Borges's realities and Peirce's semiosis: Our world as factfablefiction

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This quite modest meditation focuses somewhat indirectly on Peirce's semiotics and on Borges's prose. In the long run, it more directly bears on what it is to be human sign makers and takers by addressing the work of Peirce and Borges along with some strains of postanalytic philosophy in such a manner that the message is, hopefully, more sensed than conceptualized, more intuited than cognized. Whether or not I succeed in my endeavor us up to the reader, for the best I can do is suggest, not demonstrate or prove by rigorously constructive argumentation.[1]

Peirce

Peirce's 'semiotics' is a silent answer to Saussure's 'semiology'. The North American semiotician's concept of the sign is trinary with a vengeance; it depends upon a continuity of interrelations between signs. As such, it is process, it is *semiosis*. We are always caught in the flow of this process, because thought itself is inextricably bound up with and is of the very nature of signs (*CP* 5.421).

The most fundamental of Peirce's sign types consists of the trichotomy of *icons*, *indices*, and *symbols*. *Icons* resemble the objects to which they relate (a circle, as a sign of the sun).[2] Borges's 'Aleph' (1970: 15–30), a small spherical object in which Carlos Argentino Daneri experienced the entire universe from beginning to end, is for practical purposes not an icon. It cannot really be an icon, because, as a self-contained, self-sufficient whole, it *is* the whole universe. Yet it is contained within the universe, so in a sense it *is* an icon of the purest sort. It is an icon of the universe and hence an icon of itself. *Indices* relate to their objects by some natural connection (smoke as an indication of fire). The magician of Borges's 'The Circular Ruins' (1962: 45–50) thought he created an icon, a dreamt son, and then he thought he interpolated his dreamt image into the world to render him 'real'. But the magician was mistaken, for in the end

he discovered he was the figment of yet another dream by another dreamer. Hence his dreamt image, in addition to its iconic qualities, was also an index, an indication, of his own condition. The relation between Peirce's *symbols* and their objects entails sign use according to cultural convention (a national flag, evincing hardly any similarity with and no natural connection to its object, or the word 'horse' in relation to a certain species of quadrupeds). Symbols of the best and most common sort are those of natural language. Lönnrot, the detective of Borges's 'Death and the Compass' (1962: 76–87), that supreme rationcinator, believed the symbolic linguistic, logical, and geometrical signs he constructed were irrefutable proof that would lead him to the assassin, Scharlach. But in the final analysis he realized they were signs of his own making, partly arbitrary and with no necessary correlation to the 'real' world. As Don Quixote magnificently implied long before Richard Rorty's (1979) destruction of the 'mind-as-mirror-of-nature' metaphor, symbols are not necessarily any faithful 'representation' of the 'real'.

According to Peirce, the meaning of signs, and especially linguistic signs, is found in their interrelations with and dependency upon other signs. An *interpretant* gives purpose, direction, meaning to a sign. But this *interpretant*, upon becoming an *interpretant* charged with meaning, becomes in the process another sign (*representamen*) — the sign of meaning — which comes into relation with the first sign in its relation to its *object*. It can then take on its own *object* — which can be the same *object*, now slightly modified — and in its turn it engenders its own *interpretant*. This *interpretant* then becomes yet another sign (*representamen*), and so on. This ongoing sign process has been dubbed by Umberto Eco (1976: 69) 'unlimited semiosis'. The succession of signs along the *semiosic* stream becomes a network of glosses, or commentaries, of signs on the signs preceding them. Or perhaps better put, signs are *translations* of their immediately antecedent signs. The process of signs *translated into* other signs is endless. For, everything is incessantly becoming something *other than* what it is. Consequently, for Peirce there is no ultimate meaning (*interpretant*). The meaning of a given sign is itself a sign of that sign, which must be endowed with its own meaning, such meaning becoming another sign. So there is no final *translation*. A given *translation* of a sign calls up another sign upon its being endowed with meaning, that meaning being different from that of the sign being *translated*, and that second meaning becoming yet another sign to be *translated* and given meaning (Peirce does in fact write of a 'final' or 'ultimate *interpretant*', but it is inaccessible *for* us as finite, fallible semiotic agents).

In view of Peirce's triadic concept of the sign, just as we are indelibly inside *semiosis*, so also both you and me are at this 'moment' suspended

'inside' the story I am in the process of telling. That is, we are suspended 'inside' the context within which we happen to find ourselves, and we must try to make heads or tails of the whole concoction. On so doing, we must cope with a nonlinear, back and forth, spiraling, self-enclosing, semiotic situation and context in the making, which gives us pieces from a jig-saw puzzle rather than a linear *A-B-C* development. Since this essay — and both you and me and our contexts besides — are inside *semiosis*, why should I, how could I, expect to render it of a nature any different from *semiosis*? The very idea would be presumptuous. Furthermore, if according to Peirce, the universe is an ongoing 'perfusion' of signs, how could my words hope to give a linear account of that very process of *semiosis*?[3] The best I can do is provide a certain *feel* for, and if I am lucky maybe even a *sense* of, what this essay is about.

Like this essay, the universe, as I have tentatively implied above, is not that deterministic linear, cause-and-effect parade of events envisioned by classical science. It is complex, not simple; it is more chaotic than orderly; it by and large favors asymmetry over symmetry. But actually, we need both our well-reasoned linearity and our 'chaos' principle, in order effectively to negotiate the now placid, now elusive, now winding and heaving, stream of *semiosis*. By the same token, if we construed *semiosis* as we would a map we could study with the presumed detachment of a classical scientist studying bacteria under the microscope, we would be destined to deluded hopes and unfulfilled dreams. For, unlike the traditional concept of knowledge as a map or mirror of nature, we are squarely *within* the map, and we must find our way about by groping in the dark, by a certain element of intuition, premonition, inclination, educated guesses, and even sheer chance, as well as by using our customary faculties of reason as best we know how.

Consequently, there is little use trying by linear methods to 'get the picture' of things, for there is no 'picture', no 'picture' that we are capable of 'seeing' from some imperious outside vantage point at least. We are, ourselves, like Niels Bohr once remarked with respect to the world of quantum theory, both spectators and actors in the great drama of existence. The traditional Western idea of a neutral spectator surveying her/his world and cramming it into her/his cognitive image, that mirrors the world in all its brilliance, is rapidly becoming defunct: may it rest in peace. So if the Peircean terms, *representamen*, *semiotic object*, and *interpretant* at this stage remain to a large extent foreign, I would expect that at least they have etched some trace or other on your mind. Perhaps the most I can suggest that we let the Peircean sign components grow on us, and we on them, as we attempt to proceed through the remainder of this labyrinthine journey.

Borges

Borges reconstructs a couple of apparently diametrically opposed concepts, *nominalism* and *realism*, condensed in two strange objects, the *Zahir* and the *Aleph*, in two stories by the same names (1962: 156–164, 1970: 15–30). This pair of concepts actually embodies the Argentine fabulist's intellectual leanings: Borges is a fox who nurtures nostalgia for the simplicity and certainty of the hedgehog (Wheelock 1969: 24). The fox is a wily nominalist who slips in and out of the numbing *complexity* of language particulars, while the hedgehog is a realist who desires to see everything through the same tinted goggles in terms of their relatively *simple* universal properties. The conflict is essentially between a plurality of *simples* and the complex *singularity* of a 'universal vision', that is, between the *Zahir* and the *Aleph*.

The Zahir is an ordinary coin worth twenty centavos. It is *per se* insignificant; its function could have been provided by one of any number of objects: it has been a tiger, a blind man, an astrolabe, a small compass, a vein in the marble of a mosque in Cordoba. Once an object is chosen to function like the Zahir, however, it becomes a particular perspective that potentially reaches out to all perspectives. Potentially, that is, because one who knows not how to avail oneself of the strange powers of the Zahir becomes ensnared by it: one cannot forget it. This inability to ignore the coin becomes the narrator's plight. He finds himself obsessed with the small round object, sensing that it must somehow signify in *linear* fashion, like language, each and every thing that it *is not* until by a process of elimination — a sort of *via negativa* — it has signified what the entire universe *is*. But that project, of course, would be out of the question for we finite humans. In good nominalist fashion, then, the Zahir can arbitrarily be anything that stands for something else. We thus enter the arena of language. It is not mere coincidence that the vast majority of all considerations of cybernetics, information theory, and AI research, insofar as they bear on concerns in the social sciences and the humanities, focus obsessively on language. In our recent 'linguistic turn', we have all but disappeared in the digitized staccato of Saussurean *signifiers*, of distinctive features, of textuality, and above all, of the *arbitrariness* of it all, which presumably allows signs to liberate themselves from the furniture of the world euphorically to do their own thing, whether we like it or not.

This notion of *arbitrariness*, quite significantly, was also the observation of Mr. Palomar in a novel by Italo Calvino (1985) by the same name. While in Mexico and visiting the ruins of Tula, ancient capital of the Toltecs, Palomar contemplates the various representations of

Quetzalcoatl as the Morning Star, the monolithic columns known as 'Atlases', a butterfly, and the Plumed Serpent. He realizes that all these signs must be taken on faith that they represent something else, and if the signs are rejected, such rejection must be taken on faith also, the faith that they do not represent something else. In other words, according to Peirce's conception, signs of the 'real' and of the 'nonreal' are equally 'real' signs, hence they can be as 'real' or as 'nonreal' as either the 'real' or the 'nonreal' itself. Signs in this sense are of the very stuff of which our world and the world of our imagination are made: whether 'in here' or 'out there', all that is, insofar as we perceive and conceive it, consists of signs of one sort or another. But Palomar bears witness to something other than that *logocentric* bias within which Western thought is caught. The ancient art he is witnessing is hardly in any form or fashion linguistic; apparently like the Zahir, it is visual, iconic through and through. In the Aztec world, seeing in the most concrete sense predominates, which means that saying takes on a role of diminished importance, at least in comparison to Indo-European languages:

In Mexican archeology every statue, every object, every detail of a bas-relief stands for something that stands for something else that stands, in turn, for yet another something. An animal stands for a god who stands for a star that stands for an element or a human quality, and so on. We are in the world of pictographic writing; the ancient Mexicans, to write, drew pictures, and even when they were drawing it was as if they were writing: every picture seems a rebus to be deciphered. (Calvino 1985: 95–96)

Where is meaning in this scheme of multiply interlinked, interdependent, nonlinear series? The only possible answer, it seems, is: *everywhere* and *nowhere*. Every sign represents another sign, and that another one, potentially without end. Every sign defers the responsibility of its act of representation to other signs. Every such deferral is a translation of one sign into another one, which requires another translation in order that it emerge into the diaphanous light of comprehension, though it never stands a chance of actually arriving at the pristine plenitude of meaning perfectly wrought and crystallized for all time.

We read further that a 'stone, a figure, a sign, a word reaching us isolated from its context is only that stone, figure, sign, or word: we can try to define them, to describe them as they are, and no more than that; whether, beside the face they show us, they also have a hidden face, is not for us to know' (Calvino 1985: 97). Now, it appears, Palomar has gravitated from Zahir-like pictorial images toward contemplation of language, and with language, linear writing, we would suppose, in addition to his reference to nonlinguistic signs. Palomar realizes that each

linguistic sign requires another sign, requires all signs, from concrete figures to words, from language to language, from culture to culture. The need to glide along the surf of signs interrelated to all other signs is in a way frightening, yet compelling. There actually seems to be hardly any alternative, for that is the message we seem to get from language: it becomes relatively disconnected from the furniture of the world, and it sort of takes on a life of its own, it becomes a self-organizing whole. Or at least so we are told by those high priests of the 'linguistic turn'.

However, language also brings with it the need of its users to reweave and unite it into this continuous and well-nigh seamless whole of culture, which, as we shall observe, is aggressively translinguistic. Consequently, the monstrous aggregate of linguistic signs cannot really remain aloof and autonomous at all, for language's very use demands some relation with something other than what it is; it demands translation and interpretation, that is, translation and interaction with some interpreter and within some cultural context. If interpreters and interdependent contexts are included in the equation, then interpretation there will always be. For: 'Not to interpret is impossible, as refraining from thinking is impossible' (Calvino 1985: 98).

Language's Imperialism

However, we are not yet free of the overpowering force of language. Interpretation, it hardly needs saying, is most effectively conveyed through language, though not exclusively through language, since other signs can serve as helpful adjuncts. Yet, one almost inevitably gravitates toward language and toward *linguicentrism*.[4] The problem with *linguicentrism* is that it places undue priority on language, the Saussurean *signifier*, the Peircean *symbol*, while shoving the crucially important functions of *iconicity* and *indexicality* aside.[5] Perhaps this move toward *linguicentrism* is hardly avoidable. The idea that language is what makes us most distinctly human pushes us toward the imperious attitude that, as proud owners of 'minds', we are above and beyond the nitty-gritty world of instinct the dumb brutes inhabit. As articulate mammals, we are also writing and reading mammals.

In *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1981), Calvino tells us that reading — and writing as well — are no more than combinatorial play. But we also read that if what is written and read is false to itself, the product of language's incapacity to represent something other than itself, then ultimately, reading and writing are like a country where everything that can be falsified has been falsified. The result is that nobody can be

sure what is true and what false, what is 'simulation' and what is 'real' (Calvino 1981: 212). Calvino's allusion to 'simulation' evokes shades of Jean Baudrillard's (1981, 1983) 'simulacra', commodities and their respective signs incessantly repeating themselves until the commodities have been relegated to the dust bin of forgetfulness, and all that remains is signs of signs. It is also reminiscent of Umberto Eco's (1990: 172–202) 'fakes and forgeries', simulacra or iconic models that are hardly worthy of being called signs. Eco the *linguicentrist* has a pretty low opinion of icons. Completely iconic signs, he writes, would be *identical* to and a *simulation* of that to which they refer, and would therefore have no genuine semiotic function: they would in essence be tantamount to the 'real' thing, and in no need of the things to which they might have referred — i.e., shades once again of Baudrillard's 'simulacra'.[6]

To be sure, our world is a semiotic world through and through; it is a world chiefly of signs, of a 'perfusion of signs'. However, linguistic signs are actually no more than a small minority of the entire sphere of signs making up our world. Borges's narrator who came into possession of the linearly developing signs emerging from the Zahir discovers this important aspect of *semiosis*. The Zahir at the outset appears to be nothing but a mere *icon*, a visual object that evokes any and all signs other than itself. But it also indicates something *other*, so it has an *indexical function* as well. Moreover, since it is capable of bringing about the emergence of whatever sign, it is also to a degree *arbitrary*, hence it is also of *symbolic character*. The Zahir is prelinguistic, and at the same time it is of the nature of language. It is of the world of physical objects, yet it is a sign, it is part and parcel of the *semiosic* process. Signs are prelinguistic before they gain entry into the venerable empire of language: they are icons and indices of sight, sound, touch, taste, and scent before they become arbitrary phonemes exemplified in sounds and marks. Yet, as mentioned above, it appears that symbolicity inevitably comes to pervade the minds and hearts of human articulate animals. So, just as Palomar gravitated from iconic pictorial images to *linguicentricity*, so also the Zahir, even though it is at heart iconic, through symbolicity — its narrator's prime medium of expression — it cannot help but become saturated with *linguicentricity* as well.

The Zahir, nonetheless, is a relatively benign sign. Lying in linear contiguity with all other objects of the world, it is, or it can be, or at least we would like to make it, a representation of all that *is*, quite clearly and simply. But it can hardly do more than function as an oxymoron, the narrator tells us, insofar as it is not that which would ordinarily represent the represented. Consequently, it is capable of all possible perspectives, perhaps in the order of Calvino's *ars combinatoria*. But, since the Zahir

nervously flits from one perspective to another, and from one linguistic label to another, the sum of these perspectives can be no more than sequential in nature, an apparently rather disconnected collection of 'series' something like that envisioned by Gilles Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense* (1990). Given their sequentiality, and in light of the infinite stretch of all series the prime metaphor of which is the line (a mathematical continuum) they can never reach the end of the road. Like language itself, the Zahir apparently affords successive perceptual grasps of fragments of the universe, though none of them as an individual can be all-embracing. Hence, given human finitude, the incapacity to hold more than a few items of thought mentally in check for more than a fleeting instant ensues: the Zahir is ultimately a helpless sign. The narrator, finally realizing this limitation, ends his story with a futile hope: 'In order to lose themselves, in God, the Sufis recite their own names, or the ninety-nine divine names, until they become meaningless. I long to travel that path. Perhaps I shall conclude by wearing away the Zahir simply through thinking of it again and again. Perhaps behind the coin I shall find God' (Borges 1962: 164). Thus the narrator's destiny is hardly any less undesirable than that of our curious seeker of knowledge, Mr. Palomar.

If the Zahir is not itself a legitimate word — a Peircean symbolic sign — it is still a sign, to be sure, an iconic and indexical sign. As such, it is 'real', 'real' as a sign, though as a thing it is 'nonreal', yet it is a 'real' thing, for it is a sign. The Zahir, then, is of the physical world and of the world of signs, though it is a chiefly nonlinguistic sign. Hence given its myriad array of exemplifications, there is no *disconnectedness* of series at all but a *conjunctive synthesis* of series (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 — to be discussed below). In this sense, any attempt to interpolate the Zahir into an exclusive linguistic framework would render it *linear* and relatively *simple*; but it is not *simply linear*, for its interdependent interconnectedness with all things in terms of its iconicity and indexicality renders it *nonlinear*, and as such it enters full force into *complexity*. Each instantiation of the Zahir as a 'nonreal' sign for something else, which is either a 'real' or a 'nonreal' sign, is a part among parts, the sum of which make up the whole of *semiosis*. But that whole remains outside the reach of any given Zahir instantiation, even of any given serial collection of Zahir instantiations. With this broader, more general, concept of *semiosis* in mind, we are now a far cry from the gutless bits and codes of flesh-less information channels of the sort usually handed down to us by information theory and media theory. *Semiosis*, properly conceived, is *nonlinguicentric* through and through.

Borges's tale, 'The Aleph', corroborates this *nonlinguicentrism* and takes it to a shrill pitch of intensity. Daneri tells the narrator (that is,

Borges) of the Aleph's existence in the home of his parents and grand-parents, explaining that it is a point in space that is interconnected with and contains all points. Borges visits the house, descends the stairway leading down to the basement where it is located, and he experiences it, a sphere about one inch in diameter, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference nowhere, a beginning without terminus, paradoxically both finite and infinite, the only place where all places are seen from every possible angle: it is the whole of wholes. The narrator then petitions the gods that they might grant him the appropriate metaphors with which to describe this miraculous vision, but he knows it is impossible:

for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal. In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. What my eyes beheld was simultaneous but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive. Nonetheless, I'll try to recollect what I can. (Borges 1970: 26)

The narrator's feat is impossible, because the whole cannot but be timeless, while he as a pathetic mortal is inextricably time-bound. And for the purpose of human communication, he is bound to linear language processes. What he knows, he knows now. But to say what he knows is to say what he has known, which is not exactly the same as what he knows at each moment of the saying, hence the saying takes what he knows a bit further down the road, or it retrogresses, perhaps, depending upon the way of the saying. In other words, to say is to know anew, yet to know is to know what cannot be said now.

Linear language engenderment is like a Zahir series: hopelessly inadequate for articulating what timelessly *is* — knowledge, perceiving, sensing, conceiving — whether in the *now*, in memory of the *past*, or in expectations regarding the *future*. The Aleph's timeless *complexity* consequently eludes the articulating animal, tied to linear language, just as it eludes the Zahir's multiple time-bound, relatively *simple*, series. In yet another way of putting the matter, the Aleph affords a *realist* image as opposed to the Zahir's *nominalism*. The one entails an impossible transcendental revelation, the other a potentially interminable series of relatively insignificant perceptual grasps. The one is *synchrony*, the other *diachrony*; the one is a *nonlinear* intertwining of all objects, acts, and events in *complex* simultaneity, the other a serial collection of relatively *simple* particulars with no necessary or determinate links.

According to Borges, today we almost instinctively favor nominalism, but in spite of ourselves, we implacably gravitate toward the opposite pole in an effort to discover the whole of 'reality' in those hopeful eternal forms

(Christ 1967). And since this search is ultimately futile, we find ourselves fleeing back to the secure *minutiae*, the particulars, of our everyday empirical world.[7]

Let us take these concepts a step further.

Signs that talk past themselves: Postanalytic philosophy

Hilary Putnam (1983: 1–25) tells a story about how minds can be the same though their signs are entirely different, or conversely, how signs can be the same but minds different. In either case, an entirely distinct 'semiotic reality' is yielded. It has to do with ordinary notions of reference apparently gone mad. In Putnam's example, I talk about cats and mats but you take me to mean cherries and trees, and you talk about cherries and trees but I think cats and mats. If we keep things honest, at the level of first-order predicates it is entirely possible that we will get along fine with the belief that we are communicating groovily. I am confident I know what you are talking about and you have the same confidence regarding my talk. But here, as in all forms of communication, there is no determinable knowing we are on the same frequency at all. In fact, there always exists the possibility that we are talking about different things altogether.[8]

To be specific, Putnam shows that 'A cat is on the mat' can be reinterpreted in such a manner that 'Cat' for one interlocutor relates to *cherries* for another, and 'Mat' for the one relates to *trees* for the other, without affecting the truth-value of 'A cat is on the mat'. Putnam then designates 'Cat' and 'Mat' for some *cat* and some *mat*, and 'Cat*' and 'Mat*' for some *cherries* and some *trees*. When I say 'A cat is on the mat' I mean that there is some *cat* such that it is on some *mat*, but you construe my sentence to mean that there is (are) some *Cat** (*cherries*) such that it is (they are) on some *Mat** (*trees*). I don't know what you take my words to mean and you don't know what I mean by my words. In this manner, if you reinterpret my sign 'Cat' by assigning it the 'intensional' framework I would ordinarily assign to 'Cherries' (and you to 'Cat*') and in the same semiotic act you reinterpret 'Mat' in terms of what I would ordinarily assign to 'Trees' (and you to 'Mat*'), then we have translated two signs into two radically distinct signs. Yet phonemically and orthographically, 'Cat' is the same as 'Cat*' and 'Mat' is the same as 'Mat*'. Although we believe our communication has us flowing along the same channel, our meanings are at cross current with one another: ordinary lines of communication have suffered a meltdown.

Supposing I utter 'Cat' and 'Mat' and you construe my signs as, 'Cat*' and 'Mat*', then structurally 'A cat is on a mat' would for me *mean*

virtually the same as 'A cat* is on a mat*' for you. The only difference is in what is taken to be the object of 'reference' of our respective signs and what interpretation they are given — a difference that makes a crucial difference. And this, Putnam swears, would fall in step with our well regimented habit of assigning 'truth' to 'A cat is on a mat', or any other string of signs for that matter, in every possible world. As Peirce might be prone to put it, when semiotic *vagueness* rules the roost, faith in the *principle of noncontradiction* can at times become a futile enterprise. 'Cat' and 'Cat*' can live in blissful coexistence as long as their interpreters do not catch onto their ontological and semantic confusion. And insofar as the contradiction remains merely possible, the interlocutors may continue to swim along in blissful ignorance, oblivious as to the communication chasm between them. The upshot is that 'The cat is on the mat' or 'The cat* is on the mat*' can be taken either as intensional or extensional. There is hardly any difference, for, since in the long run of things, and much in the order to Peirce, thought-signs (of the mind) can come to be construed as sign-events (of the world), and vice versa.

This conclusion entails, Putnam tells us, an application of what is known as the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem to any domain of language and individual items of experience, whether *cats* and *cherries*, *mats* and *trees*, or any nonexperiential domain for that matter — 'Unicorns' and unicorn pictures, 'Quarks' and quark equations, or 'Square circles' and square circle talk. Regarding any of these items, all of which come in signs of one sort or another, in spite of whatever we may conceive as meaning or 'truth', unintended (unexpected) situations can always stand a chance of emerging from Peirce's Firstness to taunt us and throw our confidence-building programs, beliefs, conceptual schemes, and general views from within the arena of Thirdness in disarray.[9] I intended 'Cat' to be *cat* and you took it to be *cherries* ('Cat*'). Or one person takes 'Lightning bolts' to be *spears thrown by Jove* and another sees them as nothing but *electrical discharges*. Or the 'Earth' as *static* becomes the 'Earth' as *revolving about the sun*. And so on. The total range of possibilities is virtually beyond imagination, I would expect.

This observation, I might add, is also relevant to malapropisms and other rhetorical figures, as outlined by Davidson (1986), but not exactly in the manner intended by Davidson. 'Shrewd awakening' in place of 'Rude awakening' could be the case of: (1) the speaker's being unaware that he uses one word to mean another, or (2) his awareness of the inappropriate uses of words in order to make his listener aware of the malapropism. The listener can either: (1) take the word at face value, unaware that it is used improperly, in which event confusion ensues, or (2) take the word at face value, knowing it is meant as a malapropism — stemming from

Davidson's contention that there are only literal meanings — and interpret it accordingly (see Pradhan 1993). Regarding Putnam's context of conversation, 'Cat' is taken either as 'Cat' or 'Cat*', and endowed with its rightful meaning, each interlocutor believing her meaning to be quite in line with that of her counterpart. Both of them believe they know what they are doing, though miscommunication runs rampant. The upshot is that there is simply no guarantee of good intentions coupled with cognizance of what's going on regarding one's own mind, the mind of the other, and the surroundings in which both are found, as ideally would be the case of Davidsonian dialogue.

'Now let's get serious', one might wish to retort. ' "Cats" and "Cats*" are radically distinct, one "referring to" *cats* and the other to *cherries*. So even though "There is a cat on the mat" and "There is a cat* on the mat*" are logically equivalent, it is impossible to conceive of their being fused together in such a way that their divergent "referents" will not immediately become apparent'.

Putnam counteracts this charge, however. He reminds us that if the number of *cats* and the number of *cherries* available to a given pair of interlocutors happen to be equal — an unlikely affair one must admit — then it follows that 'Cats' in relation to *cats* and 'Cats*' in relation to *cherries* demands a shift of the entire set of lexical items in 'Cat' language and in 'Cat*' language such that, as wholes, the two languages become radically distinct. The sentences of each language remain unchanged regarding their truth-value while at the same time the extension of 'Cats' and 'Cherries' (i.e., 'Cats*') is drastically altered.[10]

So from within one 'language' I speak past you and from within another 'language' you speak past me, yet as far as our respective languages go, our 'semiotic world' appears as normal as can be. What is more, from within the range of all possible spatio-temporal contexts, 'Cats' for *cats* and 'Cats*' for *cherries* are equally permissible, as are 'Cats' for 'Bats', 'Rats', 'Blatz', 'Quacks', 'Quarks', 'Sharks', 'Aardvarks', or virtually anything else for that matter. Each and every interpretation is distinct, yet all are equally admissible from some perspective or other. In fact, 'there are always infinitely many different interpretations of the predicates of a language that assign the 'correct' truth-values to the sentences in all possible worlds, *no matter how these "correct" truth-values are singled out*' (Putnam 1981: 35). Putnam's conclusion: nature does not single out any one 'correspondence' between signs and the furniture of the world; rather, nature 'gets us to process words and thought signs in such a way that sufficiently many of our directive beliefs will be true, and so that sufficiently many of our actions will contribute to our 'inclusive genetic fitness'; but this leaves reference largely indeterminate' (Putnam 1981: 41).

This perturbing radical indeterminacy of 'reference' and of interpretation might remind us of the strange case of Borges's Pierre Menard, of 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote' (1962: 36–44). After a failed attempt, Menard wrote a few passages identical to part of *Don Quixote* without previously having read Cervantes's masterpiece. Ironically, Menard's critics totally recontextualized his text, claiming the replica was actually a great improvement of the original. It was the product of creative endeavors not of a Golden-Age Spaniard but of a twentieth century Frenchman ignorant of the time of which he wrote. They considered Menard to have:

enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading; this new technique is that of the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution. The technique whose applications are infinite, prompts us to go through the *Odyssey* as if it were posterior to the *Aenid.* ... This technique fills the most placid works with adventure. (Borges 1962: 44)

Placing Borges's 'thought-experiment' within the context of Putnam's quandary, Menard's fragments could be taken by one reader as Menard's text and by another reader as Quixote's text, or vice versa, and virtually incommensurable interpretations would ensue. In one interpretation, the Menard text might contain allusions to Nietzsche, William James, Russell, Proust, Dickens, and others, while the Cervantes text would be relatively impoverished. And in another interpretation the Cervantes text might be rich in the cultural lore of early seventeenth-century Spain, which would be diluted considerably in the Menard text. What is virtually a 'Cat' for one mind can be a 'Cat*' for another: nothing is either 'Cat' or 'Cat*', but mind can serve to make it so. Whether we are in first order sentences or sentences of greater complexity, as long as minds do not or cannot meet at some point or other, there is little hope of effective communication. Menard's text or Cervantes's text, or 'Cat' or 'Cat*', consist of the same signs in terms of their pure possibilities (of Firstness). But upon their being actualized (into Secondness) and endowed with interpretants (Thirdness), they relate to different 'semiotic objects' whose respective interpretants are radically distinct, even well-nigh incommensurable.[11]

Now for a turn to another language conundrum.

And a sign's equally elusive attributes

Nelson Goodman's (1965) 'New Riddle of Induction', that complements Carl Hempel's (1945) inductivity paradox, goes something like this. Any upstanding English speaker ordinarily believes the statement 'Emeralds

are green' to be eternally and invariably 'true'. Supposing that all the emeralds he has examined before a given time are 'Green', he is quite naturally confident that 'Emeralds are green' will always be confirmed, for according to his observations, emerald *a* on examination was 'Green', emerald *b* was 'Green', and so on. Now suppose he meets someone from Netherworld and discovers that her perception of things appears to him apparently unstable and that her language is radically distinct from his own. Among other oddities, Netherworlder's language contains the following two terms that Ourworlder has learned to translate into his language thus:

Grue = examined before the temporal 'reference point' t_0 and is reported to be 'Green' or is not examined before t_0 and reported to be 'Blue' (t_0 is apparently an otherwise arbitrary moment of time that is not in the past).

Bleen = examined before the temporal 'reference point' t_0 and is reported to be 'Blue' or not examined before t_0 and is reported to be 'Green'.

Before time t_0 for each of Ourworlder's statements asserting an emerald is 'Green', Netherworlder has a parallel statement asserting that it is 'Grue', and as far as she is concerned her observations that emerald *a* on examination is 'Grue', that emerald *b* is 'Grue', and so on, adequately confirm her own hypothesis. It will obviously appear to Ourworlder from the standpoint of his language and his normal color taxonomy that Netherworlder's sensory images change radically after t_0. But, from Netherworlder's perspective, the glove is turned inside out, for it is Ourworlder's taxonomy that appears to her to be time dependent. That is, Netherworlder's translation of Ourworlder's color scheme would result in the following report:

Green = examined before t_0 and is reported to be 'Grue', or not and is reported to be 'Bleen'.

Blue = examined before t_0 and is reported to be 'Bleen', or is not and is reported to be 'Grue'.

From the perspective of each translator, then, the inductive expectations of the other's perspective are twisted. On the other hand, the two perspectives, if taken together as an atemporal whole, are apparently quite symmetrical (Gärdenfors 1994). However, since atemporality from within

one system becomes temporality within the other, each perspective is conceived to be time dependent from the grasp of the other, complementary perspective. Hence when taken separately as self-sufficient wholes, they are asymmetrical with respect to one another (Rescher 1978). In a manner of speaking, Ourworlder and Netherworlder possess their own 'metaphysics of presence' with respect to their conception of their own world, though, from the other's complementary world, this 'metaphysics of presence' is easily demythified.[12]

Coping in Tlönlandia

The conjunction of Putnam's dilemma and Goodman's 'New Riddle of Induction' bears on the concept of Borges's citizens of the planet Tlön of 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (1962: 3–18) for whom there is neither science nor reason, and where any and all acts of classification imply falsification. On Tlön, sciences and modes of reason and systems of classification do exist, 'in almost uncountable' numbers. In order to include the existence and nonexistence of such sciences, modes of reason, and systems of classification within the whole package that goes by the name of Tlön, there is an iron-clad necessity that throws our own need for stable bearings into vertiginous loops: every theory must include its countertheory, every proof its refutation, every metaphysical doctrine its blasphemous opposite, every text its own countertext (intertextuality). Indeed, for the Tlönians, 'metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature', for they know 'that a system is nothing more than the subordination of all aspects of the universe to any one such aspect' (Borges 1962: 10).

Now this is Karl Popper's (1963) falsification with a vengeance![13] Yet, when we come to think about it, contemplate it, and sense it, truly sense it, we must somehow acknowledge that in good Tlönian fashion, dualism should not be treated as such in the ordinary sense but as unity, that is, as complementary pairs ultimately forming unity. Opposites, *differences* that make a radical *difference*, exist solely in the constructive eye of their beholder, whereas the process of the *becoming of the beingness* of all us believers of order and progress is no more than the process of the *beingness of our becoming*. We, all things that enjoy some fleeting form of existence, in the manner of that most fundamental and at the same time the most metaphysical of sciences, quantum theory — according to John Archibald Wheeler following Niels Bohr — organize ourselves in a process that is codependent with the self-organization of everything else: *the universe, ourselves included, lifts itself up by its own bootstraps* (Wheeler 1996).

Consequently, the Tlönians would be able to make the switch from 'Cat' to 'Cat*' or from 'Green emeralds' to 'Grue emeralds' in the blink of an eye. No problem. Their world is as fleeting or as permanent as their constructive hearts and minds wish. In other words, they impose Thirdness on their world of Firstness and Secondness, a world that was, is, and will have been, of their own making. Their world is, in Goodman's (1978) conception, a world fashioned and fabricated rather than found.

Linearity again, but this time with its own form of vengeance

If this were not the case, the world might be hardly more than that of poor Funes the Memorious from Borges's (1962: 59–66) tale whose title bears the same label.

Funes's world is not quite simply that of his immediate experience along the one-dimensional knife-edge of time and in three-dimensional space. Funes is capable of seeing only *particulars*, and he virtually sees them all. He can at a glance take in all the leaves, branches, contours on the trunk, etc., of a tree, and years later recall them to memory perfectly. The problem is that his memory is a garbage heap. It contains an indefinite number of *individuals*, yet Funes is incapable of 'ideas of a *general*, Platonic sort'. It seems strange to him that a dog seen at 3:14 P.M. from the side is considered to be the same dog seen at 3:15 P.M. from the front. Conceiving number as an ordered series is for him impossible. He has simply memorized each number without establishing the necessary serial relations between them. In fact, he once developed his own alternative number system consisting of arbitrary names in place of every number, which for him was just as effective. Funes, in short, is unable to think, for to think 'is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details almost immediate in their presence' (Borges 1962: 66).

Funes, it appears, either sees all or nothing at all; he remembers aggregates of particulars without being able to isolate any of them. He is the consummate nominalist, a superempiricist. A hypothesis, theory, conjecture, even a beginning, would be for him virtually impossible. For us, before there can be any-*thing* at all, even before there can be no-*thing*, there must be some-*thing*, and this some-*thing* must be a selection, an abstraction, of some part from the whole. Our collection of selective abstractions makes up the world, *our* world. On the other hand, if, like Funes we would expect, we were able to perceive the world as an unselected continuous stream in terms of pristine objects and events, that world would be a teeming jungle, a myriad array of clearly differentiable

differences. Every-*thing* would be clearly and distinctly here now and gone in the next instant, but indelibly committed to memory. Since we would be incapable of abstracting any-*thing*, every-*thing* would be reduced to essentially the same level. We would take in one perceptual snapshot of the world 'out there', then another, then another, and so on. With each snapshot we would see a slightly different collection of particulars before us. But the question is: How would it be possible for us to detect any movement at all? In other words, if we saw every-*thing* at once as an aggregate of particulars, and if we could not abstract any-*thing*, then we would be incapable of seeing one particular against the background of the whole, and hence we could not detect a change in that particular while holding the whole in check as an unchanging entity. What we would perceive, and the only thing we could perceive, is, so to speak, a succession of static 'slices', a crisp series rather than a virtual continuum. But there could be for us no change, no time in the conventional sense — for which Borges has a special affinity and which has resisted complete resolution over the centuries.

Consequently, Zeno's arrow paradox would prevail. In other words, if the arrow is where it is at each instant and displaces a space equal to itself and no more, then it cannot move to another space at another instant, so it can't move, and therefore time can't exist. Or at best, instead of Funes's perception of his world as a unifying whole, there is no more than a set of static, discrete particulars, without any unifying thread. Moreover, since each of these particulars occupies no more than a split second, the differences between them are minuscule, perhaps well-nigh infinitesimal. In the face of these myriad *differences*, quite surprisingly, Funes is *indifferent* toward his world. The narrator describes him as a:

face belonging to the voice that had spoken all night long. [Funes] Ireneo was nineteen years old; he had been born in 1868; he seemed to me as monumental as bronze, more ancient than Egypt, older that the prophecies and the pyramids. I thought that each of my words (that each of my movements) would persist in his implacable memory; I was benumbed by the fear of multiplying useless gestures. (Borges 1962: 66)

Funes somehow triumphed over Zeno's arrow and created time; as a consequence he had fused discrete *differences* into the flux of his experience ultimately to breed *indifference*.

Funes's life is incessantly, perpetually new. He never knows from one moment to the next what will happen to pop up. His past consists of a static, digital series of objects, acts, and events, and his future is devoid of expectations, hopes and dreams, and possible surprises and unavoidable delusions. Everything for him is always already different. The differences

are not differences that make a difference, for there is no gauge with which to measure the difference between one object, act, and event and another one. In order that there may be such differences, Funes must be capable of abstractions of the general sort. But he is not. For him there is no Jacques Derrida (1973) *différance*: neither spatial differentials, displacements, and dissemination nor temporal deferrals and diffusions. Each decision to name or qualify some object, act, or event is no more than a shot in the dark. Funes is privy to no rules by means of which to classify his world into thises and thats, thises instead of thats, now thises and now thats. Every qualification the furniture of his world is brought about by an arbitrary choice. His number-words are arbitrary, his labeling this-thing-here-now 'Dog$_1$' and this-thing-here-now 'Dog$_2$' — which is actually the same *dog* seen at a later moment and from another angle — is a matter of choices that are up for grabs at each and every moment. His labeling this-emerald-here-now 'Green$_1$' and at a later moment labeling this-emerald-here-now 'Green$_2$' — which is the same *emerald* — allows him no way of knowing whether or not what is for him at one moment the same 'Green' as it is at another moment or whether or not 'Green' at some moment in the long series of attaching color attributes to an emerald had not at some interdeterminate point become 'Grue'. Neither would there be any way for him to know, with absolute certainty, whether at some point what is for him 'Cat' might have become 'Cat*'.

In other words, Funes's world is tantamount to Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'following a rule', where rule following is at every juncture subject to deviations, tangential shifts, and radical transformations. It is as if we were to follow Saul Kripke's (1982) interpretation of what he considers the core of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) known as 'Wittgenstein's paradox' which is: 'This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here' (Wittgenstein 1953: 201) — and consequently the *excluded-middle principle* has been violated.[14] To the rule 'Add 1' proclaimed by Jane with respect to the series '1, 2, 3', ... there is no knowing whether or not John will not use rule 'Bad 1' and after the number 1,000 continue with '1,000, 1,004, 1,006'. ... So skepticism about applying a sign in accord with what one means by that sign leads Kripke to the conclusion that there can be no meaning at all and that language is thus impossible. Wittgenstein provides a Humean skeptical solution to his skeptical problem on the assumption that there are no facts-of-the-matter in the world capable of dictating a set of rules for connecting words to objects, acts, and events that is fixed for all time.

In other words, Funes's world is devoid of Thirdness. It consists only of a desert populated by disconnected, alienated, autonomous signs of Firstness and Secondness. This would be comparable to the Zahir if each of its instantiations were absolutely divorced from each and every other instantiation. It would be the case of the frantic library rats, those pathetic human would-be knows, of Borges's library of Babel (1962: 51–58) for whom there is apparently no possibility of making any necessary connect between a given book and any other book with the infinite (or is it finite?) presumably unordered array of books. It would be like the helpless and hopeless anguish-ridden lottery players of the lottery of Babylon (1962: 30–35) who are incapable of deciphering the workings of what for them is for all intents and purposes an infinite and hence absolutely unpredictable and indeterminable lottery. Funes's world would be dire indeed.

But things could be even worse, as we shall soon note.

The whole truth and nothing but the truth?

A picture of the world contrary to that of Funes would be holistic. The so-called 'Quine-Duhem thesis' is one of the more radical interpretations of holism. Williard v. O. Quine's (1969) epistemological holism says that our big cosmological beliefs form a field or network of interrelationships between little beliefs. A big belief is at the core of the entire network, and as the subsidiary beliefs become smaller and smaller, they find themselves at the periphery. All positioning of beliefs within the network is a relative matter. Beliefs at the periphery are more loosely connected, and beliefs toward the core are more stringently connected, hence they suffer from a certain loss of freedom. Yet, with respect to the whole, everything is relative — interdependently, interrelatedly — to everything else. Moreover, the network is constantly changing, as new beliefs are acquired and others tossed, which goes to make the network even more indecipherable. Whatever differences there are that can be specified are so specified solely by a loose comparison of the use of signs that depict the perceived and conceived world's objects, acts, and events as those signs are used and abused within their respective contexts. In this view, the world becomes indeed uncertain.

As a matter of fact, how could a given network of beliefs be specified and made intelligible? It couldn't. That is, it couldn't, outside the specification and intelligibility of this-network-here-now in its interrelationship with any and all other networks-there-then. So it couldn't. That is, it couldn't, except for those rare privileged souls such as Daneri of

'The Aleph', or that Aztec priest, Tzinacán of 'The God's Script' (1962: 169–173). Daneri experienced the entire universe, past, present, and future, in a golf-ball size apparition. Tzinacán, after innumerable trials and errors, deciphered a spot on a jaguar's hide to experience that same universe in a marvelous mystical moment.

In other words, Daneri and Tzinacán experienced both Cat and Cat* and the signs 'Cat' and 'Cat*' and Green emeralds and Grue emeralds and the signs 'Green emeralds' and 'Grue emeralds'. They also experienced all possible combinations, compatible and incompatible and complementary and contradictory and similar and distinct in all sorts of ways. Nothing was truly separable from anything else. Everything was intimately interdependent, interrelated, interlinked and interactive. As a matter of fact, both Daneri and Tzinacán could not play the role of detached, objective spectators, for they were at the moment of their experience included within the whole as parts inseparable from any and all other parts of that whole. There could be no Secondness, for nothing 'here' was detachable from anything else 'there'. There was only *That*. There was no body and mind, subject and object, knower and known. There was only *One*, *Oneness*. It is as if we were to begin with the number one, which is just one: one apple, one orange, or whatever. The one begets two, and two three, and so on, to infinity. And what is that entire collection of numbers? Why, it is *One*, no more, no less. This is called the arithmetic paradox, as illustrated by Erwin Schrödinger (1967) in his strange, quasi-mystical account of the universe of twentieth-century science.

If the experience of Daneri and Tzinacán can hold no Secondness, neither can it bear any vestige of Thirdness, for, after their experience, they confessed that they stood nary a chance of being able to describe, let alone explain, their marvelous moment of enlightenment. Particular words were simply inadequate to the task. Each word, when used, became so overbearingly bloated with generality that instead of saying something in particular it said everything in general. It said it all. Which is to say that as far as we helpless finite souls are concerned, it said virtually nothing at all. It was at the same time all-intelligible and un-intelligible. This situation is tantamount to Borges's 'Everything and Nothing' (1962: 248–249) where Shakespeare (or God?), after having become an indeterminate number of selves, discovered that he no longer knew his own self. He had become all selves and hence one self and at the same time no self in the sense of a determinate particularity as Secondness or Thirdness. In other words, there is only Firstness, no more, no less. It is everything, and nothing, depending on the perspective. It contains both one thing and another, and another, and another, without end — hence

there is a rape of the *principle of noncontradiction* here — and so it is, as far as our human practical purposes are concerned, really nothing at all. Thus, the quandary of holism. As a theory it is a beauty to behold, but it can be neither effectively conceptualized nor articulated.

We have seen the imposition of Thirdness on Firstness and Secondness from Goodman and Putnam, the absence of Thirdness altogether in Funes's world of Firstness and Secondness as authors of haecceities and nothing but haecceities, and Daneri's and Tzinacán's pure Firstness and the impossibility of any modicum of Secondness or Thirdness. So the perhaps anguished question now becomes ...

How, really, does one cope?

Regarding Borges's characters, contexts, and quandaries we have discussed, I would venture to suggest that we as living and breathing semiotic animals experience a little of all of them and at the same time we experience none of them. We experience at one and the same time both the one thing and the other thing and we experience neither the one thing nor the other thing. In this manner, we are just what we are: semiotic animals trying to cope, and as human semiotic animals we are trying to understand how we are perpetually trying to cope and what it is that makes up the focus of our coping process.

So we try to cope, and I reckon we will continue trying to cope to the end. What more can be said? What more should be said? The Thirdness in us thinks it knows what it knows and says what it knows it knows. But it is deluded, for it is incapable of articulating that incessant outpouring of Secondness. It is also deluded, for the whole, the absolute whole, of Firstness, lies eternally beyond its capacity regarding surveyability, specifiability, and articulability. All this is, perhaps, our boon and our bane, our promise and our pathos, an indication of our fickleness and our fortitude, our fortune and our fate. Borges, of course, knew the story well. ...

Notes

1. For more on the relationship between Borges and Peirce, see Merrell (1998), where I give numerous examples of Peirce's semiotics found throughout Borges's opus.
2. For a general outline of Peirce on icons, indices, and symbols, see *CP* (2.227–308).
3. Here I follow Peirce's (*CP*: 5.448n) notion that the universe is a 'perfusion of signs', if it does not consist exclusively of signs. And when Peirce writes 'signs', he means to include linguistic as well as nonlinguistic or extralinguistic signs.

4. I use the term 'linguicentrism' in Merrell (1996, 1997) as a wedge with which to get a critical hold on 'logocentric' and many presumably 'nonlogocentric' practices insofar as they share an overriding prioritization of, and occasionally an obsession with, language as the chief — and it even appears at times the exclusive — source of all that makes for genuine understanding.

5. 'Icons' and 'indices' make up two of the legs of Peirce's basic sign tripod, including also 'symbols', whose most effective medium consists of linguistic signs and the signs of artificial languages.

6. In fact, in *Simulations* (1983), Baudrillard comes quite close to Eco's views on 'fakes and forgeries'.

7. Perhaps Borges himself is a 'realist' temperament disguised as a 'nominalist', then. In this light, judging from his frequent intellectual excursions into mysticism, it should come as no surprise that he often longed for a view *sub specie aeternitatis*, such as that afforded by the Aleph, for example. On the other hand, Borges once remarked that all perspectives, all classifications of the world, are nothing more than convenient intellections (Borges 1953: 18–19).

8. Ian Hacking (1982, 1983), for one, is critical of Putnam's hypothesis. The hypothesis is based on the Löwenheim-Skolem paradox for first-order logic, that, is not applicable, Hacking asserts, to the language of everyday talk.

9. I allude here to Peirce's three categories of sign processes, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. For a concise definition, see Almeder (1980).

10. In this respect, see also Lakoff's (1987) defense of Putnam vis-à-vis David Lewis's (1984) attack on the Putnam hypothesis.

11. While sticking with Putnam's rather 'linguicentric' example, I have, of course, almost entirely ignored the iconic and indexical dimension of *semiosis*, both of which are remarkably presented in Cervantes's text: the image of a windmill viewed simply as a 'windmill' or a 'menacing enemy of the crown', with the moving parts either as indices of 'windmill blades' or 'threatening appendages engaged in battle tactics'.

12. Hesse (1969) argues quite effectively that when Goodman's puzzle operates by symmetry relation, it is insoluble (i.e., incommensurability holds). But in our actual practices by use of our natural languages, it is rarely to never the case that meanings, concepts, and theories are radically incommensurable. Relations are more often than not asymmetrical, due to the element of temporality, or irreversibility, present. In this sense, conditions are usually qualifiable in terms of disequilibrium rather than equilibrium, nonlinearity rather than linearity.

13. In this vein, Stove (1982) argues that the philosophy of Karl Popper, just as much as that of philosophers and historians the likes of Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and Paul Feyerabend, when taken at face value, is irrational through and through.

14. Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein is generally respected though not universally accepted. For a critical view, see Baker and Hacker (1984).

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