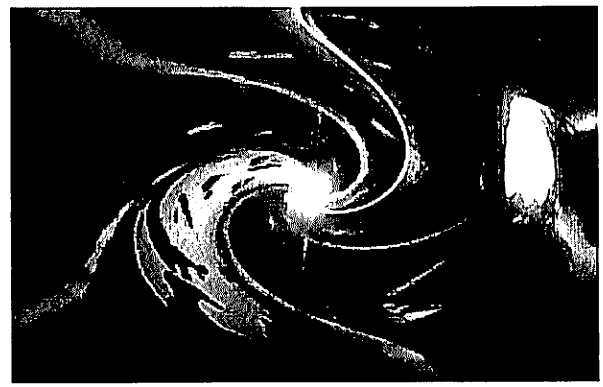

Borges' "Library of Babel" and the Internet

By Christopher Rollason, M.A., Ph.D.

The 16 April 1999 issue of the French newspaper 'Libération' carried an interview with Ignacio Ramonet, the editor of the prestigious publication 'Le Monde Diplomatique', on the subject of the 'communications revolution' ('Sur l'Internet, ' une rumeur et une info se valent [a]' - 'On the Internet, ' rumour and fact become as one [a]' - interview with 'R.Fl.', p. 36).

Ramonet was presenting his most recent book, 'La Tyrannie de la communication' (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1999), offered as a critical examination of what 'Libération' calls the 'prolifération d'une information de plus en plus diffusée, et de moins en moins contrôlée' ('proliferation of information in a form which is more and more diffuse and less and less subject to control'), under the impact of modern information and communications technologies. The book itself is, in fact, primarily a critique - well-argued, detailed and convincing - of the distortions, oversimplifications and misinformations (what the French call 'l'intox') perpetrated by newspapers and audiovisual media; the main targets are the global communications empires and the 'nouvelle idéologie de l'information en continu et en temps direct' ('the new ideology of continuous, real-time information' - p. 67), and 'La Tyrannie de la communication' refers only tangentially (if somewhat sceptically) to the Internet.

In his book, Ramonet briefly airs the notion that the 'network of networks' is creating an overload or surfeit of fact and opinion, a 'surabondance de l'information' ('information overkill') (p. 109) - much of which has not been checked and cannot be verified: 'le pouvoir de publier est désormais décentralisé, toute rumeur, vraie ou fausse, devient de l'information, et les contrôles, effectués naguère par la rédaction en chef, volent en éclats' ('ability to publish has now been decentralised: any rumour, true or false, can become information, and the old editorial checking process simply falls apart' - p. 192).

In the 'Libération' interview, Ramonet confronts the Internet head-on, further developing the views briefly expressed in his book, and elements of his position merit careful examination. Of particular interest is the comparison he makes with a celebrated image from twentieth-century literature, namely the imaginary, infinite library of Jorge Luis Borges' short story, 'La Biblioteca de Babel' ('The Library of Babel'). Ramonet declares: 'Il y a ... l'excès de l'information, qui confronte tout internaute à sa propre ignorance en matière de pilotage dans un océan d'informations souvent difficiles à hiérarchiser, à vérifier; c'est le syndrome de la bibliothèque de Babel qu'avait imaginée Jorge Luis Borges, dans laquelle se trouvent tous les livres écrits et à écrire (dans toutes les langues et toutes les écritures) ... comme dans cette bibliothèque de Babel, beaucoup d'informations se trouvent sur le Net, avec toutes leurs variantes et approximations; rien ne garantit la véracité des données; une rumeur et une info se valent' ('There is ... the excess of information, which confronts all Internet users with their own ignorance as they try to find their way through an ocean of information which tends to be difficult to organise or verify; this is the syndrome of the Library of Babel as imagined by Jorge Luis Borges, which contains all the books ever written or to be written (in every language and every script) ... as in that Library of Babel, vast amounts of information are there on the Net, with all their variants and approximations; nothing guarantees the reliability of the data; rumour and fact become as one').

The fictions of Borges are often adduced today as prophecies of our age, not only by critics and academics but by his fellow writers. Salman Rushdie's recent epic novel of globalisation, 'The Ground Beneath Her Feet' (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), ironically cites certain imaginary books and authors invented by Borges (the alleged Chinese novel 'The Garden of Forking Paths'; the fictitious writer Pierre Menard), as if they were real, in the context of a social universe where fact and fiction have become indistinguishable (pp. 280, 351); José Saramago, who is a great admirer of Borges, evoked, in an address at the European Parliament in Brussels on 23 March 1999, the Argentinian writer's 'literature of ritual, announcing a world itself composed of rituals' ('uma literatura ritual anunciando um mundo, também ele, ritual') ('Encontro com José Saramago no Parlamento Europeu', 'A Aurora do Lima', Viana do Castelo, 21 May 1999, p. 3); and, indeed, Saramago's most recent novel, 'Todos os Nomes' ('All The Names') (Lisbon: Caminho, 1997), set in the registry office of an imaginary country, confronts the reader with an intimidating perspective of endless shelves, 'ciclópicas e sobre-humanas' ('cyclopean and superhuman', p. 13), which resembles Borges' library, except that this labyrinth contains, not books or knowledge, but dry-as-dust bureaucratic files.

To return to Ramonet's argument, it may certainly appear a seductive prospect to push the notion of contemporary relevance further and interpret Borges' famous Library of Babel as some kind of prefigurement of the Internet. However, examination of the actual text of the story suggests that if such analogies are to be drawn, certain very important qualifications need to be made.

Borges wrote 'La Biblioteca de Babel' in 1941, and it was published the same year in a collection of stories entitled 'El jardín de senderos que bifurcan' ('The Garden of Forking Paths'). My references to the Spanish text are to the republication in the volume 'Ficciones', (Madrid: Alianza, 1971; pp. 89-100); the English translation used is that published in the Borges anthology 'Labyrinths' (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970; pp. 78-

86).

The infinite library in Borges' narrative is presented from the point of view of one of its denizens, 'los hombres de la Biblioteca' (the 'men of the Library') - who was born in the library, has spent his life wandering among the book-stacks, and knows he will die within its walls. This, certainly, could be read as prefiguring the inhabitants of today's or tomorrow's world of virtual information, with their consciousness saturated by an endless flow of cyberdata. The volumes of Borges' library add up in their totality to the sum of every text ever written, and, indeed, every text which could possibly ever be written - and, going well beyond that, *also* contain every possible combination of letters in every language and, presumably - as Ramonet deduces - script ('la Biblioteca es total y ... sus anaqueles registan todas las posibles combinaciones de los veinticuatro símbolos ortográficos ... en todos los idiomas' - 'the Library is total and ... its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd [note: the Spanish text says 'twenty-four'] orthographical symbols ... in all languages'). In other words, the great majority of the books are completely useless, and statistically it would be a remarkable feat to find even one 'real', actually readable book in months searching the shelves - and even then, the chances of its content being of any use or interest to the seeker would be minimal. This 'naturaleza informe y caótica de casi todos los libros' ('the formless and chaotic nature of almost all the books') could, of course, be taken by Net-sceptics as darkly foreshadowing today's cyberuniverse, with what some see as the endless proliferation of valueless, nonsensical or downright harmful material on the network, with the acres of dross rendering the few genuinely useful texts all but invisible. Less drastically, even the keenest of Net-users may at some times feel that the 'signal-to-noise' ratio on, say, certain newsgroups raises shades of Borges' nightmare library: 'Afirman los impíos que el disparate es normal en la Biblioteca y que lo razonable (y aun la humilde y pura coherencia) es una casi milagrosa excepción' ('The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception'). Following this line of thought, Ramonet declares to 'Libération', in a somewhat patrician tone: 'On voit déjà, dans le réseau, se multiplier les ′ pages éditoriaux [a], où n'importe qui donne une opinion sentencieuse sur les questions les plus diverses ... ce n'est pas plus scientifique que le café du commerce' ('Already on the network, we find a multiplication of ′ editorial pages [a], with anyone and everyone offering sententious opinions on everything and anything ... this is no more scientific than the corner café').

At this point, however, it becomes imperative to change the direction of the argument, and remind the Jeremiahs that this analogy with the Library of Babel is *only partial*. The Internet is, after all, *also* made by its users. The proliferation of Websites and newsgroups has not descended from outer space: Borges' library is presented as a pre-existing, immutable given ('La Biblioteca existe *ab aeterno*' - 'The Library exists *ab aeterno*'), but the Internet is nothing of the sort. The virtual library now evolving in cyberspace differs from any previous library - real or imaginary, Alexandria or Babel - because it is also the creation of its readers. Its endless volumes include, certainly, material which has been put there by society's rulers, as well as pre-existing works by established authors of past or present; but the cybershelves also contain row on row of volumes *written by the readers*, who thus become *not only readers but writers too*, not only passive consumers but also producers. Anyone with an Internet

account can start up their own Web site, or post a message in a newsgroup, without passing through any filtering, sifting or, indeed, censoring mechanism. The great library that is the Internet is continually expanding, and that expansion is the work of its ordinary, common readers, as much as anyone else.

In other words, we are dealing with a phenomenon that is totally unprecedented in the long annals of human history. It is quite true that much of the material in this library is of little value to anyone but its producers; it is also true that some of it is harmful. However, these factors should be counterbalanced against the massive gains being made in the collective potential of the human race for self-expression, communication, dialogue and democratic participation.

Borges' fable contains an episode in which, back in the distant past, hundreds of the library's dwellers thronged its shelves, each in pursuit of his 'Vindication', the book which would justify the existence of the individual who read it: 'libros de apología y de profecía, que para siempre vindicaban los actos de cada hombre del universo' ('books of apology and prophecy which vindicated for all time the acts of every man in the universe'). The search was, for the most part, in vain, thanks to the vastness of the library: 'Las Vindicaciones existen (yo he visto dos que se refieren a personas del porvenir, a personas acaso no imaginarias), pero los buscadores no recordaban que la posibilidad de que un hombre encuentre la suya, o alguna pérfida variación de la suya, es computable en cero' ('The Vindications exist (I have seen two which refer to persons of the future, to persons who are perhaps not imaginary) but the searchers did not remember that the possibility of a man's finding his Vindication, or some treacherous variation thereof, can be computed as zero'). By contrast, in today's real-virtual world, there is a simple answer to the problem: seekers who fail to find their personal vindication on the network can write the missing text themselves, and add it to the library by pressing a button - and there it is on the shelves, for everyone else to read - or rewrite, improve, embroider, illustrate, refute, contradict, forget, or simply ignore.

We are living in a time when the mainstream media increasingly push the message of 'pensée unique', of one-dimensional goodthink, of centrally approved and sanitised orthodoxies. In these circumstances, the Internet has emerged to fill what many perceive as the need for alternative points of view - on any number of issues, from Kosovo to the WTO - which are not those of hegemonic governments or multinational companies. The attitudes of journalists such as Ignacio Ramonet, who, while quite correctly stigmatising the whole phenomenon of 'pensée unique', simultaneously impugn the 'unscientific' nature of the citizens' speech that now exists on the Internet, may arguably not be totally unfree of conditioning from what a certain now-unfashionable psychologist named Freud once called the 'professional complex' - in this instance, the notion, surely eminently dubious today, that only the professional journalists and intellectuals have the 'right' to make public comment on the great issues of the day. If today's cyberuniverse is a Library of Babel, it is a library which you who read and I who write are building up with our own hands and minds, here at this very minute.

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