as a synthesis of rhetoric, narrative models, and a mosaic of styles. In terms of philosophy understood as reflexive grasping of the conditions of knowledge, Calvino's philosophy of metafiction may be described as a synthesis of *logos* and *techné*, that is to say as a reflexive and problematized thinking of literature and as an aesthetic praxis of literary discourse. Calvino points out that the relationship between literature and philosophy is the one between a rigorous literary representation of the world and Man (as in Dostoievsky, Kafka, Beckett, Camus, and Genet), and an interpretive mode that characterizes philosophy. Thus Calvino remarks:

> It is only when the writer writes before the philosopher who interprets him, that the literary rigour can serve as a model for the philosophical rigour— even though writer and philosopher live together in the same person.[21]

By naming *Robinson Crusoe*, *Don Quijote*, and *Hamlet* philosophical works, Calvino emphasizes the fact that they "announced a new relationship between the phantasmatic lightness of the ideas and the weight of the world."[22]

Eco

To understand Umberto Eco's novels in terms of his philosophy of metafiction requires a grasp of the basic cognitive operation, which is both semiotic and literary. This operation is at the heart of Eco's novelistic creation. Language for Eco, in semiotic terms, is technique above all. Language is given as a differentiated totality of signs, syntagms, and narrative. It should

be used technically, as a form of practically adopted knowledge. Adopted and applied to a specific sphere of actions and functions, Eco's novels constitute a practical recycling of such literary and semiotic models as the thriller, the gothic novel, the medieval romance, the labyrinthine or daedalic narrative, the psychological novel, and the social-popular novel. These genres and subgenres coincide and function in his novelistic texts. In a paradoxical sense, Eco's novels are almost totally metafictional. We can consider Eco's literary production as the outcome, or inheritance, of Borges's lesson of the labyrinth. Calvino, for whom the labyrinth is also a necessary narrative model, is similarly Borges's heir.

We can, therefore, establish the following succession of labyrinthine perspectives in the literary genealogy encompassing Borges, Calvino, and Eco: (1) Borges: a fascination with the labyrinth and constant multiplication of various labyrinthine structures leading to a permanent narrative and the hermeneutical "growth" of the structures; (2) Calvino: the labyrinth as an epistemological model for understanding and challenging the world; and (3) Eco: the labyrinth as a dynamic and heuristic model for interpreting the world.

Interpreting the world is a complex process, and this very fact of complexity constitutes the subject of *Foucault's Pendulum*. In this novel, we witness a growing complexity of the plot and of interpretive presuppositions, and a kind of constant widening of the interpretative matrix.

The metafictional relationship between story and commentary establishes itself in a series of discourses entitled "Filename." In *Foucault's Pendulum* "Filename" functions as a quasiparallel novel. It may even be named "metanovel" if we assume with Mario Perniola that what characterizes a metanovel is first an autoreferential relationship toward itself.[23] It is highly intertextual and self-referential. For instance, in the first "Filename" the narrator says:

> *Where were you last night, L*
> There, indiscreet reader: you will never know it, but that half-line hanging in space was actually the beginning of a long sentence that I wrote but then wished I hadn't even though let alone written it, wished that it had never happened. So I pressed a key, and a milky film spread over the fatal and inopportune lines, and I pressed DELETE and, whoosh, all gone.[24]

In the numerous "Filename" passages, the reader will find more and more self-referential and intertextual allusions. For example:

> Could a story like this be made into a novel? Perhaps I should write, instead about the women I avoid because I can have them. Or could have had them. Some story. If you can't even decide what the story is, better stick to editing books on philosophy.[25]

You're an author, not yet aware of your powers.[26]

Begin the story in a bar. The need to fall in love.
Some things you can feel coming. You don't fall in love because you fall in love; you fall in love because of the need, desperate, to fall in love. When you feel that need, you have to watch your step: like having drunk a philter, the kind that makes you fall with the first thing you meet. It could be a duck-billed platypus. . . .[27]

There comes the dinner with Dr. Wagner. At the lecture he had just given a heckler a definition of psychoanalysis. La psychanalyse? C'est qu'entre l'homme et la femme chers amis ça ne colle pas.

There was discussion: the couple, divorce as a legal fiction. Taken up by my own problem. I participated. We allowed ourselves to be drawn into dialectic exchanges, speaking while Wagner was silent, forgetting there was an oracle in our presence. . . .[28]

The reading process of *Foucault's Pendulum* is a polyreferential one. It involves deciphering the story itself as well as the proliferating interpretive commentary that goes in different directions. A multiplicity of stories and of metastories, of intertextual signals, as well as of intellectual allusions makes of *Foucault's Pendulum* a sort of *compendium* of encyclopedic narrativity (including myths and archetypes, popular novels, thrillers, etc.) and narration understood as a process of utterance producing diverse narratives, various philosophical worldviews, as well as information on the mystical and occult.

Philosophically speaking, and with Wittgenstein as a point of reference, Eco explores the boundaries of the novelistic language to show that it has no limits in practice. Metafictional use of the narrative language presupposes a dialectical relationship toward another language and another universe. For instance, one of the perspectives of *Foucault's Pendulum* is the following triple relation: novel vs. fiction vs. psychoanalysis.

Thus, within the polycontextual narrative universe of *Foucault's Pendulum*, Wittgenstein's affirmation: "*The boundaries of my language* mean the boundaries of my world" (*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache* bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt)[29] can be interpreted as follows: who sets the boundaries of my language? The narrator, so enthusiastically disposed toward unfinished worlds of information, does not see any limits for his fiction. As an open-ended novel, and also as a world-mirroring and a world-explaining novel, *Foucault's Pendulum* is an endlessly self-mirroring text whose commentary and interpretation do not stop. On the contrary, they open into new nodes, and presuppositions. Intertextually interwoven, *Foucault's Pendulum* stories, and presuppositions. Intertextually interwoven, *Foucault's Pendulum* is a sort of indestructible infernal machine. It constantly displays its infinite perspectives

Interpretations of Eco

Beyond their enormous international successes, Eco's novels have given rise to scores of critiques and studies with innumerable interpretations. It is quite significant that almost at the same time as the publication of *Foucault's Pendulum*, Eco dealt with the problem of interpretation and of overinterpretation. What strikes me in the numerous interpretations of this novel is the fact that some interpretations do not grasp all the subtle and refined prescriptions put forward by Eco in his theoretical writings. Quite often, instead of interpretation, we find violent attacks known as "stroncature" in Italian. Some critical readers blast the author instead of attempting to understand the meaning of Eco's semiotic and metafictional operation. Salmon Rushdie's reading of *Foucault's Pendulum* is a case in point. Stemming from an obvious misinterpretation of Eco's novel, it is in every respect unjust.

A more general problem may be formulated concerning whether it is possible to acceptably interpret a complex novel of such unbounded and limitless dimensions. The novel is a postfactum utilization of cabalistic, magic, scientific, philosophical, religious, and literary sources. What sort of *intentio operae* and *intentio auctoris* can we fruitfully attribute to such metafictional writing? It remains an open question.

Indeed, the planetary setting, intention and themes, writing and reading processes of *Foucault's Pendulum* are quite evident. This mammoth project can thus either be accepted in all its complexity or rejected as a pretentious and confusing enterprise. Here, anthropos, logos, and cosmos meet somewhere in a secret, fictitious place. To achieve an optimal thematic understanding of this novel, we must realize that it is a multilayered text with each layer constituting an enigmatic actual or possible world.

Let us consider what Rushdie faults in *Foucault's Pendulum*. I cite some passages of this above-referenced intemperate critical outburst.

About twenty years ago the bookshops seemed to be full of volumes with titles like *Illuminatus*, in which it was suggested that the world was run by this or that occult conspiracy. In the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, the notion that "visible" history was a fiction created by the powerful, and that this "invisible" or subterranean histories contained the "real" truths of the age, had become fairly generally plausible.

Pynchon once wrote a short story called "Under the Rose," its title an Englishing of the Latin *sub rosa*. *Foucault's Pendulum*, the obese new volume from Umberto Eco, is an illuminatus-novel for the end of the eighties, a post-modernist conspiracy fiction about, I suppose, the world under the name of the rose. It is, I regret to report, a very faint Eco indeed of those old Pynchonian high jinks. It is humourless, devoid of characterization, entirely

free of anything resembling a credible world, and mind-numbingly full of gobbledygook of all sorts. Reader: I hated it.

Foucault's Pendulum is not a novel. It is a computer game.

And at the very end, in Casaubon's conclusion ("I have understood. And the certain(ty?) that there is nothing to understand should be my peace, my triumph"), there's more than touch of the ancient Japanese poet Basho who travelled to the seat of wisdom, the Deep North, to learn that there was nothing to learn in the Deep North.

Unfortunately, the journey to this truth is so turgid that it is impossible to care about reaching the goal. This is Spielbergery without the action or bull-whips, and if, as Anthony Burgess threatens on the jacket, "this is the way the European novel is going," we should all catch a bus in the opposite direction as soon as possible.[30]

It is evident that Rushdie misses the metafictional dimension of Eco's novel. In *Foucault's Pendulum*, Eco achieves a literary construction that consists of a dialogical mixture of the popular novel (*Illuminatus* in Rushdie's term) and uncharacterized characters, as they are the intellectual actans of the invented Plot. It is postmodern because it recycles old, popular, and contemporary literary structures and stereotypes. Like the world it is full of sound and fury. Like the contemporary world, it is full of stereotypes, vulgar literature (Trivialliteratur), scientific and specialized discourses. Viewed philosophically, it may be compared to Montaigne's essayistic and yet narrative prose. Like Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*—an anatomic novel—it is prose about knowledge of the world, an all-encompassing mélange, a Mischung, a digressive, open-ended, strongly self-referential, and provocatively extrareferential text.

Philosophies of metafiction are not as philosophical as Cartesian, Husserlian, or Adornian discourses. However, they engender visions of the world as well as a critical discourse on representation. At stake here is the problem of mimesis. Metafictional novels confirm that mimesis is both wishful thinking and a vicious circle necessarily entering the discourse as semiotic process, the sign about signs about signs.

The objects of philosophical discourse are not the private property of philosophers. And the objects of literary discourse are not the private property of the literati. Metafiction is a state of affairs comparable to some extent to the proverbial "Spanish tavern," l'auberge espagnole, where philosophers and writers convivially lodge together, although each of them brings heterogeneous subjects to the tavern.

They enjoy seeing horse and not horseness. When Joyce joyfully plays with the concept of "allhorse" by saying: "Horseness is the whatness of allhorse,"[31] he alludes to the opposition between Plato's idealism and Aristotle's rationalism. By the same token, he opposes the abstract to the concrete. In terms of metafiction, he opposes two conflictual languages.

In the play of stories, narrations, and abyssal discourses, philosophies of metafiction demonstrate that the interpretation of the world cannot escape fiction. Fiction is therefore the first condition of unveiling the world. Metafiction means that in potentializing the insufficiency of the fictional story, the commentary has a double role to play: it has to assess philosophically the efficacy of the story and relativize its absolutizing pretension.

Notes

I wish to thank Mr. Antoine Polgar for scrupulously editing my text.
1. R. Laporte, *Pourquoi? Une voix de fin silence II.* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 179.
2. I. Christensen, *The Meaning of Metafiction* (Bergen, Oslo, Tromso: Unversitetsforlaget, 1981), p. 11
3. P. Waugh, *Metafiction, The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York, Methuen, 1984), pp. 4, 6, 18.
4. Waugh, p. 18.
5. A. Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth," in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, ed. L. Linsky (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1952), pp. 22–23.
6. I. Calvino, "Il romanzo come spettacolo," in *Saggi 1945–1985* (Milano: Mondadori, 1995), p. 272.
7. I. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 50.
8. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, p. 51.
9. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, p. 118.
10. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, p. 119.
11. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, pp. 119–120.
12. S. Fricaud, "Les figures du temps dans *Fictions* ou Comment la fiction d'un Temps idéal ébranle le mythe de la littérature," in *Borges, "Fictions" mythe et récit*, ouvrage collectif (Paris: Ellipses, 1988), p. 37.
13. N. Rosa, *Los fulgores del simulacro* (Santa Fe: Cuadernos de Extensión Universitaria, 1987), pp. 278–279.
14. J. L. Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998) p. 74. (Hereafter *CF*.)
15. Borges, *CF* 122.
16. Borges, *CF* p. 95.
17. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, p. 95.
18. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, p. 94.
19. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, p. 120.
20. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, p. 112.
21. I. Calvino, *La machine littéraire*, tr. M. Orcel and F. Wahl (Paris: du Seuil, 1984), p. 38.
22. Calvino, *La machine littéraire*, p. 44.
23. M. Perniola, *Il Metaromanzo* (Milano: Silva Editore, 1966), p. 22.