

BORGES'S STORIES: FICTION AND PHILOSOPHY

THE essays and stories of Jorge Luis Borges must be placed in an intermediate zone between the critical and the imaginative, the intellectual and the poetic, the real and the invented. But in discussing the stories alone one might feel obliged to follow Borges's own lead and regard them as purely fictitious, as dream, as artistic structures devoid of any ideological intentions: "When I write a story I do not think too much about the metaphysical meaning it may possess, because if I did, perhaps, it would not let me dream the plot. . . . The ideal reader of my work would be a person who greatly resembles me, one who would not look for too many intentions in what I have written but would abandon himself to the reading."¹ "Metaphysical meaning" is always subordinate to the playfulness of art. Borges has observed in himself a tendency to evaluate philosophical systems according to aesthetic criteria.² The conscientious critic would then respect the autonomy of the stories and refrain from wondering if Borges's elegant fictions have other than literary relevance. In this spirit, Enrique Anderson Imbert writes that our author is radically skeptical but interested in "la belleza de todas las teorías, mitos, creencias en que no puede creer."³ James Irby differentiates the function of ideas in "conceptual" and artistic usage: "for Borges those ideas are never final or 'conceptual' but rather are a plastic and ambiguous substance for the elaboration of expressive images revelatory of true aesthetic intuitions."⁴ Rafael Gutiérrez Gi-

¹ Interview which Borges gave to a group of teachers and students in Buenos Aires on May 23, 1960, translated by Robert Lima in the appendix of the English version of Ana María Barrenechea's *Borges, the Labyrinth Maker* (New York, 1965), p. 150.

² In his essays in *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires, 1952, henceforth abbreviated as *OI*), he notes a tendency to "estimar las ideas religiosas o filosóficas por su valor estético y aun por lo que encierran de singular y de maravilloso" (p. 223).

³ Enrique Anderson Imbert, *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana*, II (Mexico, 1964), 268.

⁴ James East Irby, "The Structure of the Stories of Jorge Luis Borges," unpubl. diss. (Michigan, 1962), p. 48. This is the most complete and penetrating study of all of Borges's stories.

rardot, after observing that Borges's work is situated "en el límite de lo real y de lo irreal, del conocimiento y de la intuición . . . de la prosa y de la poesía" says that the author nevertheless tries to free himself from discursive thought by thinking in metaphors.⁵ This critic is eager to keep apart what Borges seems to be confounding. He argues that the development of the themes of immortality, the infinite, etc., is not a secret substitute for philosophy nor even a "visión del mundo" but rather "la expresión simbólica de la actitud irónica fundamental"; the value of his ideas is "más allá o más acá de la función del conocimiento."⁶

But is it really necessary to maintain this strict separation between intuition and reflection? If Borges shows that the distinctions between the world of fiction and our own "real" world are doubtful, precarious or non-existent, it would seem quite proper to assert that the stories not only create an imaginary realm but also comment on possible ways of knowing and picturing the world we live in. Judging philosophical systems by aesthetic standards does not necessarily reduce philosophy to aesthetics; it could point to the possibility of a kind of speculative thought as hypothetical and provisional as fiction. I do not think we destroy the literary quality of the stories or reduce them to a set of ideas by suggesting that the aesthetic satisfaction they produce is inseparable from an intellectual one.⁷ Instead of establishing an entirely independent

⁵ Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot, *Jorge Luis Borges, ensayo de interpretación* (Madrid, 1959), p. 70.

⁶ Gutiérrez Girardot, p. 100.

⁷ The contextualist critic (and I take his position as the most recent expression of a central tendency in aesthetic theories from symbolism to the present) claims that the work of art gives meaning to experience only if it first functions aesthetically, that is, in the case of literature, as an autonomous verbal structure in which all meaning is inward and reflexive. The poet is not concerned with referential meaning. "Poetic images do not state or point to anything, but by pointing to each other, they suggest or evoke the mood which informs the poem" (Northrup Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* [Princeton, 1957], p. 81). Once the density of the work is respected, once it is permitted to act upon us as an integrated whole, it can be seen to have a certain symbolic or analogical correspondence to reality. The problem, of course, is precisely how, once you have claimed poetry as a closed system, you can have it opening up the experiential world for us in a way that discursive or assertive prose cannot. "The apologist must make sense of the seemingly paradoxical claim that this self-containedness allows poetry to tell us something

realm of game and conjecture, Borges's fiction-making irradiates its ambiguity and playfulness to all the activities of the mind.

The advantage of fiction as a means of representing experience is precisely its acknowledged deceptiveness. And Borges's fantasies make their illusory nature thoroughly apparent (all of the "de-realizing" techniques studied by Ana María Barrenechea⁸ contribute to this obvious transparency). The most direct demonstration of the story's fictitiousness is a pattern of ideas and motifs that refute themselves. It is not only in the literature of Borges's imaginary world of Tlön that all books have their counter-books and no philosophical thesis is complete without its antithesis. The theory or postulation that negates itself is one of the author's favorite topics and it determines the structure of several stories. His themes generally involve an initial polar contrast of images or ideas; that duality is then destroyed or collapsed in the course of the story. Yet the final identification can be understood only by going through the story, by following the steps from primary opposition to eventual coalescence. In this essay I shall examine the contradictory thematic development of four of these self-reversing tales, "Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "La lotería en Babilonia," "El inmortal," and "El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan."⁹ I hope to show that the progression of the plot is itself a working out of the ideal of fiction—complete provisionality and ambiguity—and that this ideal can be extended to other forms of thought. All representations of the world, whether given as "fact" or fiction, should display an equal awareness of their tentative nature.

about the world that we cannot learn from less self-contained discourse" (Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* [Bloomington, 1963], pp. 192-193). Aside from this general difficulty with all poetry, there is a further problem with those works of literature that persistently undermine their own independence and organic wholeness. Fiction in the Cervantine tradition, which takes as its central theme the problem of illusion and reality, purposefully destroys itself as an inviolate hermetic orb. One might ask how such a work can be considered centripetal and self-contained.

⁸ Ana María Barrenechea, *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (Mexico, 1957).

⁹ "El inmortal" is in *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires, 1957); the other stories are in *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires, 1956). I will refer only to page numbers in these two texts.

II

The essay-like quality of "Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the numerous references to non-existent works by real scholars, critics, and writers (Bioy Casares, Martínez Estrada, Alfonso Reyes) from the beginning make its genre dubious—essay or fiction. The story is a peculiar blending of the conceptual and the aesthetic, similar to that of fiction. This mixture of forms is a reflection of the plot itself which traces the gradual insertion of an ideal scheme into concrete reality. In Part I the narrator describes his discovery of Uqbar, whose legends and myths refer to two imaginary regions, Mlejnas and Tlön. In Part II, the reader discovers that not only did Borges come (accidentally) into possession of Volume XI of *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* but further that this mythical planet has for some time been the subject of scholarly discussion ("Nestor Ibarra, en un artículo ya clásico en la *N.R.F.* . . ." p. 19). Even popular magazines seem to have devoted considerable attention to its more sensational features; so convincing are these references, that for a moment the reader wonders how news of the planet has for so long escaped his attention. Part III, a postscript of 1947 (projected seven years into the future from the year the story appeared, the dating gives the whole piece even greater verisimilitude when read after 1947), summarizes the history of the planet's intrusions into our world and predicts its eventual total usurpation of reality: "El mundo será Tlön." The narrative's disclosure of information about Tlön is piecemeal: first we read an apparently marginal description of it in relation to Uqbar's literary epics; then we find out, to our surprise, that not only Borges, but other well-known writers have been puzzling about it for some time (why did he conceal this fact at the beginning of his accounts?); finally we are faced with the prospect of succumbing to its total rule. The gradual penetration of Tlön into the reader's awareness reproduces the action of the story—Tlön's invasion of the experienced world.

Yet the passage of Tlön into reality contaminates the pure ideal universe with disorder and chance and inevitably entails a restriction of the immense scope and flexibility of its ideas. We notice that as Tlön proceeds to take over our world, certain contradictions necessarily arise within its system.

The mythical planet represents, at least in its origins, an inversion of common sense. At the very beginning of the story the threatening and monstrous mirror in the hallway of the villa in Ramos Mejía announces not only the theme of an illusory physical reality (mirrors and copulation are abominable because they multiply the number of men) but also the possibility of a reversal of ordinary perceptions and beliefs. Tlön is a world of pure idealism: "el mundo para ellos no es un concurso de objetos en el espacio, es una serie heterogénea de actos independientes" (p. 20). The heresy of materialism is so fantastic that language can scarcely formulate it; to the people of Tlön it is as strange and unbelievable as Berkeley's idealism to the common sense realist. Paradoxically enough, in this world of independent mental acts, we can observe a certain evolution—the "history" of Tlön is one of increasing idealism. At first it is pure temporal sequence. Many of its schools of thought undermine the bases of succession and one of them goes so far as to deny time.¹⁰ Yet a few pages after the mention of this theory we learn about the mental fabrication of secondary objects, the *hrönir*, which has been going on for some one hundred years (the *hrönir* as concretizations of thoughts or desires, anticipate the "realization" of Tlön in our world). Their methodical production has permitted the modification of the past. They radically alter the sequential, temporal nature of ideality; they destroy time. The question that arises is how one can speak of this process as having gone on for any specific number of years. And what kind of validity can be attributed to the discovery of Tlön's origins and history outlined in the postscript (origins that are significantly imprecise: "a principios del siglo, en una noche de Lucerna o de Londres")? Indeed, what happens to the history of Tlön's emergence into our world? In Tlön "el pasado . . . no es menos plástico y menos dócil que el porvenir." Such flexibility must then also characterize its "past" relations to us. The history of Tlön is the destruction of the very possibility of history. The narrator refers to Bertrand Russell's postulation of a planet created a few minutes ago, inhabited by people who "remember"

¹⁰ Borges himself has maintained that the refutation of time is only the inevitable extension of idealist arguments. "Negados el espíritu y la materia, que son continuidades, no sé que derecho tenemos a esa continuidad que es el tiempo . . . Niego con argumentos del idealismo, la vasta serie temporal que el idealismo admite" (OI, p. 207).

an illusory past; the story can be seen as the creation of such an imaginary or fictitious remembrance.

The contradictions involved in Tlön's refutation of time are equally evident in the story's treatment of causality. The mental world of Tlön is thoroughly comprehensible and orderly. Yet in infiltrating our disorderly reality Tlön makes use of what Borges considers one of our world's distinguishing features—chance. 1) The copy of the *Anglo-American Encyclopaedia* that contained the articles on Uqbar had been purchased by Bioy Casares in "uno de tantos remates" (p. 15). 2) Volume XI of *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* also reaches Borges's hands by coincidence: "Ahora me deparaba el azar algo más precioso y más arduo (p. 18). 3) The discovery of the letter from Gunnar Erfjord that tells about the origins of Tlön is equally fortuitous. 4) The intrusions of objects from Tlön do not follow any predictable pattern; the narrator is witness to the first two: "Un azar que me inquieta hizo que yo también fuera testigo de la segunda" (p. 31). These events seem to have a design and direction after all. It looks as if chance is not chance but the working out of a complete though as yet unperceived scheme. And beyond that scheme we may discover an even more inclusive contingency. This leads to the general problem of order as opposed to chaos or, more specifically, the relation between order and sheer arbitrariness.

Men are enchanted by Tlön because of its perfect rigor. If only a few years ago any apparent symmetry (dialectical materialism, anti-semitism, nazism) was enough to captivate men's minds, how, the narrator asks, can humanity resist submitting to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet? Reality yearns to give in to total coherence. Yet this final coherence, the story shows, is also a contraversion of its own principles. In the idealism of Tlön, speculative sciences exist in almost "innumerable number." Since philosophies are dialectical games, they multiply indefinitely. The inhabitants of the strange planet recognize that any system means the subordination of all aspects of the universe to a single one of them. They provide a corrective to this unavoidable narrowness in the unchecked proliferation of metaphysical theories, each one of which is balanced and countered by its contrary (philosophical works "invariablemente contienen la tesis y la antítesis, el riguroso pro y el contra de una doctrina," p.

27). Yet this corrective must be abandoned if Tlön is to introject itself into our world. Tlön can be utopian only in the realm of pure thought. As soon as it tries to invade reality it must subject its own diversity to exact organization. A meaningful pattern is necessarily based on the arbitrary selection of a single configurative principle. Order is an attempt to overcome contingency, yet it is inevitably tied to it. And Tlön's order is more all-encompassing than any previously devised: it integrates all realms of mental effort, offering a thoroughly congruent cosmology, geography, literature, falsified history, etc. In its over-all articulation it is more "totalitarian" and threatening than dialectical materialism, anti-semitism and Nazism, which are only poor fragmentary symmetries "con apariencia de orden." When the world is Tlön, even expressive variety will disappear; our languages will be forgotten: "desaparecerán del planeta el inglés y el francés y el mero español" (p. 34). Tlön will be the perfect dictatorship. The story develops the contrasts not only between the cohesiveness of Tlön and the incomprehensible, unstable realities of the experienced world, but also the inevitable mutilation that order imposes. The utopian world of unlimited capricious speculation becomes a carefully wrought complex that eliminates all alternatives and bewitches humanity with its utter intelligibility.

The theme turns in upon itself and in so doing illustrates the very function of fiction. While Tlön slowly establishes itself as the only truth, the plotting of the story shows that truth to be limitation and distortion. "Truth" remains intact only by making no claims on reality—only by holding itself aloof. In a sense it can exist only in that fiction which makes obvious its fictitiousness, in the story as tentative, ironic formulation.

Tlön is a labyrinth contrived by men, destined to be deciphered by men. Reality, the narrator tells us, is organized according to divine laws, that is, inhuman laws. "La lotería en Babilonia" is a description of how those laws might operate. As in "Tlön," the institution of the lottery is presented historically, and as in "Tlön," the principles of the lottery destroy all possibility of history. The lottery grew from an ordinary one that gave out a limited number of prizes to a complicated distribution of rewards and punishments. The company early assumed complete public control and decreed that its operations should be free of charge

and apply to all the inhabitants of Babylon. Everyone could then experience the "delicious" alternations between hope and terror. The drawings are made interdependent so that thirty or forty of them might be necessary to bring about a single occurrence—an execution or an unexpected rise to power. The Babylonians believe that the lottery is an intensification of the random nature of events, a "periodic infusion of chaos into the cosmos." They reason that chance should therefore determine all the steps of a drawing—not only a given reward or punishment but the way it is carried out as well. These scruples at last brought about certain reforms. Because of the lottery's totalitarian extension, it becomes impossible to tell the difference between mere chance, "accidental" or "mistaken" drawings, and official chance; errors would only corroborate the arbitrariness of the entire program. The system is finally so intricate that every action requires an infinite number of drawings. Some seem to cause only minimal alterations in the physical world but they have, at times, terrible consequences.

The adverbs I have used in this summary, "at last," "early," "finally," "at times" would seem to make a separation between events which occur as part of an expected sequence and those which lie outside that series. Yet by the end of the story, it is apparent that no such separation can be made. No pattern of causality (no "history") can be perceived in a world entirely ruled by chance. As the narrator proceeds with his tale, the reader realizes that it is a mythical or pseudo-historical explanation of the experience of total contingency. "Bajo el influjo bienhechor de la Compañía nuestras costumbres están saturadas del azar" (p. 74). The speaker slyly tells us that he has perhaps covered up "alguna misteriosa monotonía," the monotony of reality itself, of all-too-well known disorder and insecurity. Strangely enough, history is cultivated in Babylon; the historians have invented a method to correct chances: "Es fama que las operaciones de ese método son (en general) fidedignas; aunque, naturalmente, no se divulgan sin alguna dosis de engaño" (p. 74; the parenthetical, understated refutation and the qualifying clause that undermines the assertion of the main clause reflect, on a syntactical level, the pattern of the entire story). Just as men have sought to find in the incomprehensible workings of the world evidence of a divine plan, the

Babylonians theorize on the "divine" significance of the lottery. The company's silent functioning is "comparable al de dios" and gives rise to the same kind of conjectures that a despairing consciousness might make about God in the face of the world's complete meaninglessness. The narrator summarizes them at the end of his story. The company no longer exists and the "sacred" disorder of our lives is purely hereditary and traditional. Or disorder is eternal. Or the company is omnipotent but only influences minute details. Another explanation is that the company has never existed and will never exist. Finally, "no less vile," is the suggestion that it doesn't matter if we affirm or deny the shadowy corporation because Babylonia is nothing else than an infinite game of chance. This last supposition would, of course, negate the entire projected history of the lottery. The narrator's account of its development is nothing but an illusory memory, the invention of an impossible sequence. The detailed description of the rules of chance demonstrates the capriciousness of the rules. The "divine" laws of the company are indistinguishable from pure chaos.

Both "Tlön" and "La lotería" are historical accounts of what cannot possibly have historicity. "El inmortal" develops a parallel contradiction. It is the autobiography of a man who is all men—or no man—and who cannot possibly have a biography. A manuscript is found in the last volume of Pope's *Iliad*; written in the first person, it tells the story of Marco Flaminio Rufo, tribune of a Roman legion at the time of Diocletian. Rufo sets out to find the City of the Immortals and the river whose waters are said to abolish death. He unwittingly discovers the river, a miserable dirty stream, and the city, an incomprehensible confusion of architectural forms. Among the speechless troglodytes who live near the river's edge is one who eventually reveals himself to be Homer. Rufo later realizes, through a reconsideration of certain slips and peculiarities in his own narrative, that he too is Homer and that he has been all men. He tries to rid himself of the intolerable burden of immortality.

The theme of mortality/immortality is tied to that of order/disorder; in a sense the two might be seen as the temporal and spatial elaborations of the same basic polarity—the limited, the particular, the ordered as opposed to the incommensurable, the

undifferentiated, the totally disordered. The double-layered labyrinth Rufo traverses after drinking from the magic river prefigures the rest of the story's plot, which moves from a limited but coherent human world to the utter meaninglessness of the immortal world. The substructure of the resplendent City of the Immortals is a blind chaos of sordid galleries. It is, nevertheless, a true labyrinth, a house built to confuse men but a house whose secret internal plan can conceivably be grasped. One might make one's way through a maze by following the single hidden pathway that leads to the entrance of the city above. But the City of Immortals has no purpose and no secret plan; it is utterly confounding. Like the universe as it would be perceived by an immortal subject, it is "interminable, atrocious and senseless" (p. 15). As is often the case with Borges's labyrinth images, the idea of a manageable (though sometimes sordid, cruel, or tyrannical) human order is opposed to a far more inclusive arrangement that can only be described as complete disorder or thoroughly bewildering multiplicity.¹¹ This upper construction is not that city of perfect and

¹¹ The same opposition can be found in Tlön as it finally penetrates our world—"un laberinto urdido por los hombres"—and as its own principles would make it ideally—total arbitrariness. In "La muerte y la brújula," the labyrinth Scharlach devises can be understood; the structure of the world as a lineal, temporal labyrinth that Lönnrot mistakenly thinks he perceives and in which he pathetically seeks to save himself in his next life, is beyond formulation. The Library of Babel and the Lottery of Babylonia are both ironic pictures that show the total labyrinth of the universe to be total fortuitousness—a Complete Lottery. God's labyrinth in "Los dos reyes en sus dos laberintos" has no paths or infinite paths; it is the desert. The ultimate meaning of the labyrinth is chaos, or rather, the ultimate labyrinth of the universe is without plan. This is almost the opposite of James Irby's interpretation which sees it as "an endlessly wandering disorder, but which has, nevertheless, a secret center and a symmetrical order, cyclically self-contained" (op. cit., p. 276). Ana María Barrenechea discusses the labyrinth only as a symbol of chaos. I agree with Irby that such an analysis does not take into account its other facet of precise and lucid design. But it seems to me that this latter meaning is confined to labyrinths devised by men and does not apply to the final image of the universe. Nor do I agree with all of the passage by Karl August Horst that Irby quotes in his "Ana María Barrenechea, *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges*," *NRFH*, XVI, num. 1-2 (enero-junio 1962): "El laberinto no tiene meta, es desconcertante, es infinitamente repetible, pero tiene un centro. Sólo desde el centro se reconocen sus ramificaciones y puede formularse su ley. Penetrar en el centro significa reconocer que el hombre, preso en el núcleo más interno

classical beauty whose fame had spread as far as the Ganges and which Rufo traveled to find. The Immortals had destroyed their first city and built on its ruins a parody or reversal, a temple to the irrational gods who rule the world. This architectural confusion is the last symbol to which the Immortals condescended. Again, human order is superseded by divine disorder, cosmos by chaos.

The narrator too passes from the human world to the inhuman, immortal one and loses thereby all sense of meaningful design and of human dignity and uniqueness. Given infinite time, all things occur to all men. Given infinite time, infinite circumstances and changes, it is impossible not to write, at least once, the *Odyssey*. Rufo is Homer and he is all men, which is to say he is no one or he is not. "Nadie es alguien, un solo hombre inmortal es todos los hombres . . . soy dios, soy héroe, soy filósofo, soy demonio y soy mundo, lo cual es una fatigosa manera de decir que no soy" (p. 21). To such a being every act and thought becomes a mere echo of all past acts or a faithful foreshadowing of future ones. Nothing can happen only once, "nada es preciosamente precario" (p. 22). Therefore all acts are justified and all are indifferent. Just as the terrible senselessness of the City of the Immortals contaminated the past and the future, eliminating the possibility of value or happiness, so too immortality destroys the prized individuality of men. Only death can make them "preciosos y patéticos" (22). The narrator and all the other impossibly pluralized Immortals seek the magic river whose waters restore mortality (they reason that if the universe is a system of precise compensations—a corollary of the theory that in infinite time all things occur to all men—the river that confers immortality must be encountered by one that abolishes it). After accidentally discovering this river, Rufo-Homer looks forward to death. Yet mortality, which supposedly gives pathos and value to men, turns out to be strangely similar to immortality. It is only another version of the identification of one man with all men or with no one. The immortal has been all men, therefore he has not been;

del laberinto, se sabe dueño de él" (p. 130). One is never master of the labyrinth and it is impossible to formulate its law—except in the ironic, self-controverting way Borges does it in "La biblioteca de Babel" and "La lotería en Babilonia."

the mortal will be all men when he is *nadie*, when he dies, when he ceases to be: "Yo he sido Homero; en breve, seré Nadie, como Ulises; en breve, seré todos; estaré muerto" (p. 25). The progress of the story's argument is as follows: the escape from mortality, from the limitations of human reality and the ultimate annihilation of death proves to be the entrance into a still more dreadful realm of ceaseless repetition, of perfect and perpetual annihilation. But after developing the disastrous consequences of immortality against the apparent "benefits" of mortality, the narrator collapses the latter into the former. Borges spreads out the play of two apparent antitheses and then reduces them both to the same formula: "ser todos: ser nadie."

"El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan" is a spy story with a pseudo-historical setting. A revelation by one of the characters undercuts the historicity and suggests that the account we are reading, for all its references to real people and real events, may actually be part of a vast fiction. And then the fiction itself becomes a dream or nightmare in the mind of one of the characters so that finally the entire story hovers enigmatically between truth and fiction, between history and invention. The protagonist Yu Tsun is a spy for Germany in the First World War. To communicate a secret (the whereabouts of an allied military installation) to the German chiefs of staff, he must kill Stephen Albert, a man he does not know and who turns out to be the discoverer of a secret far more important than his own. Albert's discovery is intimately related to Yu Tsun: it solves the mystery of the labyrinth and the strange, chaotic novel left by the latter's ancestor Ts'ui Pen. Albert had found out that the two legacies were really the same thing: a bewildering novel that develops multiple contradictory plots, every one of which has several denouements that, in turn, serve as the starting points of still more bifurcating narrative lines. This fictional world has infinite temporal levels, innumerable pasts, presents, and futures; in other words, it has no time, no sequential progression, no single continuity in which all episodes are linked in lineal order. If there is no time, causality does not operate. In any given plot within the novel, the resolution is inevitable but the chain of occurrences within it is variable. For example, two versions are presented of a single epic encounter: in the first an army marches to battle

across a desert mountain—the horror of the place makes the warriors disdain life and they easily win the victory; in the second the same army goes through a palace where a celebration is underway—the battle seems a continuation of the celebration and they easily win the victory. The antecedent of an event has no necessary connection to it; it does not cause it nor in any way affect it. There is nothing in any moment that determines those following it. Each present is discontinuous and autonomous, and the future, since it is not tied to a causal chain, is no more subject to willful modification than the past. No character can determine his fate. Every future in this many-layered novel is irrevocable, though entirely different sequences may lead up to the same conclusion. The novel is not infinite but it implies infinity (Ts'ui Pen had set out to construct an infinite labyrinth); if it were sufficiently extended, all things would eventually occur to all the characters.

It is obvious that Ts'ui Pen's work is more than mere fiction; it is, Albert says, "an incomplete, though not false, image of the universe." The universe portrayed consists of innumerable temporal series; it is a growing and vertiginous network of diverging, converging, and parallel times. As Albert describes it, the image seems to become confused with the universe itself; the novel ceases to be a mere symbol and extends to the "real" world of the story's characters. Albert speaks of himself and of Yu Tsun as if they were figures in Ts'ui Pen's novel or as if the implications of the novel applied to their real lives. He tells Yu Tsun that in most time spheres they do not exist; in others only one of them does; when they coincide their destinies vary; at one time Albert is dead when Yu Tsun finds him, at another he appears as a ghost.¹² The summary of these potential encounters may simply be a personal example of how the novel works or it may indicate that the two men have been absorbed into that fictional world. Giving credence to this second possibility is the description of the strange sensation produced in Yu Tsun by Albert's words: he feels within him and around him an invisible, intangible teeming; the garden that surrounds the house seems to be infinitely saturated with

¹² Albert does not suggest the actual outcome of this story, though he did prefigure it in an earlier example about a certain Fang who has a secret: a stranger comes to his house, Fang decides to kill him; various solutions are possible—Fang may kill the intruder, the intruder may kill Fang, both may be saved, both may die, etc. (p. 107).

invisible persons. "Esas personas eran Albert y yo, secretos, atareados y multiformes en otras dimensiones de tiempo" (p. 110). But then Yu Tsun suddenly awakens from this tenuous nightmare to the realization that in the garden there is only one man, his pursuer Richard Madden. The image of the universe as an infinite labyrinth in which a person leads innumerable contradictory lives is dissipated by the consciousness of a unique and irreversible destiny.¹³ Yu Tsun's first-person account ends, however, with words that suggest he once again sees himself multiplied in countless temporal dimensions: "No sabe . . . mi innumerable contrición y cansancio" (p. 111).

At the beginning of his adventure Yu Tsun had steeled himself by remembering that "el ejecutor de una empresa atroz debe imponerse un porvenir que sea irrevocable como el pasado" (p. 101). One cannot be sure, at story's end, whether this act was necessary because he could, as free agent, determine it, or whether it was the useless willing by a fictional character of what had already been fixed in one of the trajectories of an enormous, labyrinthine novel. The story starts out as an apparently veridical report of an episode in the First World War (presented as a first-person narration in a "found" manuscript). Then the development of the plot indicates first that the whole "reality" of the report has been swallowed up into the fictitiousness of Ts'ui Pen's novel, next that such fictitiousness is a vain and evasive dream in the protagonist's mind, (a dream destroyed by the undeniable reality of his pursuit, capture, and execution, and finally, in the closing lines, that the entire action is just one of the many opposing plots in a vast web of infinite times. The story seems to reverse itself twice so that we can never be sure whether it is real or imaginary, whether Yu Tsun and Albert are "real" persons in a historical, autobiographical account, or shadowy, in-

¹³ A similar shift occurs in Borges's essay "Nueva refutación del tiempo." After elaborate proofs of the unreality of time, and hence of mortality, the author concludes: "And yet, and yet . . . Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. Nuestro destino . . . no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible, de hierro. El tiempo es la substancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebató, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo desgraciadamente, soy Borges" (*OI*, p. 220).

finitely fictitious beings repeated in numberless novelistic situations.

III

The themes of Borges's stories—a utopian world of pure mental content, the sacred order of the universe, immortality, the assimilation of temporal sequence into an eternal and total labyrinth—would seem to point to an atemporal realm of complete and enduring stability. Yet the implications of those themes are always carried to the point of reversal and final dissolution. The mechanism is similar to that of the surprise ending. James Irby observes that the latter technique causes the reader, in a retrospective consideration of the story, to see it spread out “spatially” in his mind: “the back and forth correspondences of details become simultaneous allusions to a subsistent reality that was always there.”¹⁴ And, I believe, beyond the recognition of a subsistent order, is a kind of refutation of it. The point of the trip is the trip itself. We might describe three steps in the story's effect on the reader: 1) we read from beginning to end and are forced to reconsider the entire course of the action; 2) we re-read and experience the story not only as narrative, as a sequence of episodes, but as a suspended complex of interrelated images and themes; 3) we then realize that the very progress of the narrative prevents any permanent or simultaneous order (although at the same time the indications of simultaneity destroy any meaning the progression might have). Tlön negates the past and the possibility of history and thereby negates the history of its own gradual intrusion into the real world that is recorded in the narrative. “La lotería en Babilonia” historically develops the denial of history. “El inmortal” fuses the contrary poles of mortality and immortality into a single annihilation that precludes any stable or unchanging form. It is not clear if Yu Tsun's political mission constitutes a unique and irrevocable destiny or merely one of infinite fictional possibilities. In other words, the forced temporality of the story has, in its contrary effects, a kind of “message,” and that message involves the complete undermining of the subsistent order suggested by the story's themes and by the illusion of simultaneity.

Such a pattern subverts not only the apparent reality of the

¹⁴ Irby, “The Structure of the Stories of Jorge Luis Borges,” p. 190.

story's events, but its opposite as well; it dissolves both the common sense world-organized by time and causality and the “ideal” world of order, eternity, infinity. The contradictions established within the fictions set the disorder of the material world against the abstract order of an ideal one, but they also set that ideal realm against itself. Order either simplifies its own principles and becomes totalitarian or it is so wonderfully complex, intricate, and all-inclusive that it is indistinguishable from complete chaos. The stories act out an ironic and total destruction of all realities and all abstractions.

This persistent dissolution is certainly nihilistic. Some critics want to defend Borges against the charge of inhuman nihilism or “negative” thinking.¹⁵ But negative thinking, Borges shows, is the least deceptive, the most intelligent, and the most fruitful. Since the world forever escapes the mind's attempts to grasp it, thought should be continually self-critical. In one of his essays, he observes that there is no classification of the universe which is not arbitrary and conjectural. The impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme does not dissuade us from proposing human schemes, although we know they are provisional (*OI*, p. 124). The important point is to keep their provisionality always in mind.

¹⁵ For example Emir Rodríguez Monegal in “Jorge Luis Borges y la literatura fantástica,” *Número*, año 1, núm. 5 (nov.-dic., 1949) writes that “este escritor no es, en verdad, nihilista. La concepción caótica y nihilista se refiere sólo al mundo aparente” (p. 453). He speaks of an “intuición fundamental de la eternidad” (p. 455). James Irby argues the same position: “If Borges makes the everyday world unreal, it is with the purpose of erecting in its place another world which is more real, though fictitious. If he also questions the validity of that created world and peoples it with ambiguous images, he does so in order to give it even greater reality, the reality of ideal construction, of thought . . . which becomes purer and more exact by recognizing the inevitable limitations, the multiple aspects, of the very themes and forms on which it is based” (“The Structure . . .,” p. 223; see also his review of Barrenechea, p. 128). I agree with the last modifying clause, but as soon as the mind recognizes the unreality of its creations, it is no longer necessary to contrast the concrete world and the mental one. Irby himself goes beyond this apparent affirmation of a “greater reality” when he defines the ultimate substance of Borges's art as “a constant dialectic of contradictory dualities” (p. 47) and when he says that “Borges holds the work and its subversion, reality and unreality, ideal and defeat, equally in view in one paradoxical vision . . . [that eludes] all rigid definitive formulations” (p. 223).

Indeed, we should make an effort to dramatize and heighten it. "Admitamos lo que todos los idealistas admiten: el carácter alucinatorio del mundo. Hagamos lo que ningún idealista ha hecho: busquemos irrealidades que confirmen ese carácter" (*OI*, p. 135). Examples of these unrealities can be found, Borges believes, in Kant's antinomies and in Zeno's paradoxes. And they can also be methodically produced in fictions that demonstrate their own insubstantiality ("El arte siempre requiere irrealidades visibles," *OI*, 135). The stories' self-refuting, self-digesting form acts out the realization of the fragility of all mental constructions.¹⁶ Because they are transparent inventions that at every turn give evidence of their imaginative origins, the fictions organize experience without distorting it. Each fiction is, like Ts'ui Pen's novel "an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe." If divine order is the delusive tag for total chaos, the artist's order is, in the awareness of its incomplete and hypothetical nature, vastly superior.

At this point, it is no longer necessary to separate fiction and philosophy. The attitudes useful in artistic creation may also be useful in speculative thought. Certainly their products are frequently indistinguishable. Borges confessed to the serious omission in his anthology of fantastic literature of the genre's unsuspected and greatest masters—Parmenides, Plato, Duns Scotus, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Frances Bradley.¹⁷ In his stories Borges does not set everyday reality against a more convincing "reality" of thought; in fact, he scrupulously blurs the differences between these two levels. But in the pattern of all of them is the implicit opposition between bewitchment or blind faith and ironic comprehension. In an essay he quotes Novalis's description of man's self-deception: the greatest wizard is the one who enchants himself to the point of taking his own fantasmagoria for autonomous appearances. Borges argues that such is our case. We have dreamed the world but we have left certain tenuous interstices of unreason in order to know that it is false. By calling attention to these nebulous zones, we make ourselves aware of the conjectural char-

¹⁶ Marcial Tamayo and Adolfo Ruiz Díaz in *Borges, enigma y clave* (Buenos Aires, 1955), write that "el verdadero destino de la inteligencia coincide con la hora en que deja de creerse en sus frágiles poderes trascendentales" (p. 116).

¹⁷ *Discusión* (Buenos Aires, 1957), p. 172.

acter of all knowledge and all representation. It is this consciousness of fabrication that we must persistently maintain in relation to our verbal constructions, whether prose or poetry, science or fantasy.¹⁸ And Borges's fictions, in playing out a drama of postulation and dissolution, illustrate what should be the ironic and playful ideal of all mental activities.¹⁹ The aesthetic is the final attitude towards the tentative formulations of the mind. Fiction-making turns out to be the proper exercise of intelligence.

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¹⁸ For Wittgenstein this is the task of philosophy. "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (*Philosophical Investigations* [Oxford, 1953], p. 47).

¹⁹ James E. Irby says that this ideal is a dialectical and Socratic one: "The activation of thought, shared by author and reader . . . is the real secret promise of the infinite dominion of mind, not its images or finalities which are expendable" (Introduction, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952* [Austin, University of Texas Press, 1964] p. XV).