Literary Philosophers

Borges, Calvino, Eco

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The Writing of the System: Borges's Library and Calvino's Traffic

Systemic Parodists

In its most strident clarity, the rapport to philosophical systems maintained by the writing of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino, and we could mention with them Umberto Eco, Franz Kafka, and Maurice Blanchot, is at best murky and ambiguous. Any of us who have ever taken Borges's guided tour through the maniacally symmetrical hexagonal galleries of the Babel Library, bearing important similarities, by the way, to the monastery library in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, or have ever negotiated the traffic patterns that Calvino elaborates with philosophical rigor in "The Chase," or have contemplated business with the bureaucracy of Kafka's Castle knows that systematic presumptions and processes are at the heart of these writers' fictive experiments and games. Their fictive productions, as cultural artifacts, almost plead to be written off as systematic parodies. The latest, still-influential nineteenth-century projects of philosophical system-making, so this narrative runs, generated an aesthetics of systematic parody. In different pretexts and under different guises, writers as diverse as Kafka, Bataille, Artaud, and Beckett, not to mention Borges and Calvino, rush in to give the lie to systems that, however meticulously they accounted for the torque and distortions exerted by their representational and nonrepresentational linguistic media, ultimately privilege determination and repetition over linguistic allegory and play.

This scenario—of Borges, Calvino, and their ilk as systemic parodists—is a compelling one, and I have already submitted to its full sway in my efforts to formulate the aesthetic contracts prevailing in modernism and postmodernism.[1] Certain aesthetic subcontracts to modernism,[2] such as futurist or dadaist manifestoes, the elaborate overdetermination in the structuration of the different segments comprising Joyce's *Ulysses*, or the fragmentations of cubism, import systematic dimensions, patterns, and pretensions wholesale, which they then joyfully demolish in explicit fashion. The aesthetic experi-

ments of postmodernism, according to this scenario, elide the systems that may have been their occasion and deposit on the public docket of art the material residues of system-confounding strategems. These remains may well include Thomas Bernhard's endlessly self-referential and correcting sentences,[3] the musical minimalism of Glass or Reich, or closer to home, Calvino's image of the "soft moon,"[4] a lunar body whose vertical elevation and separation dissolve into the consistency of Cheese Whiz.

As philosophical discourse, in its circumspection and innovation, moves toward the consideration of writers such as Borges, Calvino, and Eco, language peels off of the scaffolding of conceptual systematization and metamorphoses itself into a radically different, more disruptive and intransigent sort of stuff. Borges, Calvino, and, closely allied to them, Blanchot, become philosophers of a writing, which, in the wake of deconstruction, allegorizes the freedom that systems delineate but cannot contain. The semantic, conceptual, and even physical play evidenced by Borges's and Calvino's systematic parodies may be interpreted as escapes, or at least interludes away from systematic control. I could launch, just at this point, a reasonable overview of parodic, self-questioning systems in Borges's and Calvino's fiction that would be more or less compelling, and that might convince a certain number of us that we had not egregiously misspent our time in hearing out the enumeration.

What Are Systems?

But this approach to Borges and Calvino, at a rare philosophical forum devoted to their importance, begs at least two pivotal questions: what, after all, are systems? And isn't the relation to conceptual systems by asystematic art and aesthetics more nuanced than one of simple one-upmanship or unmasking? If conceptual systems, by virtue of their architecture, or their perdurance, or their iterability, always exert some sort of repressive gravitational force, then the artifacts of structured language playing *off* of systems are *always* oppositional, extending the avant garde still current in Borges and Calvino far backward in the histories of literature and art.

We need furthermore consider the question of complicity. What if systematic parodies, such as reach a high degree of hilarity in Borges's image of *hrönir*,[5] units of mimesis and derivation on Tlön, or in Calvino's fifteen-page recapitulation and expansion of Dumas' *The Count of Monte-Cristo*,[6] evidence a higher degree of collaboration with the matrix of control than we, under the Western conventions of aesthetic disinterest and freeplay, are wont to allow? In terms of one of Borges's *Ficciones*, the hero, at least the thinking man's hero, or thinker, in a situation of war or other sociopolitical polarization, is the likeliest suspect to become a traitor,[7] for aesthetic creativity acknowledges a labyrinthine proliferation of viable avenues of action, among them the renunciation of "true" belief. The cultural audience that equated aesthetic play and systematic opposition with liberal political values was infuriated by his decoration, at the end of his career, by Chile's General Augusto Pinochet. At the same time, Borges's later *ficciones*, such as comprise *Doctor Brodie's Report*, abound with ethical images of the lamentable after-effects of extremism, in situations of professional competitiveness, sexual jealousy, and even nationalistic pride.[8]

What if the lesson we draw from Borges's and Calvino's fiction is as much of the complicity between parodies and the systems they play off of as of the opposition? This collaboration might complexify, in a salutary fashion, our notions of the language justifying the sense of Borges, Calvino, Blanchot, Benjamin, and Derrida as philosophers of language. In a world of collusion between repressive—because structured, repetitive, and ultimately deterministic—systems, even the language of parody is inflected by what might be called the style or tonality of a system, or its shadow, as in Wittgenstein's early turn of phrase, "the shadow of a fact."[9] As I hope to suggest below, in Borges and Calvino, and the demonstration may well extend to others, the parodic bad-boys of philosophical systematization may derive much in tone, style, and imagery from the conceptual machines from which they presumably part company.

The law of genre may also be germane to the complex rhythm of opposition and complexity most likely prevailing between conceptual systems and their parodic renderings. However brilliantly Borges and Calvino occasionally mock the dimensions, processes, and tonalities accruing from the systematic works of Kant and Hegel, there is no reason why asystematic discourse should rest solely in the hands of artists, literary or otherwise. The positionality of Borges and Calvino, as putative philosophers of writing, may be more akin to that of Fichte, who taught knowledge literally between the systematic lineaments of Kant and Hegel, and of Kierkegaard, who organized a literal shutdown of Hegelian dialectics, than that of literary system-makers, whether Dickens or Eliot, Mann or Pynchon.

Twelve Ways of Looking at a System

So what are systems? However diverse their forms and manifestations, they, along with their aspirations, have occupied a pivotal place in culture for a long time. And if we attempt to know them from their actions rather than their essence, what do systems do?

In a Borgesian Chinese encyclopedia, this is how conceptual systems might fare:

1. A system is an interactive language tool such that certain elements predicate others, whose value and function through this process become

predictable. The identity of the machine, which will surely belie its linguistic nuance and complexity, becomes conflated with its repetitive function, its ability to reproduce its own action.

2. A system is a linguistic artifact achieving certain organic properties, in which the whole predicates certain elements, which in turn stand for the system in entirety, although the linguistic medium is itself distinctly inorganic.

3. A system is a mechanism of sufficient perdurance and predicability to allow for the state of affairs in which "only that which happens every three hundredth night is true" (F, p. 26).

4. A system is a linguistic configuration of concepts better designed, more fully fitted out, than other units of discourse to consummate acts and perform functions. It is better geared to performatives, speech-acts, and writing-acts than a parallel composition of asystematic script. Systematic writing opens up a dynamic whose operational function, on the other hand, is always already impaired, a medium that revels in this crippled function. This crippling becomes a motif in the asystematic fiction that performs its own status, whether Borges's Funes, whose memory, as resistant to logical and epistemological formats of organization as it is relentless, is a byproduct of his having been thrown by a horse (F, p. 109), or Beckett's Molloy, whose ambulatory dysfunctions make him reliant upon a bicycle, itself chainless and broken down.[10]

5. We say of a phenomenon or tendency that it is "systematic" when we refer to its comprehensiveness, the degree to which it is pervasive. The regularity and repetitiveness of systems endow them with the specific mode of expansiveness consisting in an extension, or iteration, to certain types of situations, always in the same way. The effects of a circumstance may be random, or even fanciful, but a system tends toward foregone conclusions in every situation in which it plays.

6. A system is interconnected. Other composite entities may incorporate diverse components and functions that, however, do not interrelate. Texts of the minimal degree of design rendering them beyond pure functionality, say the functionality of the telephone directory, are also interconnected. Hence, there are frequent and understandable conflations of texts and systems. But whereas textuality, an amalgam of linguistic features involving the semantic, semiotic, phonetic, grammatical, and syntactical registers of language, defines the linguistic cohesion of written artifacts, systems crystallize through relations of logic, succession, function, and operation. This is a critical difference between texts and systems, one worth noting.

7. A system deploys units. Its infrastructure is greater or on a higher level than the units over which it presides. These units may comprise entities, functions, acts, structures, or points of view, all of which play, for

example, in the system that Hegel designs and composes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Whatever the nature of its units, a system would purport to deploy them consistently at all levels of operation, in all arenas, that is, systematically.[11]

In the variety of components that he incorporated into his systematic substructure, and in the range of settings in which he deployed them, Hegel may be considered the first French structuralist, even though he was not French and died a 130 years before this attitude or set of studies coalesced. There is a strong affinity between the powerful iterability of Hegelian structures and tropes and the permutational aesthetics that Borges shared with, among other instances, Kafka's mythological experiments and Lévi-Strauss's "Structural Study of Myth."[12] Where structuralist approaches to linguistics, anthropology, history, and related disciplines attempted to finesse the question as to whether structures are above all formal or substantive in nature, structural fabulations in literature, as in Borges's permutational fiction (e.g., "The Garden of Forking Paths," "The Library of Babel," "The Babylon Lottery," or "Death and the Compass"), aestheticized the play of structures, and in this sense sidestepped the issue.

8. Systems, in their distinction between infrastructure and units of operation, implicitly differentiate between levels of operation, some higher, some lower. Yet they are designed to operate identically on each of the levels that they encompass. One clear strategy for asystematic writing is to offer the trappings of mechanical function with neither the vertical articulation nor the presumption of perfect repetition. Kafka, for one, exploits this systematic vulnerability as he stages the demolition of the execution machine in "In the Penal Colony."[13]

9. Because conceptual systems expand our possibilities of thinking, they, in reciprocal rapport to their "subjects," are figured as expanding their own dimensions. Conceptual systems gravitate toward outer limits that are, by definition, sublime, in the Kantian sense. The trajectory of systematic thought is outward bound. Kant sets this agenda for modern systematic thought in the overall approach to the Transcendental in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. As the treatise and its constructs circulate closer and closer to the Transcendental, the features of this register become more sublime, even though Kant has not yet postulated the formal aesthetics of sublimity.[14]

10. Systems, in keeping with their own implicit Enlightenment ideology, are self-regulating. Their internal mechanisms are both restrictive and stochastic. The mechanism by which systems expand and govern themselves is one and the same. It is in this sense that Lönnrot, the ill-fated detective of "Death and the Compass," experiences the Kabbalistic web of clues that he must decipher in order to solve a spate of murders

as a progression along a sequence of integers with occasional, near-magical points of expansion. Among the examples that the narrative cites of this expansion that breaks out, occasionally and arbitrarily, along a progressive series are God's "ninth attribute, eternity" (F, p. 131), and "a hundredth name—the Absolute Name" of God (F, p. 132), which, according to the Hasidim, lifts His prior ninety names to a new level.[15]

11. The disclaimers or at least allowances that systems make for their claims, whether of comprehensiveness, consistency, self-reflexivity, or whatever, are as pervasive as their magnitude and seriousness of purpose. Systems are as instruments of language guaranteeing their own malfunction as are instruments of language guaranteeing their own malfunction as inevitably as new machinery comes fitted out with its own warranty. A work with systematic pretensions apologizes for itself even while it presses its claim. This foregone apology constitutes a rhetorical subgenre; affectively, this admission amounts to existentialist bad faith. Systematic work would hope that giving the lie, in advance, to the force and dimension of its design *excuses* it of its shortcomings and excesses. In an offhand manner, then, a philosophical system and its literary simu-lacrum, as opposed to the poem and the fragment, is an instrument of language distinguished by being always already equipped with its own bad-faith excuse. The systematic disclaimer disarms the aggression that might be directed toward the systematic claim.

12. Systematic writing therefore maintains a privileged rapport to its own destruction. The story, the poem, the argument, the critique as such make a certain offer. There is an inherent finitude to their claim. The espousal of their limit serves as an insurance policy to their design. Imperfections, anomaly, inconsistency, and parallel traits are all protected under the aesthetic contract prevailing over modernity in the West. Systematic writing aspires to much more. In its multifaceted claim is the violation of each one of its features. The thrill of the system is that each one of its pretensions hovers on the shoal of its own dismember-ment. The Kantian drama of the sublime has anticipated this thriller. The science fiction scientist, who is a close relative to the speculator of sublimity in Kant, fully anticipates the vengeful attack by the monster, the figuration of the Transcendental, that only he has managed to pred-icate and track.

Borges: An Asystematic Writer

Page for page, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is the most intense, fully and successfully designed work of asystematic writing in a nonphilosophical mode that I have ever encountered. It is the first of Borges's *Ficciones*. Like the other *ficciones*, it is in part a miniaturized recapitulation and extension of ⟨...⟩ draws on the conventions

of science fiction and fantastic literature. What is so inventive and brilliant about this brief work is how systematically it sets out the conditions of an alternate universe whose features correspond to those of Western meta-physics, but in an a priori state of deconstruction (if one be permitted to coin this phrase). The traits of this imaginary world (or rather uncannily related subworlds) are not merely set in relief against the Western philo-sophical conventions that they challenge. They are products, as poetic constructions, of positive imaging. It is in this context that knowledge and thought on Tlön attain a systematic coherence. "The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility—they seek to amaze, astound" (CF, p. 74). By the same token, mathematical values are relative rather than precise. "Visual geometry is based on the surface, not the point" (CF, p. 76). "Books are rarely signed, nor does the concept of plagiarism exist: It has been decided that all books are the work of a single author who is timeless and anonymous" (CF, pp. 76–77). "Their fiction has but a single plot, with every imaginable permutation" (CF, p. 77). "All nouns ... have only meta-phoric value" (CF, p. 75). The philosophy, mathematics, literature, and reli-gion of this imaginary domain, like Borges's most significant literary and philosophical models, subjugate Being, essence, identity, truth, and recti-tude to the dynamics of language itself. "Their language and those things derived from their language—religion, literature, metaphysics—presuppose idealism" (CF, p. 72). The extreme idealism that is perhaps Borges's ulti-mate caption for this world in a preexistent state of deconstruction is a condition in which figments of language influence reality and vice versa. There is no more fanciful talisman of this threshold at which textuality, as a modern-day monadology, reconfigures the protocols and expectations of established philosophical systems than the *hrönir*, units of originality, derivation, and duplication that operate in no knowable sequence or deter-minable pattern.

I shall not dwell on "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" on this occasion, having belabored its compression, expansiveness, and extreme idealism elsewhere.[16] But I mention it as I set out on a survey of Borges as an asystematic writer because it perfectly defines and dramatizes the relation between the Borge-sian *ficcion* and that aspect of philosophical work purporting to systematic dimensions. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" does not simply substitute whimsy or playfulness for the Western manias for directionality in time, precision in mathematical value, decisiveness in juridical procedure, linearity in literary plot, and uniqueness in questions of identity and creative originality. It verges on the limits of systematic aspirations and dimensions by imposing system-atic protocols on itself. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" must be accorded every seriousness as the blueprint for a nonexistent universe at the same time that its prevailing notions of time, space, quality, quantity, duration, and suc-cession are foils to their counterparts as they could derive from the encyclo-pedias of Western philosophy.

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries. In the center of each gallery is a ventilation shaft, bounded by a low railing. From any hexagon one can see the floors above and below—one after another, endlessly. The arrangement of the galleries is always the same: Twenty bookshelves, five to each side, line four of the hexagon's six sides; the height of the bookshelves, floor to ceiling, is hardly greater than the height of a normal librarian. One of the hexagon's free sides opens onto a narrow sort of vestibule, which in turn opens onto another gallery, identical to the first—identical in fact to all. To the left and right of the vestibule are two tiny compartments. One is for sleeping, upright; the other, for satisfying one's physical necessities. (CF, p. 112)

This passage, which initiates "The Library of Babel," hangs suspended between the sublimely repetitive architecture of an imaginary library and "physical necessities." It is a synecdochical miniature both of the *fiction* that it heads and Borges's appeal and approach to systematicity. The passage juxtaposes the obsessive but inhuman, because utterly indifferent repetitions that give the library its style, to the fundamental, because earthly and leveling, human needs. The *fiction* absorbs any hypothetical character that might inhabit this landscape and place the reader in a labyrinthine and self-contained, but expanding system, whose features link it inextricably to the processes of reading, exegesis, and writing. As in the internal landscapes of Piranesi's prisons and Poe's tales of horror, a distinctive fascination, even allure, will accrue to the very indifference and inhumanity of the design. There are laws at work in this architecture. They have been issued with sublimity by the moral imperative. All galleries are hexagonal. Concessions to human scale and necessities are uniform throughout the architecture. An interminable display of identical galleries, giving the Library what Borges elsewhere calls "the numbered divisibility of a prison" (*F*, p. 129), lends the construction the aura of panoptical oversight.

Within this overdetermined landscape, "The Library is 'total' ... its bookshelves contain all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols (a number which, though unimaginably vast, is not infinite)—that is, all that is able to be expressed, in every language. *All*" (*CF*, p. 115). The arbitrariness and overdesign of the Library's architecture extend to the works on its shelves. These result not from the imagination or creativity of their authors, but from the combinatory potential of the orthographic symbols. As in Tlön, the literary activity culminating in the works of the Library is an impersonal operation along the functions and registers of a manifold of symbols, graphemes, phonemes, and marks. Any notion of authorship is collective, and of creativity automatic and accidental. The totality ascribed to

the Library is not the unimaginable amalgam of human creativity, and its metaphysics, but a mathematical sum or reckoning of all the combinations in the signs. This of course introduces a chance factor of potentially hilarious anomalies and provides a tonal antidote to the dry arbitrariness of the architectural blueprint.

One book, which my father once saw in a hexagon in circuit 15-94, consisted of the letters MCV perversely repeated from the first line to the last. Another (much consulted in this zone) is a mere labyrinth of letters whose penultimate page contains the phrase *O Time thy pyramids*. This much is known: For every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency. (I know of one semi-barbarous zone whose librarians repudiate the "vain and superstitious habit" of trying to find sense in books, equating such a quest with attempting to find meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines of the palm of one's hand). (*CF*, pp. 113–114)

We are already gathering enough data from "The Library of Babel" to begin positing some surmises regarding Borges's theoretically aware approach to systems and systematicity. The ultimate system lending the *Ficciones* their sublime, spacy, labyrinthine quality is, of course, the system of language itself, understood, in keeping with surrealism as well as structuralism, as an impersonal combinatorial matrix at the level of Chomskyan deep structure, on a level that would have to be described as subpsychological. "The Library contains all verbal structures" (*CF*, p. 117), specifies the narrator of our *fiction*, rendering explicit the link between the absurdities of our library building and the linguistic medium that its works, however tangentially, join. Throughout *Ficciones* and his other writings, Borges configures figurative simulacra of language, and these are characterized by systemic features. The aspect of language that Borges is highlighting in his involuted fabulations, whether the Library of Babel or the labyrinthine plot in which, in "The Garden of Forking Paths," a World War I Chinese spy for the Germans and a British sinologist are enmeshed, is the deep grammar, the impersonal features that belie the intimate roles in thinking and interpersonal communication to which language is put. Although Borges clearly belongs to those twentieth-century writers, among them Kafka, Proust, Beckett, Calvino, and Eco, most theoretically attuned to the linguistic ground, underpinnings, and dynamics making fiction, and indeed all representation possible, he is quite selective with regard to which linguistic gestures he installs into his fantastic landscapes or labyrinthine constructions. He gravitates to the impersonal, machine-like features, the extreme of *langue* on the continuum also extending to street-talk or *parole*. These inhuman dimensions of the linguistic medium in which even our most private, inadmissible, and intimate thoughts are couched he figures as expansive matrices or labyrinths in space, to wir

"The Library of Babel" or the Paris/Buenos Aires of "Death and the Compass," but also in time. This utterly fantastic notion of a labyrinth in time is one of Borges's most striking and original syntheses:

> Unlike Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform and absolute time; he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains *all* possibilities. In most of those times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others I do and you do not; in others still, we both do. (*CF*, p. 127)

Borges populates the landscape of his writing with inhuman and impersonal constructions whose features are a deliberate subset of linguistic functions in part so that he can trace out their absurdities or anomalies on a human scale. He introduces human considerations into his fictive settings in part as limiting cases of systematicity. He configures mock systems indistinguishable from their linguistic parameters so that he can lay them low with anomalies also corresponding to features of language, this time at the level of arbitrariness and singularity, the coordinate of the continuum verging on the parole. He traps his reader, and indeed his whole fictive world, in a feedback loop shuttling endlessly, but not infinitely, between the systematic parameters and the singularities within the linguistic medium. Toward the overdetermined and impersonal sweep of this trajectory, he lends efforts at system-making, whether on the part of Kant, Hegel, or Schopenhauer, more credence than we might initially allow. Yet he endlessly questions this gravitation toward systematization, one as inevitable as linguistic articulation itself, by staging the absurdities arising when system and intractable particular are set on a collision course. Asystematic writing, under Borges's stewardship, is a release of the repression or constraint demanded by an inevitable positing of the universe as an expansive rhetorical figure.

This double act of construction, this parry-and-thrust, does much to illuminate the brief sections of "The Library of Babel" that we have begun to approach. For it turns out that the breathtaking universe of the Library is as sensible as it is fantastic and impossible. I speak here not only of the architectural acknowledgment of the "physical necessities." Let us consider the unique volume that the narrator's father, an earlier librarian, opening up the issue of intellectual as well as genetic patrimony, discovered "in a hexagon in circuit number 15-94." The textual material out of which the book's single grammatically correct phrase emerges is not meaningless word-salad; it is a seme consisting of the letters MCV repeated innumerable times. MCV is also a Roman numeral amounting to 1105. (A dictionary of dates reveals that in 1105 C.E., Tancred defeated the Turks at Tizin; also, that Henry V of the

France was crowned at Chartres. Is this confusion of Henrys a historical correlative to the contingent generation of meaning in the Library?)

Even while the Library and the works comprising it push our standard notion of meaning to the extreme, they do not abolish it. There are epiphenomena of meaning everywhere, even in the constructed discourse designed to put this traditional notion to the extreme test. Borges's demonstration is clear. The world of *ficciones*, or of the "extreme idealism" pressing backward to the terrain at which, always mediated by language, ideas and things generate one another, retains the residue of the systematicity that fictive language might otherwise seem to negate. Fiction bears the trace of system to the same extent that system is already discombobulated by the inherent play and radicality of the medium—language—making it up. This observation of my own is borne out by the phrase that emerges, as if by magic, out of the cacophony of the MCVs. It is "O Time thy pyramids," a phrase presenting the enigma of time as the riddle of the sphinx. (The pyramids, of course, stand adjacent to the Egyptian Sphinx.) What interests me more about this phrase than its exotic (in an orientalist sense) provenance is the sublimity of its content and tone. The meaning that the absurd and inhuman system of the Library puts forth on a bad day, when mechanism gives way to sense, is sublime. Sublimity, of course, is the position that the Kantian speculations reach at the end of a long trajectory in which the Transcendental remains the bedrock and landmark of human culture and civilization, but only as deduced and evolved, in keeping with European emancipatory ideology, from human capability. The system eventuating in the Kantian sublime makes an accommodation for human traits and lineaments just as the interminable hexagons of the Babel library contain commodes for fecal necessities.

The sublime, and a long chain of systematic works struggling to effect a synthesis between the transcendental basis of Western metaphysics and the modern, in Foucault's sense, resuscitation of the human, not only Kant's, thus leave their imprint on Borges's fantastic, and I would add asystematic, counteruniverse.[17] The interaction between systematic thought and the twentieth-century writers who set it in an abyss or parodied it is, alas, not simple. It is not the joyous and invariably uplifting struggle between Tom and Jerry and their many analagons. The system marks asystematic writing, even as the latter measures the claims and efficacies of systems. This standoff, as suggested above, may belong more to the suspended ambiguity of collusion than to the edifying ethos of liberation.

Calvino's "The Chase"

Whereas it likely constitutes an oversimplification to assert that Italo Calvino's asystematic writing parts ways definitively from the modality of the sublime, I may not be entirely wrong in suggesting that Calvino, in comparison to Borges, leaves more room in his fiction for the everyday, and its

particular register of humor. There are many instances that could be inserted at this point in the argument: the meditation on Zeno's paradox and matters of spatiality, as well as their application to the fatal leap of a lion in the title story of *t zero* and the synthesis of a biological rhetoric of mitosis, meiosis, and death in articulating the love-drama uniting Qfwfq and Priscilla in the segmented romance of the latter's name. But by its explicit invocation of systematic dimensions and dynamics, in exploration of time and movement in space, I am drawn to Calvino's miniaturized thriller, "The Chase."

Calvino is no less a philosophically motivated writer than Borges. But in toning down his indebtedness to sublimity, above all as invoked by Kant and the Romantics—and this particular appropriation is evident throughout Borges's fiction, especially in the Library galleries and the ineluctable Babylon lottery—Calvino is free to explore other twists and plays of the philosophical concept.

The conceptual richness and profundity of the everyday is the compost out of which Calvino tills the turns of plot and humor in his fictive writing. We cannot be certain as to the existential conditions (criminal conspiracy, the Oedipal triangle, irrational mutual antipathy) that compel the narrator of "The Chase" in his traffic-driven fight to the death with a like-minded Other. But from the outset, Calvino's narrative places us in a dual and abruptly shifting perspective in which we vacillate between the experience of the situation, its phenomenological dimensions, and a systematic reinscription of it, which is Other. It is the abrasive juxtaposition, the always tenuous fusion, on the verge of collapse, between psychosocial experience and its phenomenological coordinates and a systematic reinscription of that experience, that comprises the true motive and object of "The Chase."

That car that is chasing me is faster than mine; inside there is one man, alone, armed with a pistol, a good shot, as I have seen from the bullets that missed me by a fraction of an inch. In my escape I have headed for the center of the city; it was a healthy decision; the pursuer is constantly behind me but we are separated by several other cars; we have stopped at a traffic signal, in a long column.

The signal is regulated in such a way that on our side the red light lasts a hundred and eighty seconds and the green light a hundred and twenty, no doubt based on the premise that the perpendicular traffic is heavier and slower. A mistaken premise: calculating the cars I see going by transversely when it is green for them, I would say that they are about twice the number of those that in an equally long period manage to break free of our column and pass the signal. (tz, pp. 112-113)

Enemy bullets are missing the narrator only by "a fraction of an inch." His existential status could not be more tenuous. But this does not stop him from calculating, in a somewhat dispassionate and philosophical manner, how the

preprogrammed traffic lights favor the perpendicular stream of traffic at the corner where he is stalled. By the same token, Calvino situates his text at the corner where subjective metaphysics, with its life-and-death dramas, and systematic apprehensions merge. It is on this corner, between the cheesiness, say, of "The Soft Moon" and the romance that it serves as a talisman, and the cold calculations of astronomy that Calvino chooses to locate the constructions of his fiction.

I realize that when, in this description, I oppose "us" and "them" I include in the term "us" both myself and the man who is chasing me in order to kill me, as if the boundary line of enmity passed not between me and him but rather between those in our column and those in the transverse one. But for all who are here immobilized and impatient, with their feet on the clutch, thoughts and feelings can follow no other course but the one imposed by the respective situations in the currents of traffic; it is therefore admissible to suppose that a community of intention is established between me, who cannot wait to dash away, and him who is waiting for a repetition of his previous opportunity....

It should be added that the community implied in the term "us" is only apparent, because in practice my enmity extends not only to the cars that cross our column but also those in it; and inside our column I feel definitely more hostile toward the cars that precede me and prevent me from advancing than those following me....

In short, the man who at this moment is my mortal enemy is now lost among many other solid bodies where my chafing aversion and fear are also perforce distributed. (tz, pp. 113-114)

The narrator of "The Chase" is quick to note his simultaneous membership in two collectivities: in the duel with his adversary, in which he has a tangible stake in dodging the bullets, in ultimately coming out on top; and in the flow of traffic, in which his shared interest with his adversary, for they are in the same lane of the same column of traffic, supersedes his rather pressing personal preoccupations in importance. If the narrator can be accused of achieving a philosophically rigorous position of indifference in the midst of his travail, and I believe this to be the case, this purview entails the precedence of systematicity over dialectical interest or self-interest.

Like Borges's protagonists, the surrogates in the world of Calvino's fiction, however pedestrian they may be, however much their clutch-feet may be jammed into the automotive carpet, also verge on a vast expansion of the everyday through the opening up of systems much broader than their limited concerns. Long before the narrator distinguishes between "the system that includes all the vehicles moving in the center of a city where the total surface of the automobiles equals and perhaps exceeds the total surface of the streets; on the other hand the system created between an armed pursuer and an unarmed pursued man" (tz, p. 122), thereby making the

systematicity of the traffic flow and of the Master/Bondsman reversals in the duel explicit, the story's rhetoric has hinted at this broader dimension or register underlying the attention to the empirical data. The "calculations" in which both pursuer and pursued are engaged (tz, pp. 115–116), the narrator's exploration of "every hypothesis because the more details I can foresee the more probabilities I have of saving myself" (tz, p. 117), conceding that his driverly maneuvers "above all are not decided by us but dictated by the traffic's general pace" (tz, p. 120) are all considerations intimating a speculative, general, and systematic dimension to the situation, making it a philosophical diorama or cloud-chamber. Traffic is an annoying aspect of contemporary urban and suburban life that benights us. It is also an instance of what Bergson or Merleau-Ponty might have called "the systematicity of everyday life,"[18] the systematic analagon to Kant's deployment of consensus regarding beauty as an everyday instance of judgment, and the immanent conceptual operating system upon which it is based, in the ordinary lives of ordinary people.

"The Chase" bears witness to the birth of a philosophical subspecialization that I hope will become prevalent throughout the discipline, namely, to the philosophy of traffic.[19] Once the systematic scope of traffic and the urban plans that direct and control it opens up, there are no limits to the philosophical concepts and traditions falling under its sway.

It is the bodies therefore that determine the surrounding space, and if this affirmation seems to contradict both my experience and my pursuer's . . . it is because we are dealing with a property not of single bodies but of the whole complex of bodies in their reciprocal relationships, in their moments of initiative and indecision, of starting the motor, in their flashing of lights and honking and biting nails and constant angry shifts of gear: neutral, first, second; neutral, first second, neutral . . .

Now that we have abolished the concept of space (I think my pursuer in these periods of waiting must also have reached the same conclusions as I) and now that the concept of motion no longer implies the continuous passage of a body through a series of points but only disconnected and irregular displacements of bodies that occupy this point or that, perhaps I will succeed in accepting more patiently the slowness of the line, because what counts is the relative space that is defined and transformed around my car as around every other car in this traffic jam. In short, each car is the center of a system of relationships which in practice is the equivalent of another, that is, the cars are interchangeable, I mean the cars each with its driver inside; each driver could perfectly change places with another driver, I with my neighbors and my pursuer with his. (tz, pp. 122–123)

So fundamental are these speculations eventually attaining systematic proportions that they revert to an analytic of space and time, in which even

the dimensions of the body, and the possibility of corporeality itself, are up for grabs. The gravitation away from the banalities of self-concern and petty rivalry is also a momentum toward increasingly fundamental categories of philosophical speculation, such as a body situated at the very coordinates of space and time. This is no longer a body that in conventional fiction insinuates itself into different sensual apotheoses; this is a body in the purest, in the Kantian sense, form: a body that is a unit of space and time, an element of movement, a shifter of identity and difference, sameness and reciprocity, a body both epitomizing and parodying Cartesian space.[20] So powerfully does the traffic situation in which the pursuers are enmeshed assert itself on a systematic level that one space is interchangeable with another; a body indistinguishable from another. The dimension of systematicity abolishes spatial and corporeal singularity just as it has mocked the melodrama of the life-and-death chase experienced on the existential level.

Calvino's systematic fiction, like that of Borges, expands in the sense that it uplifts beyond the constraints of circumstance and materiality. But where the Borgesian *ficción* luxuriates in the arabesques of complication, labyrinths, lotteries, and endlessly twisting plots, a modernist and postmodern embroidery on possibilities latent in the Hegelian dialectic, Calvino's systematic writing looks back over its shoulder at the pure elements of philosophical speculation. Perhaps in a more Kantian fashion, Calvino reverts backward toward the irreducible elements in the grammar of the intellectual operating system of the universe, obscure but objectifiable. Both Borges and Calvino adopt the features of their narrative to the point at which they articulate not only the writing of one system or another, but the writing of the system, the systematic parameters imprinted upon theoretically aware writing itself. It is at this point where they leave us, and we leave them.

Notes

1. See Henry Sussman, *Afterimages of Modernity: Structure and Indifference in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 1–20, 161–205.
2. I develop my notion of the aesthetic contract in *The Aesthetic Contract: Statutes of Art and Intellectual Work in Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 150–177.
3. See Thomas Bernhard, *Correction*, trans. Sophie Wilkins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 8, 13, 46–47, 108, 156, 200, 242, 267.
4. Italo Calvino, "The Soft Moon," in *t zero*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), pp. 3–13. All citations of Calvino in this essay refer to this volume, henceforth abbreviated "tz."
5. This is an image from Jorge Luis Borges's story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962) pp. 29–30, henceforth abbreviated "F." Longer quotations from Borges in this essay refer to *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), henceforth abbreviated "CF."
6. See Italo Calvino, "The Count of Monte Cristo," in *t zero*, pp. 137–152.

7. See Jorge Luis Borges, "The Theme of the Traitor and Hero," in *Ficciones*, pp. 123–128.

8. Jorge Luis Borges, *Doctor Brodie's Report*, trans. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), pp. 63–78, 89–96.

9. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), p. 36.

10. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), pp. 19–20.

11. See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 6–7, 11–12, 16–17, 20, 29–30.

12. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic books, 1963), pp. 206–231.

13. See Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1977), pp. 163–166.

14. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), pp. 297–300.

15. I owe this insight regarding systematic self-regulation and stochastic expansion to Wladimir Kryzinski of the University of Montreal. This stochastic point of view enters the frameworks of critical theory and philosophy by way of fractal mathematics. For an excellent rereading of Proust from this perspective, see "Fractal Proust," in J. Hillis Miller and Manuel Asensi, *Black Holes; or Boustrephedontic Reading* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 349–363.

16. See "Kafka in the Heart of the Twentieth Century: An Approach to Borges," in my *Afterimages of Modernity*.

17. I am referring to Foucault's reinscription, in *The Order of Things*, of a human impact upon socioeconomic, natural, and linguistic process elided by the logic prevailing during his "Classical" age of scientific discovery, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 307–312, 318–335, 346–355.

18. See Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 25–44, 218–223; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 50–104.

19. My feeble attempt at facetiousness should not obscure the fact that traffic constitutes one manifestation of the general flow that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari monitor in their "Capitalism and Schizophrenia" diptych. Their gravitation toward flow enables their discourse, at the cost of some specificity, to link textual and extratextual phenomena. Their readings of Spinoza, Kleist, Kafka, Artaud, Miller, and Burroughs, among others, go hand in hand with a sociology of outmoded sociopolitical formations (e.g., "nomadic despotism") nonetheless exerting a subliminal and persistent impact on contemporary "advanced" culture. The construct of flow goes a long way toward making their distinctive perspective, corresponding to the schizo's eye-view of the world, possible. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 48–57, 70, 112, 190–191, 202–207, 223–231.

20. This body bears some affinities to Deleuze and Guattari's "BwO," or "body without organs," the locus of an experience not organized by the tried and true formats of propriety and reason. For the body without organs, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 1–5, 8–16, 281.

9.

ROCCO CAPOZZI

Knowledge and Cognitive Practices in Eco's Labyrinths of Intertextuality

> A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships.
>
> —J. L. Borges

This essay deals with Umberto Eco's use of libraries, encyclopedias, intertextuality, and rhizomes as open epistemological systems. Eco's possible worlds of fiction can be viewed primarily as cognitive experiences through which narrators and readers arrive not at truth(s), but at a better understanding of semiosic practices and philosophical notions concerning a variety of topics such as perception, interpretation of signs, language, meaning, the relativism of truths, the diffusion of knowledge, cultural history, and the omnipotence of God. My references to thinkers such as Aristotle, Roger Bacon, Kant, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Nelson Goodman, and Richard Rorty, just as my mentioning of several authors ranging from Dante to Galileo and to Thomas Pynchon, are meant to illustrate Eco's notion that through intertextuality we can contextualize texts, culture, events, works, and universal philosophical issues. Although he entertains his readers with witty intricate stories, Eco seems to reiterate that today, in our postmodern ways, we discuss basically the same rhetorical, epistemological, and metaphysical concerns that assailed our forefathers.

The debates surrounding Aristotle, realism versus nominalism and idealism, order, God, or philosophy of language, narrated in *The Name of the Rose*, the cabalistic, alchemistic, and hermetic doctrines illustrated in *Foucault's Pendulum*, and the search for a universal (Adamic) language, the nature of imagination and metaphors, and various practices of cognition that we witness in *The Island of the Day Before* are all examples of these concerns cleverly narrated within their proper historical and cultural frame and at the same time presented as universal issues that we recognize as being pertinent to our times.

I shall add immediately that I will be speaking mainly about literature and knowledge and I will not be examining the questions about "Literature as, or, and, in, through Philosophy" so well argued in Deborah Knight's opening essay in this volume, especially in references to A. Danto's and P. Jones' views on the relationships between philosophy, art, and literature. These views, like others proposed by several scholars, for example, those in the collected essays edited by Cascardi, or by Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (1994), have certainly concerned Umberto Eco. I shall also point out a myriad of philosophical issues addressed by Eco. Nonetheless I feel that my colleagues from the philosophy department are much better qualified than I am to speak in depth about Eco's interpretation of philosophers such as Plato, Roger and Francis Bacon, Locke, Vico, Kant, or Wittgenstein.

Eco is well trained in philosophy and in his essays, as in his novels, he loves to recall his favorite thinkers whenever he theorizes on philosophy of language or when he emphasizes philosophical views about the ongoing debates on realism and idealism and on the relationships between language and reality, and concepts and the outside world. In his novels mimetic realism is used primarily for contextualizing the story and the intellectual debates. At times it may even appear to be subservient to the myriad of metaliterary and philosophical discussions. Indeed, three key features of Eco's fiction are intertextuality, epistemological discourses, and an argumentative style called for by the investigative nature of his stories, all extremely rich with numerous discussions on language, knowledge, and power.

The relationship between knowledge and power is one of the many lessons that Adso of Melk learns from the protectors of the library and from his mentor William of Baskerville in *The Name of the Rose*. Similar lessons are learned by the main protagonists in *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Island of the Day Before* where power is associated with knowledge of secrets, codes, plans, plots, and even of oneself. And we would easily agree that learning processes and the quest for knowledge are unquestionably central themes in all three novels. However, although in *The Name of the Rose* critics have appreciated the presence of several philosophers such as Aristotle, Bacon, Occam, Kant, and Wittgenstein, and in *Foucault's Pendulum* critics have noticed the allusions to thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida, and Bloom, we are still waiting for analyses of *The Island of the Day Before* that examine the references to Locke, Hume, Wilkins, Kant, and Spinoza in relation to Eco's expositions on imagination, perception, categories, cognition, and God, as well as on the relationships between language and knowledge of the external world.

Eco's narrative is unquestionably populated by a variety of thinkers extending from Plato to our times. But does this make Eco's novels philosophical? And are they of philosophical importance? These are in fact some

of the questions that come to mind when trying to define the genre within which Eco's fiction falls. The well-known Italian critic and semiotician Maria Corti, after the appearance of *Foucault's Pendulum*, affirmed that they are not really essay-novels and not quite detective or historical novels and that perhaps a new category must be found for Eco's fiction.

Throughout this essay I shall refer to Eco's intellectual narratives as encyclopedia superfictions. Also, keeping in mind Eco's fundamental belief that "a text is a machine for generating interpretations" (Eco, 1979, 1994) I shall treat Eco's cognitive value of literature, or better of his metafictional intertextual machines, as pretexts for accessing a myriad of other authors and texts used for generating more interpretations. Furthermore, my examples from Eco's work are meant to illustrate how our well-known semiotician, beginning with one of his major milestones, *The Open Work* (1984; trans. *Opera aperta*, 1962), has viewed libraries, encyclopedias, intertextuality, and the World Wide Web as cognitive tools that open up epistemological systems.

From the late 1960s to the present, and mainly in conjunction with the various debates on postmodernism, the issues surrounding the possibility or impossibility to exhaust literature have made John Barth one of the most frequently quoted authors of the last two decades. Barth, in his by now historical essays "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980),[1] pays homage to one of his favorite postmodern writers, Jorge Luis Borges, as he discusses encyclopedias, labyrinths, and one of Borges's most anthologized stories, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Perhaps a brief quotation from "A note on (toward) Bernard Shaw" can provide a good indication of why Barth was fascinated with the Argentinean writer:

[A] book is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes upon his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory.... Literature is not exhaustible, for the sufficient and simple reason that no single book is. A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships. (Borges, *Labyrinths*, 1964, pp. 213–214)

This elucidating statement, as we shall see, is most pertinent to our discussions on Borges, Calvino, and Eco while it brings to mind Michael Bakhtin's notions of polyphony and intertextuality and Yuri Lotman's definition of a text: "A text is a mechanism constituting a system of heterogeneous semiotic spaces, in whose continuum the message ... circulates [....] When a text interacts with a heterogeneous consciousness, new meanings are generated" (Lotman, 1994, pp. 377, 378). Bakhtin and Lotman, I must add, are two central figures of influence in Eco's writings.