

**JORGE LUIS BORGES**

**THE GARDEN OF  
BRANCHING  
PATHS**

A TRANSLATION BY  
**NORMAN  
THOMAS  
DI GIOVANNI**



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## Introduction

The eight stories of *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, published in Buenos Aires early in 1942, are widely considered the cornerstone of Borges's fiction and of his subsequent fame as a storyteller. Yet, paradoxically, the book in which these celebrated tales first appeared was to last a bare three or so years as a separate title before it disappeared, subsumed in the now famous volume *Ficciones*. So strange a twist surely calls for explanation.

Elsewhere (*The Lesson of the Master*, 2nd ed., p. 233), I have made the claim that *The Garden of Branching Paths* 'must stand as the most revolutionary set of short fiction since Joyce's *Dubliners*, published twenty-eight years earlier', and I went on to say that Borges

came to the short story in an inconspicuous, tentative, roundabout fashion, groping his way with sketches and borrowings. In fact, he sneaked in by the back door via an amalgam of the essay, the book review, and the hoax. Among the great writers of our time, it is difficult to recall a more timorous début.

In a nutshell, Borges had little confidence in himself as a writer of fiction. His self-doubt in this matter, as I myself witnessed on many occasions, followed him all his life. These eight stories were written in the period from 1935 to 1941 and produced but a slim volume of some 126 pages. Over the next few years, while *The Garden of Branching Paths* slipped out of print, Borges managed

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to write six more stories. What to do with them? Each new story he felt might be his last. He spoke constantly of running dry. He was growing blind and he was also impatient. He never got over the fear of misplacing or losing a text before it somehow found its way into print. On several occasions he tucked a new story or stories unannounced into a re-impression of an earlier book.

All this, of course, is a mark of the amateurism of publishing in the Argentine in those years. Rarely was an edition reprinted; *The Garden of Branching Paths* simply died on the vine. A further mark of the provincial nature of River Plate publishing was that when Borges presented his next new stories—six of them—his editor or publisher did not tell him to go back to his desk and write six more for an entirely new book. Instead, the first eight and the second six were issued together in a collection called *Ficciones*. *Ficciones* then became the revolutionary volume to be marvelled at, the book that in time would launch Borges onto the international scene. And so, as a discrete entity, *The Garden of Branching Paths* passed unnoticed into oblivion, and its unique status as Borges's seminal work - a landmark in the annals of River Plate literature - became the mere opening section of *Ficciones*.

The collection contains 'The Circular Ruins', a perfect story flawlessly executed. The collection also contains Borges's most difficult and most intellectual fiction. Indeed, with their staggering, even phantasmagorical, concepts, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'—widely considered his masterpiece—and 'The Library of Babel' are veritable brainteasers. In the latter, the layout of the



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library's hexagonal chambers obviously taxed the author too. In 1956, fifteen years after he wrote the tale, it was revised and reprinted for inclusion in his complete works. In the earlier text, Borges wrote: 'Twenty-five long shelves, five on each side, fill all the sides but one...'; in the latter, this became 'Twenty long shelves, five on each side, fill all the sides but two...'. Twenty shelves or twenty-five, five of the hexagon's walls or four, I defy any architect armed with these details to draw a floor-plan of Borges' Kafkaian library. I imagine the emended version was prompted by some astute yet baffled reader who took Borges aside to point out a conceptual error. In the English translation printed here, I have not modified Borges's original wording.

The first Argentine readers of *The Garden of Branching Paths* would have found its contents puzzling and its prose a shock. Indeed, on publication the book was notoriously overlooked for a leading prize, which went to some now utterly forgotten title. As for their style, the stories are written in a Spanish unlike any up until then. One could argue the case that in fact they were composed in English with Spanish words, for they exhibit none of Castilian's high-sounding, empty bombast and instead opt for the quiet, plain language with which Borges ultimately transformed written Spanish. The shock effect will go unnoticed by English readers, who, on the other hand, will everywhere detect the stamp of those authors Borges revered and in whom he steeped himself: Stevenson and Wells, Kipling and Chesterton, Conan Doyle and the inimitable compilers of Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

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Two of this book's English versions were written in direct collaboration with the author. The stories are presented here in the order in which they were written.

*—NTdiG*

## Foreword

The eight pieces that make up this book require no further explanation. The last of them, 'The Garden of Branching Paths', is a detective story; its readers will participate in the commission of and in all the events leading up to a crime whose motive they will know but will not understand, it seems to me, until the final paragraph. The other stories are fanciful inventions. One, 'The Lottery in Babylon', is not wholly innocent of symbolism. Nor am I the first author of the tale 'The Library of Babel'; anyone curious as to its history and prehistory may consult certain pages of the magazine *Sur*, Number 59, which record names as diverse as Leucippus and Lasswitz, Lewis Carroll and Aristotle. In 'The Circular Ruins' everything is unreal; also unreal is the destiny that the hero of 'Pierre Menard, the Author of *Don Quixote*' imposes on himself. The catalogue of works which I ascribe to him is not particularly amusing but neither is it arbitrary; it is a chart of his intellectual history.

The writing of vast books - setting out in five hundred pages an idea which could be perfectly expressed orally in a few minutes - is an exhausting and impoverishing piece of extravagance. Far better to pretend that such books already exist and to provide them with a summary or commentary. This is what Carlyle did in *Sartor Resartus* and Butler in *The Fair Haven*, works that have the imperfection of also being books and no less tautological than any others. More rational, more inept, more idle, I have chosen to write reviews of imaginary books. These are 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius',

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'A Glimpse into the Work of Herbert Quain', and 'The Approach to al-Mu'tasim'. The last of these was written in 1935; a short while ago I read *The Sacred Fount* (1901), whose general outline is perhaps similar. The narrator of James's subtle novel explores the influence of A and B on C; in 'The Approach to al-Mu'tasim' the remote existence of Z, whom B does not know, is foreshadowed or surmised by B.

*Jorge Luis Borges*

*Buenos Aires, 10 November 1941*

## The Approach to al-Mu'tasim

Philip Guedalla informs us that the novel *The Approach to al-Mu'tasim* by the Bombay barrister Mir Bahadur Ali 'is a rather uneasy combination of those Islamic allegories which never fail to impress their own translators and of that brand of detective story which inevitably outdoes even Dr Watson and heightens the horror of human life as it is found in the most respectable boarding-houses of Brighton.' Before him, Mr Cecil Roberts had blasted Bahadur's book for 'its unaccountable double influence of Wilkie Collins and of the famed twelfth-century Persian, Ferid Eddin Attar' - a simple enough observation which Guedalla merely parrots, though in an angrier jargon. Essentially, both reviewers are in agreement, pointing out the book's detective-story mechanism and its undercurrent of mysticism. This hybridization may lead us to suspect a certain kinship with Chesterton; we shall presently find out, however, that no such affinity exists.

The first edition of *The Approach to al-Mu'tasim* appeared in Bombay towards the end of 1932. The paper on which the volume was issued, I am told, was almost newsprint; the jacket announced to the purchaser that the book was the first detective novel to be written by a native of Bombay City. Within a few months, four printings of a thousand copies each were sold out. *The Bombay Quarterly Review*, the *Bombay Gazette*, the *Calcutta Review*, the *Hindustani Review* (of Allahabad), and the *Calcutta Englishman* all sang its praises. Bahadur then brought out an illustrated edition, which he retitled *The Conversation with the Man Called al-Mu'tasim*

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and rather beautifully subtitled *A Game with Shifting Mirrors*. This is the edition which Victor Gollancz has just reissued in London, with a foreword by Dorothy L. Sayers and the omission - perhaps merciful - of the illustrations. It is this edition that I have at hand; I have not been able to obtain a copy of the earlier one, which I surmise may be a better book. I am drawn to this suspicion by an appendix summarizing the differences between the 1932 and the 1934 editions. Before attempting a discussion of the novel, it might be well to give some idea of the general plot.

Its central figure - whose name we are never told - is a law student in Bombay. Blasphemously, he disbelieves in the Islamic faith of his fathers, but, on the tenth night of the moon of Muharram, he finds himself in the midst of a civil disorder between Muslims and Hindus. It is a night of drums and prayers. The great paper canopies of the Muslim procession force their way through the heathen mob. A hail of Hindu bricks hurtles down from a roof terrace. A knife sinks into a belly. Someone - Muslim? Hindu? - dies and is trampled on. Three thousand men are fighting - stick against revolver, obscenity against curse, God the Indivisible against the many gods. Instinctively, the student freethinker joins in the battle. With his bare hands, he kills (or thinks he has killed) a Hindu. The Government police - mounted, thunderous, and barely awake - intervene, dealing out impartial lashes. The student flees, almost under the legs of the horses, heading for the farthest ends of town. He crosses two sets of railway lines, or the same lines twice. He scales the wall of an unkempt garden at one corner of which rises a circular tower. 'A lean and evil mob of mooncoloured hounds' lunges at him

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from the black rose-bushes. Pursued, he seeks refuge in the tower. He climbs an iron ladder - two or three rungs are missing - and on the flat roof, which has a dark pit in the middle, comes upon a squalid man in a squatting position, urinating vigorously by the light of the moon. The man confides to him that his profession is stealing gold teeth from the white-shrouded corpses that the Parsees leave on the roof of the tower. He says a number of other vile things and mentions, in passing, that fourteen nights have lapsed since he last cleansed himself with buffalo dung. He speaks with obvious anger of a band of horse thieves from Gujarat, 'eaters of dogs and lizards - men, in short, as abominable as the two of us'. Day is dawning. In the sky is a low flight of well-fed vultures. The student, in utter exhaustion, lies down to sleep. When he wakes up, the sun is high overhead and the thief is gone. Gone also are a couple of Trichinopoly cigars and a few silver rupees. Shaken by the events of the night before, the student decides to lose himself somewhere within the bounds of India. He knows he has shown himself capable of killing an infidel, but not of knowing with certainty whether the Muslim is more justified in his beliefs than the infidel. The mention of Gujarat haunts him, as does the name of a *malika-sansi* (a woman belonging to a caste of thieves) from Palanpur, many times favoured by the curses and hatred of the despoiler of corpses. He reasons that the anger of a man so thoroughly vile is in itself a kind of praise. He resolves - though rather hopelessly - to find her. He prays and sets out slowly and deliberately on his long journey. So ends the novel's second chapter.

It is hardly possible to outline here the involved adventures that befall him in the remaining nineteen. There is a

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baffling pullulation of dramatis personae, to say nothing of a biography that seems to exhaust the range of the human spirit (running from infamy to mathematical speculation) or of a pilgrimage that covers the vast geography of India. The story begun in Bombay moves on into the lowlands of Palanpur, lingers for an evening and a night before the stone gates of Bikaner, tells of the death of a blind astrologer in a Benares sewer; the hero becomes involved in a conspiracy in a mazelike palace in Katmandu, prays and fornicates in the pestilential stench of the Machua Bazaar in Calcutta, sees the day born out of the sea from a law office in Madras, sees evenings die in the sea from a balcony in the state of Travancore, falters and kills in Indapur. The adventure closes its orbit of miles and years back in Bombay itself just a few yards away from the garden of the 'mooncoloured hounds'. The underlying plot is this: a man, the fugitive student freethinker we already know, falls among the lowest class of people and, in a kind of contest of evil-doing, takes up their ways. All at once, with the wonder and terror of Robinson Crusoe upon discovering the footprint of a man in the sand, he becomes aware of a sudden brief change in that world of ruthlessness - a certain tenderness, a moment of happiness, a forgiving silence in one of his loathsome companions. 'It was as though a stranger, a third and more subtle person, had entered into the conversation.' The hero knows that the scoundrel he is talking to is quite incapable of this unexpected turn; he therefore deduces that the man is echoing someone else, a friend, or the friend of a friend. Rethinking the problem, he arrives at the mysterious conclusion that 'somewhere on earth is a man from whom this light emanates; somewhere



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on earth a man exists who is equal to this light.' The student decides to spend his life in search of him.

The story's outline is now plain: the tireless search for a human soul through the barely perceptible reflections cast by this soul in others - at first, the faint trace of a smile or of a word; in the end, the multiple branching splendours of reason, imagination, and righteousness. The nearer to al-Mu'tasim the men he examines are, the greater is their share of the divine, though it is understood that they are but mirrors. A mathematical analogy may be helpful here. Bahadur's teeming novel is an ascendant progression whose last term is the foreshadowed 'man called al-Mu'tasim'. Al-Mu'tasim's immediate predecessor is a Persian bookseller, an exceptionally happy, courteous man; the one before him, a saint. Finally, after many years, the student comes to a corridor 'at whose end is a door and a cheap beaded curtain, and behind the curtain a shining light'. The student claps his hands once or twice and asks for al-Mu'tasim. A man's voice - the unimaginable voice of al-Mu'tasim - invites him in. The student parts the curtain and steps forward. At this point, the novel ends.

If I am not mistaken, the proper handling of such a plot places the writer under two obligations. One, to abound richly in prophetic touches; the other, to make us feel that the person foreshadowed by these touches is more than a mere convention or phantom. Bahadur fulfils the first; how far he achieves the second, I wonder. In other words, the unheard and unseen al-Mu'tasim should leave us with the impression of a real character, not of a clutter of insipid superlatives. In the 1932 version, there are few supernatural touches; 'the man called al-Mu'tasim' is obviously a symbol,

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though he is not devoid of personal traits. Unfortunately, this literary good conduct did not last. In the 1934 version - the one I have read - the novel descends into allegory. Al-Mu'tasim is God, and the hero's various wanderings are in some way the journey of a soul on its ascending steps towards the divine union. There are a few regrettable details: a black Jew from Cochin speaks of al-Mu'tasim as having dark skin; a Christian describes him standing on a height with his arms spread open; a Red lama recalls him seated 'like that figure I modelled in yak butter and worshipped in the monastery of Tachilhunpo'. These statements seem to suggest a single God who reconciles himself to the many varieties of mankind. In my opinion, the idea is not greatly exciting. I will not say the same of another idea - the hint that the Almighty is also in search of Someone, and that Someone of Someone above him (or Someone simply indispensable and equal), and so on to the End (or, rather, Endlessness) of Time, or perhaps cyclically. Al-Mu'tasim (the name of that eighth Abbasid caliph who was victorious in eight battles, fathered eight sons and eight daughters, left eight thousand slaves, and ruled for a period of eight years, eight moons, and eight days) means etymologically 'The Seeker after Help'. In the 1932 version, the fact that the object of the pilgrimage was himself a pilgrim justified well enough the difficulty of finding him. The later version gives way to the quaint theology I have just mentioned. In the twentieth chapter, words attributed by the Persian bookseller to al-Mu'tasim are, perhaps, the mere heightening of others spoken by the hero; this and other hidden analogies may stand for the identity of the Seeker with the Sought. They may also stand for an influence of Man on

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the Divinity. Another chapter hints that al-Mu'tasim is the Hindu the student believes he has killed. Mir Bahadur Ali, as we have seen, cannot refrain from the grossest temptation of art - that of being a genius.

On reading over these pages, I fear I have not called sufficient attention to the book's many virtues. They include a number of fine distinctions. For example, a conversation in chapter nineteen in which one of the speakers, who is a friend of al-Mu'tasim, avoids pointing out the other man's sophisms 'in order not to be obviously in the right'.

\*

It is considered admirable nowadays for a modern book to have its roots in an ancient one, since nobody (as Dr Johnson said) likes to owe anything to his contemporaries. The many but superficial contacts between Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *Odyssey* continue to receive - I shall never know why - the hare-brained admiration of critics. The points of contact between Bahadur's novel and the celebrated *Parliament of Birds* by Farid ud-Din Attar have awakened the no less mysterious approval of London and even of Allahabad and Calcutta. As far as I can judge, the points of contact between the two works are not many. Other sources are present. Some inquisitor has listed certain analogies between the novel's opening scene and Kipling's story 'On the City Wall'. Bahadur admits this but argues that it would be highly abnormal if two descriptions of the tenth night of Muharram were quite unlike each other. Eliot, more to the point, is reminded of the seventy cantos of the unfinished allegory *The Faerie Queene*, in which the heroine,

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Gloriana, does not appear even once - a fault previously noted by Richard William Church (*Spenser*, 1879). With due humility, I suggest a possible remote forerunner, the Jerusalem Cabbalist Isaac Luria, who in the sixteenth century advanced the notion that the soul of an ancestor or a teacher may, in order to comfort or instruct him, enter into the soul of someone who has suffered misfortune. *Ibbür* is the name given to this variety of metempsychosis.\*

[1935]

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\* In the course of this review, I have referred to the *Mantiq ut-Tair* (Parliament of Birds) by the Persian mystic Farid al-Din Abu Talib Mohammad ibn-Ibrahim Attar, who was killed by the soldiers of Tului, one of Genghis Khan's sons, during the sack of Nishapur. Perhaps it would be useful to summarize the poem. The distant king of birds, the Simurgh, drops one of his splendid feathers somewhere in the middle of China; on learning of this, the other birds, tired of their age-old anarchy, decide to seek him out. They know that the king's name means 'thirty birds'; they know that his castle lies in the Kaf, the range of mountains that rings the earth. Setting out on the almost endless adventure, they cross seven valleys or seas, the next to last bearing the name Bewilderment, the last, the name Annihilation. Many of the pilgrims desert; the journey takes its toll of the rest. Thirty, purified by suffering, reach the great peak of the Simurgh. At last they behold him; they realize that they are the Simurgh and that the Simurgh is each of them and all of them. (Plotinus [*Enneads*, V, 8, 4] also posits a divine extension of the principle of identity: 'All things in the intelligible heavens are in all places. Any one thing is all other things. The sun is all the stars, and each star is all the other stars and the sun.') The *Mantiq ut-Tair* has been translated into French by Garcin de Tassy; parts of it into English by Edward FitzGerald. For this footnote, I have consulted the tenth volume of Burton's *Arabian Nights* and Margaret Smith's study *The Persian Mystics: Attar* (1932).

# Pierre Menard, the Author of *Don Quixote*

*To Silvina Ocampo*

**T**he *visible* body of work left by the novelist Pierre Menard is easily and briefly listed. Inexcusable, therefore, are the omissions and additions perpetrated by Madame Henri Bachelier in a misleading checklist which a certain newspaper that makes no secret of its Protestant leanings has had the insensitivity to thrust upon its unfortunate readers - few and Calvinist though these be, when not Freemason or circumcised. Menard's true friends looked on this checklist with alarm and even a certain sadness. Only yesterday, in a manner of speaking, did we gather among the mournful cypresses at his final resting place, and already Error creeps in to blur his Memory. Unquestionably, some small rectification is in order.

It is all too easy, I realize, to challenge my meagre credentials. Nevertheless, I trust that I shall not be disallowed from citing the names of two eminent patrons. The Baroness of Bacourt (at whose unforgettable *vendredi* it was my privilege to come to know the late-lamented poet) has been kind enough to grant approval to the pages that follow. The Countess of Bagnoreggio, one of the most refined minds of the Principality of Monaco (now of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, following her recent marriage to the international philanthropist Simon Kautzsch, a man much vilified, alas, by the victims of his disinterested activities),

has sacrificed 'to truth and to the death' (her own words) the aristocratic reserve that so distinguishes her, and in an open letter published in the review *Luxe* she too grants me her approbation. These patents, I believe, should suffice.

I have said that Menard's *visible* work is readily listed. After careful examination of his private papers, I find that they contain the following items:

a) A Symbolist sonnet which appeared twice (the second time with variants) in the review *La Conque* (March and October, 1899).

b) A study of the feasibility of constructing a poetic vocabulary of concepts that are neither synonyms for nor circumlocutions of those that shape our everyday speech 'but ideal objects created by consensus and intended essentially for poetic needs' (Nîmes, 1901).

c) A study of 'certain connections or affinities' in the thinking of Descartes, Leibniz, and John Wilkins (Nîmes, 1903).

d) A study of Leibniz's *Characteristica Universalis* (Nîmes, 1904).

e) A technical article on the possibility of enriching the game of chess by removing one of the rook's pawns. Menard sets forth his case, elaborates, argues, and in the end rejects his own innovation.

f) A study of Ramon Lull's *Ars Magna Generalis* (Nîmes, 1906).

g) A translation, with a foreword and notes, of *The Book of the Free Invention and Art of the Game of Chess* by Ruy López de Segura (Paris, 1907).

h) The draft pages of a monograph on George Boole's symbolic logic.

i) An examination of the basic metrical laws of French prose, illustrated with examples from Saint-Simon (*Revue des langues romanes*, Montpellier, October, 1909).

j) A reply to Luc Durtain (who had denied the existence of such laws), illustrated with examples from Luc Durtain (*Revue des langues romanes*, Montpellier, December, 1909).

k) A manuscript translation of Quevedo's *Aguja de navegar cultos*, entitled *La boussole des précieux*.

l) A foreword to the catalogue of an exhibition of lithographs by Carolus Hourcade (Nîmes, 1914).

m) *Problems with a Problem* (Paris, 1917), a book discussing in chronological order the solutions to the well-known paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. To date, two editions of this book have appeared; the second bears in an epigraph Leibniz's advice, 'Have not the slightest fear, Mr Tortoise', and amends the chapters on Russell and Descartes.

n) A dogged analysis of Toulet's 'syntactic usage' (*Nouvelle Revue Française*, March, 1921). Menard, I recall, held that censure and praise are sentimental activities which have little or nothing to do with criticism.

o) A transposition into alexandrines of Paul Valéry's 'Cimetière marin' (*N.R.F.*, January, 1928).

p) An invective against Paul Valéry in Jacques Reboul's *Pages Towards the Suppression of Reality*. (This denunciation, if I may digress, is the exact reverse of his true opinion of Valéry. Valéry knew this, and the old friendship between the two men was not imperilled.)

q) A 'definition' of the Countess of Bagnoreggio, included in the 'triumphant tome' - the words of another contributor, Gabriele D'Annunzio - published annually by this lady for the purpose of correcting the inevitable

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falsehoods of the gutter press and of presenting 'to the world and to Italy' a true portrait of her person, so often exposed (by reason of her beauty and conduct) to over-hasty misinterpretation.

r) An admirable crown of sonnets for the Baroness of Bacourt (1934).

s) A handwritten list of verses whose effect derives from their punctuation.\*

The above, then, is a summary in chronological order (omitting only a few woolly occasional sonnets inscribed in Madame Henri Bachelier's hospitable, or greedy, album) of Menard's *visible* work. I shall now move on to his other work - the underground, the infinitely heroic, the singular, and (oh, the scope of the man!) the unfinished. This oeuvre, possibly the most significant of our time, consists of chapters nine and thirty-eight of the first part of *Don Quixote* and of a fragment of chapter twenty-two. I am aware that my claim will seem an absurdity, but to vindicate this 'absurdity' is the principle object of the present essay.\*\*

Two texts of differing value inspired Menard's undertaking. One was that philological fragment (number 2005 in the Dresden edition) in which Novalis outlines the notion of *total* identification with a particular author. The other was one of those derivative books that place Christ

\* Madame Henri Bachelier also lists a literal translation of Quevedo's literal translation of St Francis of Sales's *Introduction à la vie dévote*. No trace of this work is to be found in Pierre Menard's library. The ascription must have arisen from something our friend said in jest, which the lady misunderstood.

\*\* I had a secondary purpose as well - to sketch a portrait of Pierre Menard. But dare I compete with the gilded pages that I am told the Baroness of Bacourt is preparing, or with Carolus Hourcade's delicate, precise pencil?



on a boulevard, Hamlet in the Cannebière, or don Quixote on Wall Street. Like any man of good taste, Menard loathed such pointless masquerades, since all they were fit for, he said, was to amuse the man in the street with anachronisms or, worse still, to bewitch us with the infantile idea that every historical period is the same or is different. What seemed to Menard more interesting - albeit superficial and inconsistent in execution - was Daudet's famous attempt to combine in *one* character, Tartarin, both the Ingenious Knight and his squire. Anyone who suggests that Menard dedicated his life to writing a modern-day *Don Quixote* defiles Menard's living memory.

Pierre Menard was not out to write another *Don Quixote* - which would have been easy - but *Don Quixote itself*. Needless to add, he never envisaged a mindless transcription of the original; it was not his intention to copy it. His ambition, an admirable one, was to produce a handful of pages that matched word for word and line for line those of Miguel de Cervantes.

'Only my aim is astonishing,' he wrote to me from Bayonne on the thirtieth of September 1934. 'The final term, the conclusion, of a theological or metaphysical proof - about, say, the objective world, God, causation, platonic forms - is just as foregone and familiar as my well-known novel. The one difference is that the philosopher gives us in pretty volumes the intermediary stages of his work, while I have chosen to destroy mine.' In fact, not a single draft page remains to bear witness to Menard's many years of toil.

The first method he devised was relatively simple. To learn Spanish well, to return to the Catholic faith, to fight

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the Moor and Turk, to forget European history from 1602 to 1918, to be Miguel de Cervantes. This was the course Pierre Menard embarked upon (I know he gained a fair command of seventeenth-century Spanish), but he rejected the method as too easy. Too impossible, rather! the reader will say. Granted, but the scheme was impossible from the start, and of all the impossible ways of achieving his aim this was the least interesting. To be in the twentieth century a popular novelist of the seventeenth century seemed to him a belittlement. To be, however possible, Cervantes and to come to *Don Quixote* seemed less exacting - therefore less interesting - than to stay Pierre Menard and come to *Don Quixote* through the experience of Pierre Menard. (This conviction, let me add, made him leave out the autobiographical prologue to the second part of *Don Quixote*. To have retained this prologue would have been to create another character - Cervantes - and would also have meant presenting *Don Quixote* through this character and not through Menard. Naturally, Menard denied himself this easy way out.) 'In essence, my scheme is not difficult,' I read in another part of his letter. 'To carry it through all I need is to be immortal.' Should I confess that I often find myself thinking that he finished the book and that I read *Don Quixote* - all of *Don Quixote* - as if it had been Menard's brainchild? A few nights ago, leafing through chapter twenty-six, which he never tried his hand at, I recognized our friend's style and voice in this fine phrase: 'the nymphs of the streams, the damp and doleful Echo....' This effective coupling of a moral and a physical adjective brought back to me a line of Shakespeare's that Menard and I talked about one evening:

Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk . . .

But why *Don Quixote*? our reader will ask. For a Spaniard such a choice would have been understandable; not, however, for a Symbolist poet from Nîmes, an ardent follower of Poe, who begat Baudelaire, who begat Valéry, who begat Edmond Teste. The letter quoted above sheds light on the point. '*Don Quixote*', explains Menard, 'interests me deeply but does not seem to me - how can I put it? - inevitable. While I find it hard to imagine a world without Edgar Allan Poe's interjection,

Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted!

or without the "Bateau ivre" or the "Ancient Mariner", I am quite able to imagine it without *Don Quixote*. (Of course, I am talking about my own ability and not about the historical resonance of these works.) *Don Quixote* is an incidental book; *Don Quixote* is not necessary. I can therefore plan the writing of it - I can write it - without the risk of tautology. I read it from cover to cover when I was about twelve or thirteen. Since then, I have carefully reread certain chapters - those that for the moment I shall not try my hand at. I have also delved into Cervantes's one-act farces, his comedies, *Galatea*, the exemplary novels, the all-too laboured *Travails of Persiles and Segismunda*, and the *Voyage to Parnassus*. My overall recollection of *Don Quixote*, simplified by forgetfulness and lack of interest, is much like the hazy outline of a book one has before writing it. Given this outline (which can hardly be denied me), it goes without saying that my problem is somewhat more difficult than the one Cervantes

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faced. My obliging forerunner, far from eschewing the collaboration of chance, went about writing his immortal work in something of a devil-may-care spirit, carried along by the inertial force of language and invention. I have taken upon myself the mysterious duty of reconstructing his spontaneous novel word for word. My solitary game is governed by two contradictory rules. The first allows me to try out variations of a formal or psychological nature; the second makes me sacrifice these variations to the "original" text while finding solid reasons for doing so. To these assumed obstacles we must add another - an inbuilt one. To compose *Don Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century was reasonable, necessary, and perhaps even predestined; at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, it is well-nigh impossible. Three centuries, packed with complex events, have not passed without effect. One of these events was *Don Quixote* itself.'

In spite of this trio of obstacles, Menard's fragmentary *Don Quixote* is subtler than that of Cervantes. Cervantes sets up a crude contrast between the fantasy of the chivalric tale and the tawdry reality of the rural Spain he knew, whereas Menard chooses as his reality the land of Carmen during the century of Lepanto and Lope de Vega. What picturesque touches would this not have suggested to a Maurice Barrès or a Dr Rodríguez Larreta! Menard, with complete unselfconsciousness, avoids the least hint of exoticism. We find in his work no gypsydom, no conquistadores, no mystics, no Philip II, no burnings at the stake. He does away with local colour. This disdain hints at a new treatment of the historical novel. This disdain is an outright condemnation of *Salammbô*.

If we examine isolated chapters we are equally astonished. Let us, for example, look into chapter thirty-eight of part one, 'in which don Quixote gives a strange discourse on arms and letters.' We all know that don Quixote (like Quevedo in an analogous later passage from his *Hora de todos*) finds for arms over letters. Cervantes was an old soldier; his finding is understandable. But that the don Quixote of Pierre Menard, a contemporary of *La trahison des clercs* and of Bertrand Russell, should relapse into such fuzzy sophistry! Madame Bachelier sees this as the author subordinating himself in an admirable and characteristic way to the mentality of his hero; others, showing not the slightest perceptiveness, see only a *transcription of Don Quixote*; the Baroness of Bacourt sees the influence of Nietzsche. To this third view (which I consider beyond dispute) I wonder if I dare add a fourth, which accords quite well with Pierre Menard's all but divine modesty - his self-effacing or ironic habit of propagating ideas that were the exact reverse of those he himself held. (Let us once more remember his diatribe against Paul Valéry in Jacques Reboul's short-lived super-realist pages.) Cervantes's text and Menard's are identical as to their words, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More ambiguous, his detractors will claim, but the ambiguity is itself a richness.)

It is a revelation to compare Menard's *Don Quixote* with Cervantes's. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time,  
storehouse of great deeds, witness to the past, example  
and admonition to the present, warning to the future.

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Written in the seventeenth century, written by the 'lay genius' Cervantes, this catalogue is no more than a rhetorical eulogy to history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time,  
storehouse of great deeds, witness to the past, example  
and admonition to the present, warning to the future.

History, the 'mother' of truth; the idea is breathtaking. Menard, the contemporary of William James, does not define history as an enquiry into reality but as its source. To him historic truth is not what actually took place, it is what we think took place. The last two phrases - 'example and admonition to the present, warning to the future' - are shamelessly pragmatic.

As vivid is the contrast in styles. Menard's, deliberately archaic - he was a foreigner, after all - is prone to certain affectations. Not so the style of his forerunner, who uses the everyday Spanish of his time with ease.

There is no intellectual exercise which in the end is not pointless. A philosophical tenet is at the outset a true description of the world; with the passage of time it becomes no more than a chapter - perhaps only a paragraph or a name - in the history of philosophy. In literature this eventual withering away is even plainer. *Don Quixote*, Menard once told me, was first and foremost an entertaining book; now it has become a pretext for patriotic toasts, grammatical arrogance, and obscene de luxe editions. Fame is a form of incomprehension - perhaps the worst.

There is nothing new in such nihilistic conclusions; what is unusual is the resolve that Pierre Menard derived

from them. Determined to rise above the emptiness that awaits all man's endeavours, he embarked upon a task that was extremely complex and, even before it began, futile. He devoted his utmost care and attention to reproducing, in a language not his own, a book that already existed. He wrote draft after draft, revising assiduously and tearing up thousands of manuscript pages.\* He never let anyone see them and took pains to ensure they did not survive him. I have tried without success to reconstruct them.

It seems to me that the 'final' *Don Quixote* can be looked on as a kind of palimpsest in which traces - faint but still decipherable - of our friend's 'earlier' writing must surely shine through. Unfortunately, only a second Pierre Menard, working his way back over the pages of the first one, would be capable of digging up and restoring to life those lost Troys.

'To think, to analyse, to invent,' Menard also wrote to me, 'far from being exceptional acts are the way the intelligence breathes. To glorify one particular instance of this action, to store as treasure the ancient thoughts of others, to recollect in amazed disbelief what the *doctor universalis* thought is to admit to our own indolence and crudeness. Every man should be capable of all ideas, and I believe that in the future he will.'

Through a new technique, using deliberate anachronisms and false attributions, Menard (perhaps without trying to) has enriched the static, fledgling art of reading.

\* I remember his notebooks with their square-ruled pages, the heavy black deletions, the personal system of symbols he used for marginal emendations, and his minute handwriting. He liked to stroll through the outskirts of Nîmes at sunset, often taking along a notebook with which he would make a cheerful bonfire.

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Infinite in its possibilities, this technique prompts us to reread the *Odyssey* as if it came after the *Aeneid* and Madame Henri Bachelier's book *The Centaur's Garden* as if it were written by Madame Henri Bachelier. The technique fills the mildest of books with adventure. To attribute *The Imitation of Christ* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce - would this not be a satisfactory renewal of its subtle spiritual lessons?

*Nîmes, 1939*



# Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius

## I

I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the concurrence of a mirror and an encyclopaedia. The mirror unsettled the far end of a corridor in a villa in Gaona Street, in the Buenos Aires suburb of Ramos Mejía; the encyclopaedia, fraudulently entitled *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* (New York, 1917), is an exact, if belated, reprint of the 1902 edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. All this took place four or five years ago. Bioy Casares had dined with me that evening and we'd lingered over a discussion on the mechanics of writing a novel in the first person, in which the narrator omitted or distorted events, thereby creating discrepancies that would allow a handful of readers - a tiny handful - to come to an appalling or banal realization.

From along the corridor the mirror spied on us. We found out (inevitably at such an hour) that there is something unnatural about mirrors. Then Bioy recalled that one of Uqbar's heresiarchs had said that mirrors and copulation are abominable because they multiply the number of men. When I asked him the source of this pithy dictum, he told me it appeared in the article on Uqbar in *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. The villa, which we were renting furnished, had a copy of the work. Towards the end of Volume XLVI we found an entry on Uppsala and at the beginning of Volume XLVII one on Ural-Altai languages, but nowhere was there a mention of Uqbar. Somewhat bewildered, Bioy scoured the index. He tried all conceivable spellings - Ukbar, Uchar, Ooqbar, Ookbar, Oukbahr, and

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so forth. Before he left that night, he told me that Uqbar was a region of Iraq or Asia Minor. I took his word for it, but, I must confess, with misgivings. I suspected that, in his modesty, Bioy had invented the unrecorded country and the nameless heresiarch to give weight to his statement. A fruitless search through one of Justus Perthes's atlases only confirmed my suspicion.

The next day, Bioy phoned me from Buenos Aires. He said he had before him the entry on Uqbar, in Volume XLVI of the encyclopaedia. The article did not name the heresiarch but did cite his tenet, setting it out in words almost identical to Bioy's, although perhaps less literary. Bioy had remembered the quotation as, 'Copulation and mirrors are abominable.' The text of the encyclopædia ran, 'To one of these Gnostics, the visible world was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they reproduce and multiply the planet.' I said that I should by all means like to see the article. A day or two later Bioy brought it round. This surprised me, for the detailed gazeteer to Ritter's *Erdkunde* was utterly innocent of the name Uqbar.

Bioy's book was indeed Volume XLVI of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. On its spine and half-title page the index key, Tor-Ups, was the same as on our copy, but instead of 917 pages his volume had 921. The four additional pages contained the entry on Uqbar - not shown (as the reader will have noted) by the alphabetic indication. We then verified that there was no other difference between the two volumes. Both, as I believe I have said, were reprints of the tenth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Bioy had acquired his copy at some auction sale or other.

We read the article with considerable care. The passage Bioy remembered was perhaps the only extraordinary one. The rest seemed quite plausible, and, fitting in with the general tone of the work, was - as might be expected - a bit boring. Re-reading the entry, we found beneath its painstaking style an intrinsic vagueness. Of the fourteen place names that appeared in the geographical section, we recognized only three - Khorasan, Armenia, and Erzurum - all worked into the text in a suspect way. Of the historical names, only one was familiar - the impostor Smerdis the Magus - and he was cited rather more as a metaphor. The article purported to set out the boundaries of Uqbar, but the hazy points of reference were the region's own rivers, craters, and mountain ranges. We read, for instance, that the Tsai Khaldun lowlands and the delta of the Axa mark the southern border and that wild horses breed on islands in the delta. All this came at the beginning of page 918. In the historical section, on page 920, we found out that as a result of religious persecution during the thirteenth century orthodox believers sought refuge on the islands, where their obelisks still stand and where their stone mirrors are not infrequently unearthed. The section on language and literature was short. One feature stood out: Uqbar's literature was of a fantastic nature, while its epic poetry and its myths never dealt with the real world but only with two imaginary regions, Mlejnas and Tlön. The bibliography listed four titles, which so far Bioy and I have been unable to trace, although the third - Silas Haslam's *History of the Land Called Uqbar* (1874) - appears in a Bernard Quaritch catalogue.\* The first, *Lesbare und lesenswerthe Bemerkungen*

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\* Haslam has also published *A General History of Labyrinths*.

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*über das Land Ukkbar in Klein-Asien*, dated 1641, was written by Johann Valentin Andreä. This fact is worth pointing out, for a year or two later I came across his name again in the unexpected pages of De Quincey (*Writings*, Volume XIII) and found that Andreä was a German theologian who, in the early seventeenth century, described an imaginary community of Rosicrucians, which others later founded in imitation of the one foreshadowed by him.

That night Bioy and I paid a visit to the National Library. In vain we exhausted atlases, catalogues, yearbooks of geographical societies, accounts by travellers and historians. No one had ever been to Uqbar, nor did the name appear in the general index of Bioy's encyclopaedia. The next day, Carlos Mastronardi, to whom I had spoken of the matter, noticed in a bookshop at the corner of Corrientes and Talcahuano the black-and-gold spines of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. He went in and asked to see Volume XLVI. Naturally, he did not find in it the slightest mention of Uqbar.

## II

**A** dim and dwindling memory of Herbert Ashe, an engineer on the Southern Railways, lingers amid the overpowering jasmine and in the illusory depths of the mirrors in the Hotel Adrogué. In his lifetime, Ashe - like so many Englishmen - seemed not altogether real; in death, he is not even the ghost he was then. A tall, phlegmatic man, whose tired, square-cut beard had once been red, he was, I believe, a childless widower. Every few years he went back to England to visit - judging from the

snapshots he showed us - a sundial and some oak trees. With him, my father had cemented (the verb is extreme) one of those English friendships that begin by eschewing confidences and very soon dispense with conversation. The two men used to engage in an exchange of books and magazines and, with scarcely a word, would duel at chess.

I remember Ashe in the hotel corridor, holding a book on mathematics and from time to time gazing at the irretrievable colours of the sky. One evening, we discussed the duodecimal system, in which the number twelve is equivalent to ten. Ashe said that he was just then transposing duodecimal into sexagesimal tables, in which sixty is equivalent to ten. He added that while in Rio Grande do Sul he had been commissioned to do this work by a Norwegian. My father and I had known Ashe for eight years, but he had never before mentioned having been in that place. We talked about cattle breeding and ranch foremen, about the Brazilian root of the word 'gaucho', which certain elderly Uruguayans still pronounce *gaúcho*, and he said nothing further - thank God - about duodecimal functions.

In September, 1937 (we were not then at the hotel), Herbert Ashe died of a ruptured aneurysm. A few days earlier, he had received a sealed, registered package from Brazil. It was a book in royal octavo. Ashe left it in the bar, where, months later, I found it. Leafing through the volume, I felt a strange lightheadedness that I shall not enlarge on, for this is not the story of my feelings but of Uqbar, Tlön, and Orbis Tertius. On a particular Islamic night called the Night of Nights, the secret gates of heaven are thrown open and the water in jugs tastes much sweeter. Had these gates opened just then, I would not have felt what

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I felt that evening. The book, which was written in English, contained 1,001 pages. On its yellow leather spine I read the following strange words, which also appeared on the half-title page: *A First Encyclopædia of Tlön. Volume XI. Hlaer to Jangr*. No date or place of publication was given. On the opening page and on a sheet of tissue paper that guarded one of the coloured plates, a printed blue oval bore the words *Orbis Tertius*. Two years before, in a volume of a certain pirated encyclopaedia, I had come across a cursory description of a bogus country; now chance was offering me something more precious and more demanding. What I held in my hands was an enormous, systematically presented fragment of the complete history of an unknown planet, embracing its architecture and its playing cards, its terrifying mythologies and the sound of its languages, its emperors and its seas, its minerals, birds, and fishes, its algebra and fire, its theological and metaphysical controversies - all coherently set out, without any apparent dogmatic viewpoint or hint of parody.

In the Volume XI just mentioned are references to both prior and subsequent volumes. Néstor Ibarra, in a now classic article in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, denies that such accompanying tomes exist; Ezequiel Martínez Estrada and Drieu La Rochelle have - perhaps successfully - refuted Ibarra's doubts. The fact is that until today the most diligent searches have proved fruitless. To no avail, we have ransacked the libraries of both Americas and of Europe. Alfonso Reyes, weary of this laborious and petty sleuthing, suggests that all of us should together undertake to reconstruct *ex ungue leonem* the several missing bulky volumes. He calculates, not entirely in jest, that one generation of

Tlön specialists should be enough. This figure out of a hat takes us back to the basic problem of who the people were who invented Tlön. The plural is unavoidable, for the idea of a single inventor - an eternal Leibniz labouring away in darkness and humility - has been unanimously rejected. One speculation is that this 'brave new world' is the work of a secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebraists, moralists, painters, and geometricians - all led by an obscure genius. There are plenty of men outstanding in these various disciplines but none who is capable of such sublime invention, much less of subordinating his creativity to a minutely detailed plan. The plan is so vast that each writer's contribution would have been infinitesimal. At first, it was thought that Tlön was nothing but a chaos, an irresponsible excess of the imagination; it is now known that Tlön is a harmonious universe and that the secret laws governing it were in fact framed, albeit in a makeshift way. I need only point out that the logic displayed in Volume XI is so lucid and perfect that the tome's apparent contradictions are the very crux of the proof that other volumes exist. Popular magazines, with pardonable extravagance, have spread the news of Tlön's zoology and geography. In my opinion, however, the planet's transparent tigers and towers of blood are perhaps not worthy of the perpetual attention of all mankind. May I be permitted a few moments to explain Tlön's view of the world.

Hume noted for all time that Berkeley's arguments neither allowed for the least rebuttal nor produced the slightest conviction. Applied to our earth, such a finding is completely true; in the case of Tlön, it is completely false.

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The nations of that planet are congenitally idealist. Its language and those things derived from language - religion, literature, metaphysics - are predicated on idealism. To the inhabitants of Tlön, the world is not an assemblage of objects in space but a diverse series of separate acts. The world is sequential, rooted in time rather than space. In Tlön's putative *Ursprache*, from which its 'modern' languages and dialects stem, there are no nouns but only impersonal verbs, modified by monosyllabic suffixes or prefixes that function as adverbs. For example, there is nothing equivalent to our word 'moon', but there is a verb that for us would be 'to moonrise' or 'to moon'. 'The moon rose over the river' would be 'Hlör u fang axaxas mlö' or, literally, 'Upward behind the lasting-flow it moonrose'. (Xul Solar translates this more succinctly as 'Upward, behind the onstreaming, it mooned'.)

The above applies to the languages of Tlön's southern hemisphere. In northern hemisphere languages, about whose *Ursprache* Volume XI gives little information, the basic unit is not the verb but the monosyllabic adjective. Nouns are formed by an accumulation of adjectives. One does not say 'moon' but rather 'air-bright on round-dark' or 'pale-gold of-the-sky' or other combinations. In this particular example, the mass of adjectives denotes an actual object; the fact is pure chance. The literature of this hemisphere - as with the real world of Meinong - abounds in ideal objects, joined together or separated at will, according to poetic necessity. Sometimes, mere simultaneity dictates what these objects are. They can be made up of two terms, one visual and the other aural - the colour of the sunrise and the distant cry of a bird. Others are made up of



several terms - the sun and the water against a swimmer's breast; the flickering pink blur you see when your eyes are closed; the feeling of letting yourself drift down a river or into sleep. These second-degree objects can be combined with others, a process which - with the aid of certain contractions - becomes virtually endless. There are famous poems that consist of one enormous word. Such a word is a 'poetic object' created by the author. Paradoxically, the fact that nobody believes nouns to be real objects makes their number countless. The languages of Tlön's northern hemisphere boast all the nouns of Indo-European languages and many others as well.

It is no exaggeration to say that Tlön's classical culture comprises a single discipline - psychology. All other disciplines are held to be inferior to this one. I have mentioned that the men of this planet conceive the universe as a series of mental processes that unfold not in space but serially in time. Spinoza attributes to his inexhaustible deity the faculties of omnipresence and of thought; nobody in Tlön would understand the juxtaposition of the former, which is characteristic only of certain states of being, with the latter, which is a perfect synonym for the cosmos. In other words, they cannot conceive that space can exist in time. The sight of a puff of smoke on the horizon and then of a burning field and then of a half-stubbed-out cigar that produced the blaze is deemed an example of the association of ideas.

This monism, or total idealism, invalidates science. To explain or assess a fact is to link it to another. In Tlön, this linkage is a later state of the fact, which cannot affect or illuminate its earlier state. Every mental state is irreducible and the mere fact of naming it - that is, of classifying

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it - implies a falsification. From this it could be inferred that there are no sciences on Tlön - or even reasoning. The paradoxical truth is that there are, and in almost numberless number. The same happens with philosophies as happens in the northern hemisphere with nouns. The fact that every philosophy is first of all a dialectic game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has contributed to their proliferation. Improbable systems abound on Tlön, but they are all pleasing in structure or else of a sensational type. The planet's metaphysicians seek neither truth nor the appearance of truth; rather, they seek to astonish. Metaphysics they deem to be a branch of imaginative literature. They know that any system is but the subordination of all aspects of the world to one in particular. Even the words 'all aspects' are inapt, since they infer the impossible addition of time present and all time past. Nor is the plural, 'times past', legitimate, in that it infers another impossible process. One of Tlön's schools manages to refute time, reasoning that the present is indeterminate, that the future has no reality except as present hope, and that the past has no reality except as present memory.\* Another school claims that *all time* has already passed and that our lives are barely the memory or dim reflection, doubtless falsified and distorted, of an irrecoverable process. Another, that the history of the world - and in it our lives and every least detail of our lives - is the scripture produced by a lesser god to communicate with a demon. Another, that the world is comparable to those codes in which some symbols have no meaning and the only truth

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\* Bertrand Russell (*The Analysis of Mind*, 1921, p. 159) hypothesizes that the world was created a few minutes ago, together with a population that 'remembers' an unreal past.

is what takes place every three hundred nights. Yet another, that while we are asleep here we are awake somewhere else and that consequently each man is two men.

Among the doctrines of Tlön, none is so deserving of opprobrium as that of materialism. Certain thinkers have presented this particular belief with more enthusiasm than clarity, as if they were advancing a paradox. To aid understanding of the preposterous thesis, an eleventh-century\* heresiarch dreamed up the sophism of the nine copper coins, whose notoriety on Tlön vies with that of the Eleatic aporias among us. There are many versions of the heresiarch's specious reasoning, each of which varies the number of coins and the number of finds. The following is the best known:

On Tuesday, X crosses a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds in the road four coins that are slightly tarnished by Wednesday's rain. On Friday, Z discovers three coins in the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the passageway of his house.

The heresiarch tried to deduce from this story the truth – that is, the continuity - of the nine recovered coins. 'It is absurd', he claimed, 'to imagine that four of the coins did not exist between the Tuesday and the Thursday, three between the Tuesday and the Friday afternoon, two between the Tuesday and early on the Friday. It is logical to assume that the coins existed - if only in some secret way

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\* A century, in terms of the duodecimal system, is equivalent to a period of a hundred and forty-four years.

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whose understanding is hidden from men - during each moment of these three periods of time.'

Since this paradox could not be expressed in the language of Tlön, most people did not understand it. Upholders of common sense at first limited themselves to denying the truth of the anecdote. They insisted it was a verbal fallacy, based on a rash application of two neologisms unauthorized by usage and contrary to all rigorous thought. The verbs 'find' and 'lose' begged the question, for they presupposed the existence of the nine original coins and all the later ones. These upholders recalled that every noun (man, coin, Thursday, Wednesday, rain) has only metaphorical value. They branded as insidious the circumstantial detail that the coins were 'slightly tarnished by Wednesday's rain', since this presupposed what was yet to be proved - the continuous existence of the four coins between the Thursday and the Tuesday. Explaining that 'equivalence' is one thing and 'existence' another, they formulated a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, or a hypothetical case of nine men who on nine successive nights suffer acute pain. Would it not be ridiculous, they asked, to pretend that this pain was one and the same.\* They said that the heresiarch was moved only by the blasphemous aim of attributing the divine quality of *being* to a few mere coins and that sometimes he denied plurality and sometimes not. They argued that if equivalence allowed for existence, by the same token it would have to be admitted that the nine coins were a single coin.

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\* At present, one of Tlön's churches takes the platonic view that a given pain, a given greenish shade of yellow, a given temperature, a given sound, are the only reality. All men, in the dizzying moment of coitus, are the same man. All men who recite a line of Shakespeare *are* William Shakespeare.

Strange to say, these refutations were not the end of the story. A hundred years after the problem was first posed, one thinker, no less brilliant than the heresiarch but of orthodox persuasion, came up with a bold hypothesis. His felicitous theory affirmed that there is but one person, that this indivisible person is each being in the world and that these beings are the organs and the masks of the godhead. X is Y and is Z. Z discovers three coins, because he remembers that X lost them; X finds two in the passageway, because he remembers that the rest have been recovered. Volume XI of the Tlön encyclopaedia gives us to understand that there were three main reasons why this idealist pantheism triumphed. One, solipsism was repudiated; two, the psychological basis of the sciences was preserved; three, the worship of the gods could continue. Schopenhauer - passionate, lucid Schopenhauer - comes up with a similar idea in the first volume of his *Parerga und Paralipomena*.

Tlön's geometry is made up of two somewhat different disciplines - one visual, the other tactile. The latter, which is equivalent to our geometry, is held to be subordinate to the former. The basis of visual geometry is the surface, not the point. This geometry has no idea of parallel lines and holds that a moving man modifies the forms that surround him. The basis of Tlön's arithmetic is the notion of indefinite numbers. Emphasis is placed on the importance of the concepts of greater and lesser, for which our mathematicians use the symbols  $>$  and  $<$ . On Tlön, it is affirmed that the act of counting modifies quantities and changes them from indefinite to definite. The fact that several individuals, counting the same quantity, reach the same result is to

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a psychologist an example either of the association of ideas or of a well- functioning memory. We now know that on Tlön the subject of knowledge is one and eternal.

In literary usage too the idea of a single subject is all-powerful. Authorship is seldom credited, and the notion of plagiarism does not exist. It has been established that all works are the work of a single author, who is both timeless and anonymous. Authors are usually invented by the critics. They choose two dissimilar works - the Tao Te Ching and the Arabian Nights, let us say - attribute them to the same writer, and then with probity construct the psychology of their remarkable man of letters.

The books are different too. Fictional works embrace a single plot, with all conceivable permutations. Works of a philosophical nature invariably contain both a thesis and an antithesis, the strict pros and cons of a theory. A book that does not encompass its counter-book is considered incomplete.

Centuries and centuries of idealism have continued to influence reality. In the oldest parts of Tlön, lost objects are frequently duplicated. Two people look for a pencil; the first finds it but says nothing; the second finds another pencil, just as real but closer to his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hrönir* and, while they look unattractive, they are slightly longer. Until recently *hrönir* were the chance offspring of inattention and forgetfulness. It's hard to believe that they have been deliberately fabricated for fewer than a hundred years, but so Volume XI tells us. The earliest efforts were unsuccessful. The process, nonetheless, deserves to be recorded. The governor of one of the state prisons informed the inmates that in the ancient

bed of a river there were a number of burial sites, and he promised freedom to anyone who made an important find. During the months preceding the excavation, the convicts were shown photographs of what they were likely to discover. The first attempt proved that hope and greed can be a hindrance; the only *hrön* unearthed by a week's work with pick and shovel was a rusty wheel of later date than the start of the excavation. This was kept secret, and shortly afterwards the experiment was repeated in four schools. Three managed to find next to nothing; in the fourth, whose head died in an accident at the outset, the pupils dug up - or produced - a gold mask, an archaic sword, two or three clay amphorae, and the greenish, legless trunk of a king whose breast bore an inscription that has never been deciphered. The unreliability of witnesses who know the experimental nature of a search was thus proven. Group excavations come up with contradictory objects; nowadays individual, virtually impromptu, labour is preferred. The systematic manufacture of *hrönir*, according to Volume XI, has given great scope to archeologists, allowing them to question and even change the past, which is now as pliant and manageable as the future. Curiously, *hrönir* of the second and third degree - *hrönir* derived from another *hrön*, *hrönir* derived from the *hrön* of a *hrön* - magnify the flaws of those of the first degree; fifth-degree *hrönir* are almost identical; those of the ninth can be confused with those of the second; those of the eleventh show a purity of line that the originals do not possess. The progression is regular, and a twelfth-degree *hrön* is already in a state of deterioration. Often stranger and purer than a *hrön* is the *ur*, a thing produced by suggestion, an object elicited by hope. The

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great gold mask that I have mentioned is a famous example.

Things are duplicated on Tlön; also, as people forget them, objects tend to fade and lose detail. A classic example is that of the doorstep that lasted as long as a certain beggar huddled there but was lost from sight upon his death. On occasion, a few birds or a horse have saved the ruins of an amphitheatre.

*Salto Oriental, 1940*

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*Postscript, 1947* - I have copied the above article just as it appeared in the *Anthology of Imaginative Literature* (1940), leaving out but a handful of metaphors and a kind of mock summary that now seems frivolous. So many things have taken place since then; I shall list them briefly.

In March, 1941, a handwritten letter from Gunnar Erfjord was found in a book by Hinton that had belonged to Herbert Ashe. The envelope was postmarked Ouro Preto; the letter illuminated the whole mystery of Tlön. Its contents supported Martínez Estrada's theory. The remarkable story began one night in Lucerne or London back at the beginning of the seventeenth century. A secret benevolent society (among whose members were Dalgarno and, later, George Berkeley) was formed with the object of inventing a country. The vaguely outlined initial programme featured 'hermetic studies', philanthropy, and the cabala. Andrea's strange book dates from this early period. After some years of secret meetings



and an overhasty amalgamation of ideas, they saw that one generation was not enough to delineate a new country. They resolved that each of the masters who made up the society should choose a disciple to carry on his work. This hereditary arrangement became the custom.

After a hiatus of two centuries, the persecuted brotherhood was reborn in America. In about 1824, in Memphis, Tennessee, one of the members spoke to the millionaire ascetic Ezra Buckley. Disdainfully, Buckley heard the man out, then laughed at the modest scope of the project. In America it was absurd to invent a country, he said, and he suggested they invent a whole planet. To this gigantic idea he added another, the child of his nihilism\* - that of keeping the enormous undertaking secret. At that time, the *Encyclopædia Britannica* was in print in all its twenty volumes; Buckley proposed a similar encyclopaedia of the imaginary planet. He would bequeath the society his gold-bearing mountain ranges, his navigable rivers, his plains trodden by the steer and the buffalo, his slaves, his brothels, and his dollars - all on one condition: that 'The work will make no pact with the impostor Jesus Christ.' Buckley did not believe in God, but he wanted to prove to the non-existent God that mortal men were capable of conceiving a world. Buckley was poisoned in Baton Rouge, in 1828; in 1914, the society sent its collaborators, who numbered three hundred, the final volume of the First Encyclopedia of Tlön. The publication was private; its forty volumes (the vastest work ever undertaken by men) would be the basis of another edition, more detailed and compiled not in English but in one or other of Tlön's languages.

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\* Buckley was a freethinker, a fatalist, and a defender of slavery.

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This emended description of an imaginary world was provisionally called *Orbis Tertius*, and one of its modest lesser gods was Herbert Ashe, whether as an agent of Gunnar Erfjord or as a member of the society I do not know. That he received a copy of Volume XI of the work would seem to suggest the latter.

But what of the other volumes? From about 1942, events followed each other thick and fast. I remember one of the first of these with singular clarity, and I believe I felt something of its premonitory nature. The incident took place in a flat in Laprida Street, over the way from a high bright balcony that faced the setting sun. The Princess de Faucigny Lucinge's silver dinner service had arrived from Poitiers. Out of the vast depths of a chest adorned with seals from all over the globe came a stream of fine ware - silver from Utrecht and Paris chased with heraldic fauna, a samovar. Among these items - with the barely perceptible flutter of a sleeping bird - a compass quivered mysteriously. The princess did not recognize it. The blue needle yearned for magnetic north; the metal case was concave; the letters on the compass rose came from one of the alphabets of Tlön.

This was the first intrusion of the imaginary world into the real world. A chance occurrence that still troubles me led to my also being a witness to the second. It took place some months later, in the Cuchilla Negra, in a country saloon belonging to a Brazilian. Enrique Amorim and I were on our way back from Sant'Anna. The river Tacuarembó had risen, forcing us to risk - and to survive - the place's primitive hospitality. In a big room cluttered with barrels and leather hides, the saloon-keeper supplied us with a couple of creaking cots. We lay down, but the drunkenness of an

unseen neighbour, who veered back and forth from incomprehensible insults to snatches of *milonga* - or, at least, to snatches of one particular *milonga* - did not allow us to sleep until dawn. As may be imagined, we attributed his persistent shouting to the proprietor's fiery rum. At daybreak, the man lay dead in the corridor. The roughness of his voice had fooled us - he was a youth. In his drunken state, a handful of coins had come loose from his wide leather belt, as had a cone of gleaming metal the size of a dice. A boy tried without success to pick up the cone. A man barely managed it. I held the object in the palm of my hand for a minute or so. I remember that it was intolerably heavy and that after I laid it aside its weightiness stayed with me. I also remember the perfect circle it left imprinted in my flesh. The evidence of a very small object that was at the same time very heavy left me with a disagreeable feeling of revulsion and fear. One of the locals suggested that we throw it into the fast-moving river; Amorim bought the cone for a few pesos. Nobody knew anything about the dead man except that 'he was from the Brazilian border'. In certain religions of Tlön, small and extremely heavy cones made of a metal that is not of this planet represent the godhead.

This concludes the personal part of my story. The rest exists in the memory - when not in the hopes and fears - of all my readers. I shall simply record the following events in a few words and let mankind's collective memory enrich or amplify them. In about 1944, a researcher working for *The American*, a Nashville newspaper, found buried in a Memphis library the forty volumes of the First Encyclopedia of Tlön. Even today it is a matter of dispute as to whether the discovery was accidental or whether the

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directors of the still nebulous *Orbis Tertius* arranged it. The latter is likely. Some of the less credible bits of Volume XI (for example, the proliferation of *hrönir*) have been eliminated or played down in the Memphis copies. It may reasonably be supposed that the suppressed material was part of a plan to introduce a world that was not overly incompatible with the real world. The distribution of objects from Tlön to different countries contributed to the plan.\* In the event, the international press kept the 'find' in the public eye. Handbooks, anthologies, digests, facsimiles, authorized and pirated reprintings of the Greatest Work of Man flooded and continue to flood the world. Almost at once, the real world gave way in more than one area. The truth is that it was longing to give way. Ten years ago, any symmetrical scheme with an appearance of order - dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism - was enough to hold mankind in thrall. Why not submit to Tlön, to the immense, meticulous evidence of an ordered planet? It is useless to reply that the real world too is ordered. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws - that is, non-human laws - that we shall never comprehend. Tlön may be a labyrinth, but a labyrinth contrived by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men.

Contact and familiarity with Tlön have brought about the deterioration of our world. Mesmerized by that planet's discipline, we forget - and go on forgetting - that theirs is the discipline of chess players, not of angels. Tlön's putative 'primitive language' has now found its way into our schools; the teaching of its harmonious history, so full of

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\* There remains, of course, the problem of the *materia* of certain objects.

stirring episodes, has obliterated the history that presided over my childhood; in our memories a fictitious past has now replaced our past, of which we know nothing for certain - not even that it is false. Numismatics, pharmacology, and archaeology have all been reformed. I understand that biology and mathematics too await their avatars. A far-flung dynasty of isolated individuals has changed the face of the earth. Their task goes on. If our forecasts are not mistaken, a hundred years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of the Second Encyclopedia of Tlön.

Then English, French, and mere Spanish will disappear from this planet. Our world will be Tlön. All this means nothing to me; here in the quiet of the Hotel Adrogué I spend my days polishing a tentative translation in Quevedo's style - which I do not propose to publish - of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urne-Buriall*.



## The Circular Ruins

And if he left off dreaming about you . . .

*Through the Looking-Glass, IV*

**N**obody saw him come ashore in the encompassing night, nobody saw the bamboo craft run aground in the sacred mud, but within a few days everyone knew that the quiet man had come from the south and that his home was among the numberless villages upstream on the steep slopes of the mountain, where the Zend language is barely tainted by Greek and where lepers are rare. The fact is that the grey man pressed his lips to the mud, scrambled up the bank without parting (perhaps without feeling) the razor-edged grasses that tore his flesh, and dragged himself, faint and bleeding, to the circular space watched over by a stone tiger, or horse, which was once the colour of fire and is now the colour of ash. This circle had been a temple which ages ago flames destroyed, which the swampy wilderness later desecrated, and whose god no longer receives the reverence of men. The stranger laid himself down at the foot of the image.

Wakened by the sun high overhead, he noticed - somehow without amazement - that his wounds had healed. He shut his pale eyes and slept again, not because of weariness but because he willed it. He knew that this temple was the place he needed for his unswerving purpose; he knew that downstream the encroaching trees had also failed to choke the ruins of another auspicious temple with its own fire-ravaged, dead gods; he knew that his first duty was to

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sleep. At about midnight, he was awakened by the forlorn call of a bird. Footprints, some figs, and a water jug told him that men who lived nearby had looked on his sleep with a kind of awe and either sought his protection or else were in dread of his witchcraft. He felt the chill of fear and searched the crumbling walls for a burial niche, where he covered himself with leaves he had never seen before.

His guiding purpose, though it was supernatural, was not impossible. He wanted to dream a man; he wanted to dream him down to the last detail and project him into the world of reality. This mystical aim had taxed the whole range of his mind. Had anyone asked him his own name or anything about his previous life, he would not have known what to answer. This forsaken, broken temple suited him because it held few visible things, and also because the neighbouring villagers would look after his frugal needs. The rice and fruit of their offerings were nourishment enough for his body, whose one task was to sleep and to dream.

At the outset, his dreams were chaotic; later on, they were of a dialectic nature. The stranger dreamed himself at the centre of a circular amphitheatre which in some way was also the burnt-out temple. Crowds of silent disciples exhausted the tiers of seats; the faces of the farthest of them hung centuries away from him and at the height of the stars, but their features were clear and exact. The man lectured on anatomy, cosmography, and witchcraft. The faces listened, bright and eager, and did their best to answer sensibly, as if they felt the importance of his questions, which would raise one of them out of an existence as a shadow and place him in the real world. Whether asleep or awake, the man pondered the answers of his phantoms



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and, not letting himself be misled by impostors, divined in certain of their quandaries a growing intelligence. He was in search of a soul worthy of taking a place in the world.

After nine or ten nights he realized, feeling bitter over it, that nothing could be expected from those pupils who passively accepted his teaching but that he might hold hopes for those who from time to time hazarded reasonable doubts about what he taught. The former, although they deserved love and affection, could never become real; the latter, in their dim way, were already real. One evening (now his evenings were also given over to sleeping, now he was only awake for an hour or two at dawn) he dismissed his vast dream-school for ever and kept a single disciple. He was a quiet, sallow, and at times rebellious young man with sharp features akin to those of his dreamer. The sudden disappearance of his fellow pupils did not disturb him for very long, and his progress, at the end of a few private lessons, amazed his teacher. Nonetheless, a catastrophe intervened. One day, the man emerged from his sleep as from a sticky wasteland, glanced up at the faint evening light, which at first he confused with the dawn, and realized that he had not been dreaming. All that night and the next day, the hideous clarity of insomnia weighed down on him. To tire himself out he tried to explore the surrounding forest, but all he managed, there in a tangle of hemlock, were some snatches of broken sleep, fleetingly tinged with visions of a crude and worthless nature. He tried to reassemble his school, and barely had he uttered a few brief words of counsel when the whole class went awry and vanished. In his almost endless wakefulness, tears of anger stung his old eyes.

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He realized that, though he might penetrate all the riddles of the higher and lower orders, the task of shaping the senseless and dizzying stuff of dreams is the hardest a man can attempt - much harder than weaving a rope of sand or coining the faceless wind. He realized that an initial failure was to be expected. He then swore he would forget the populous vision which in the beginning had led him astray, and he sought another method. Before attempting it, he spent a month rebuilding the strength his fever had consumed. He gave up all thoughts of dreaming and almost at once managed to sleep for a reasonable part of the day. The few times he dreamed during this period he did not dwell on his dreams. Before taking up his task again, he waited until the moon was a perfect circle. Then, in the evening, he cleansed himself in the waters of the river, worshipped the gods of the planets, uttered the prescribed syllables of an all-powerful name, and slept. Almost at once, he had a dream of a beating heart.

He dreamed it throbbing, warm, secret. It was the size of a closed fist, a darkish red in the dimness of a human body still without a face or sex. With anxious love he dreamed it for fourteen lucid nights. Each night he perceived it more clearly. He did not touch it but limited himself to witnessing it, to observing it, to correcting it now and then with a look. He felt it, he lived it from different distances and from many angles. On the fourteenth night he touched the pulmonary artery with a finger and then the whole heart, inside and out. The examination satisfied him. For one night he deliberately did not dream; after that he went back to the heart again, invoked the name of a planet, and set out to envision another of the principal organs. Before

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a year was over he came to the skeleton, the eyelids. The countless strands of hair were perhaps the hardest task of all. He dreamed a whole man, a young man, but the young man could not stand up or speak, nor could he open his eyes. Night after night, the man dreamed him asleep.

In the cosmogonies of the Gnostics, the demiurges mould a red Adam who is unable to stand up; as clumsy and crude and elementary as that Adam of dust was the Adam of dreams wrought by the nights of the magician. One evening the man was on the point of destroying all his handiwork (it would have been better for him had he done so), but in the end he restrained himself. Having exhausted his prayers to the gods of the earth and river, he threw himself down at the feet of the stone image that might have been a tiger or a stallion, and asked for its blind aid. That same evening he dreamed of the effigy. He dreamed it alive, quivering; it was no unnatural cross between tiger and stallion but at one and the same time both these violent creatures and also a bull, a rose, a thunderstorm. This manifold god revealed to him that its earthly name was Fire, that there in the circular temple (and in others like it) sacrifices had once been made to it, that it had been worshipped, and that through its magic the phantom of the man's dreams would be wakened to life in such a way that - except for Fire itself and the dreamer - every being in the world would accept him as a man of flesh and blood. The god ordered that, once instructed in the rites, the disciple should be sent downstream to the other ruined temple, whose pyramids still survived, so that in that abandoned place some human voice might exalt him. In the dreamer's dream, the dreamed one awoke.

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The magician carried out these orders. He devoted a period of time (which finally spanned two years) to initiating his disciple into the riddles of the universe and the worship of Fire. Deep inside, it pained him to say goodbye to his creature. Under the pretext of teaching him more fully, each day he drew out the hours set aside for sleep. Also, he reshaped the somewhat faulty right shoulder. From time to time, he was troubled by the feeling that all this had already happened, but for the most part his days were happy. On closing his eyes he would think, 'Now I will be with my son.' Or, less frequently, 'The son I have begotten awaits me and he will not exist if I do not go to him.'

Little by little, he was training the young man for reality. On one occasion he commanded him to plant a flag on a distant peak. The next day, there on the peak, a fiery pennant shone. He tried other, similar exercises, each bolder than the one before. He realized with a certain bitterness that his son was ready - and perhaps impatient - to be born. That night he kissed him for the first time and sent him down the river to the other temple, whose whitened ruins could still be glimpsed across miles and miles of impenetrable forest and swamp. At the very end (so that the boy would never know he was a phantom, so that he would think himself a man like all men), the magician imbued with total oblivion his disciple's long years of apprenticeship.

His triumph and his peace were blemished by a touch of weariness. In the morning and evening dusk, he prostrated himself before the stone idol, perhaps picturing his unreal son carrying out the same rites farther down the river in other circular ruins. At night he no longer dreamed, or else he dreamed the way all men dream. He now perceived

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with a certain vagueness the sounds and shapes of the world, for his absent son was taking nourishment from the magician's decreasing consciousness. His life's purpose was fulfilled; the man lived on in a kind of ecstasy. After a length of time that certain tellers of the story count in years and others in half-decades, he was awakened one midnight by two rowers. He could not see their faces, but they spoke to him about a magic man in a temple up north who walked on fire without being burned. The magician suddenly remembered the god's words. He remembered that of all the creatures in the world, Fire was the only one who knew his son was a phantom. This recollection, comforting at first, ended by tormenting him. He feared that his son might wonder at this strange privilege and in some way discover his condition as a mere appearance. Not to be a man but to be the projection of another man's dreams - what an unparalleled humiliation, how bewildering! Every father cares for the child he has begotten - he has allowed - in a moment of confusion or happiness. It was understandable, then, that the magician should fear for the future of a son thought out organ by organ and feature by feature over the course of a thousand and one secret nights.

The end of these anxieties came suddenly, but certain signs foretold it. First (after a long drought), a far-off cloud on a hilltop, as light as a bird; next, towards the south, the sky, which took on the rosy hue of a leopard's gums; then, the pillars of smoke that turned the metal of the nights to rust; finally, the headlong panic of the forest animals. For what had happened many centuries ago was happening again. The ruins of the fire god's shrine were being destroyed by fire. In a birdless dawn the magician

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saw the circling sheets of flame closing in on him. For a moment, he thought of taking refuge in the river, but then he realized that death was coming to crown his years and to release him from his labours. He walked into the leaping pennants of flame. They did not bite into his flesh but caressed and flooded him without heat or burning. In relief, in humiliation, in terror, he understood that he too was an appearance, that someone else was dreaming him.

*[1940]*

## The Lottery in Babylon

**L**ike all men in Babylon, I have been a proconsul; like all, a slave. I have known absolute power, public disgrace, and imprisonment. Behold, my right forefinger is missing. Behold, beneath this rent in my cloak my flesh bears a red tattoo. It is a beth, the second letter of our alphabet. On nights when the moon is full, this symbol grants me sway over men whose sign is a gimel but, at the same time, it makes me subject to those marked with an aleph. They, on moonless nights, owe obedience to men branded with the gimel. In the twilight of dawn, before a black altar deep in a vault, I have slit the throats of sacred bulls. For the space of a lunar year, I was declared invisible. When I cried out, no one answered; when I stole bread, I was not beheaded. I have suffered that which the Greeks did not – uncertainty. In a bronze chamber, confronting the strangler’s silent cord, hope did not abandon me; in the river of pleasure, neither did panic. Heraclides of Pontus relates in wonder that Pythagoras remembered having been Pyrrhus and before that Euphorbus and before that some other mortal. In order to remember similar experiences, I have no need to fall back either on death or deception.

I owe this almost hideous alternation in my fortunes to a practice that other republics do not follow or that in them works in an imperfect, secret way. I speak of our lottery. Although I have not delved into its history, I find our sages cannot agree on it. Of the lottery’s mighty purpose, I know what a man unversed in astrology knows of the moon. I come from a bewildering country, where daily life revolves

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round the lottery. Until now, I have given this institution no more thought than I have the behaviour of the inscrutable gods or of my own heart. Here, far from Babylon and its cherished customs, I think back in amazement on the lottery and on the blasphemous speculations about it whispered by men lurking in shadows.

My father used to say that long ago - was it centuries? years? - the Babylonian lottery was little more than a street game. He said (I do not know how true it is) that barbers sold for a few copper coins oblong bits of bone or parchment, marked with symbols. A draw was made in broad daylight, and, without further complication, winners received a handful of silver coins. It was, as you see, a simple arrangement.

Of course, these so-called lotteries failed. Their moral force was nil. They did not take into account all of man's capacities but only his hope. Faced with public apathy, the shopkeepers who set up these venal lotteries began to lose money. One of their number, introducing a reform, added a few forfeits to the winning lots. Accordingly, anyone who bought a numbered ticket faced a twofold contingency - that of winning a sum of money or of paying a fine. These fines were often considerable. Naturally, the slight risk - out of every thirty winning numbers one was unlucky - aroused the public's interest. The Babylonians threw themselves into the game. Anyone who did not buy a ticket was looked on as a coward and a faintheart. In time, this well-deserved contempt grew. Those who did not play were despised, but so were the losers, who had to pay the fine. The Company (as it then began to be called) had to protect the winners, who could not collect their prizes until



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almost all the fines were in the lottery's coffers. Claims would be made against the losers, and a judge would order them to pay the fine, together with court costs, or spend a few days in jail. To cheat the Company, the losers all chose jail. Out of this defiance by a few the Company's absolute power, its ecclesiastical and metaphysical basis, was born.

Soon after, financial reports gave up listing the fines and took to publishing only the number of days in custody a particular ticket imposed. The omission, which passed almost unnoticed at the time, proved to be of prime importance. It was the first appearance in the lottery of a non-pecuniary element. Success was immediate. On the insistence of the gamblers, the Company found it had to issue more unlucky numbers.

Everyone knows that the people of Babylon set great store by logic and symmetry. It was deemed inconsistent that lucky numbers should be reckoned in coinage and unlucky numbers in days and nights of imprisonment. Certain moralists pointed out that money does not always lead to happiness and that other forms of reward might be simpler.

A further concern swept the humbler neighbourhoods. Members of the college of priests, laying more bets than ever, were able to relish the thrills of impending terror or hope. Not so the poor, who knew, with inevitable and understandable envy, that they were barred from the much-touted delights of the lottery's fluctuations. The right and proper wish that rich and poor participate equally in the game sparked off an indignant protest, whose memory the years have not dimmed. A stubborn few failed to understand (or pretended to fail to understand) that a new order - an inescapable historical advance - was in the

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making. A slave stole a red ticket, which, when drawn, entitled him to have his tongue burned. This was the same penalty the law imposed for the theft of a lottery ticket. Some Babylonians argued that the man deserved the executioner's branding iron because he was a thief; others, more generous, because it was the luck of the draw.

There were riots, there was regrettable bloodshed, but in the end the will of Babylon's common people prevailed against that of the rich. The citizenry achieved its aims in full. First, it got the Company to take over the reins of power. (This unifying act was essential in view of the breadth and complexity of the operation's new scope.) Second, the citizenry managed to get the lottery made secret, gratis, and available to all. The sale of tickets for money was abolished. Now initiated into the mysteries of Bel, every free man was automatically entered in the sacred draws, which were held in the labyrinths of the god on each sixtieth night and which, until the next round, decided a man's fate. The possibilities were countless. A lucky draw could lead to promotion to the council of sages, to the arrest of a public or a personal enemy, or to a tryst in the hushed dark of a room with a woman who intrigues us but whom we never expected to see again; an unlucky draw, to mutilation, various types of disgrace, or death. Sometimes a single event - the murder of C in some low haunt, the mysterious deification of B - was the happy outcome of thirty or forty draws. Getting the combinations right was tricky, but it should be remembered that Company agents were (and are) shrewd and all-powerful. In many instances, the knowledge that certain lucky draws were simply a matter of chance would have lessened

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their attraction. To get round this difficulty, agents of the Company resorted to the power of suggestion and sorcery. Their manoeuvrings, their wiles, were secret. To find out everyone's intimate hopes and fears, they used spies and astrologers. Certain stone lions, a sacred privy called Qaphqa, cracks in a crumbling aqueduct - all these, according to popular belief, 'were pathways to the Company'. Both malicious and well-meaning people began informing on each other. Their reports, which were of varying reliability, were collected and filed away.

Unbelievably, the mutterings went on. The Company, with its usual prudence, did not reply directly. Instead, it chose to scrawl in the trash heap of a mask factory a brief explanation, which is now part of holy writ. This tenet affirmed that the lottery is an introduction of chance into the order of the world and that to accept error does not contradict but rather confirms chance. The doctrine further held that the lions and the sacred receptacle, although not unauthorized by the Company (which reserved the right to consult them), operated without official sanction.

This declaration allayed the fears of the public. It also gave rise to other consequences, perhaps not foreseen by its author. The statement profoundly changed the nature and conduct of the Company. I have little time left; we have been told that our ship is about to set sail, but I will try to explain things.

Strange as it may seem, no one so far had come up with a general theory of probability. Babylonians are little concerned with odds. They respect the dictates of chance, to which they hand over their lives, their hopes, and their wild panic, but it never occurs to my countrymen to look

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into the labyrinthine laws of chance or the revolving spheres that reveal them. Nevertheless, the semi-official statement I have referred to prompted much discussion of a juridico-mathematical cast. Out of some of this discussion came the following premise: If the lottery is a heightening of chance, a periodic infusion of chaos into the cosmos, would it not be better if chance intervened in all stages of the draw and not just one? Is it not absurd that if chance dictates someone's death the details of this death - whether in obscurity or in the public eye, whether spanning an hour or a century - should not also be tied to chance? In the end, these quite reasonable reservations prompted a substantial reform, whose complexities (weighted by the practice of hundreds of years) only a handful of specialists understand. These complexities I shall try to sum up, albeit in a hypothetical way.

Let us imagine a first draw that sentences a man to death. To carry it out, we advance to a second draw, which comes up with, say, nine possible executioners. Of these, four may initiate a third draw, which will select the name of the actual executioner; two may replace the initial unlucky draw by a lucky one - the finding of treasure, for example; another may enhance the execution - either by bungling it or by enriching it with torture; the last two may refuse to carry out the sentence. This, in theory, is the plan. In reality, the number of draws is infinite. No decision is final, and all can branch out into others. The uninformed assume that infinite draws require infinite time, but the fact of the matter is that time is infinitely divisible, as the well-known parable of the hare and the tortoise teaches us. This infinitude ties in nicely with the sinuous gods of Chance

## THE LOTTERY IN BABYLON

and with the Heavenly Archetype of the Lottery so beloved of platonists. Some garbled echo of our rituals seems to have reverberated along the Tiber. Aelius Lampridius, in his biography of Elagabalus, relates that the emperor wrote on seashells the lots that he intended for his guests, such that one would receive ten pounds of gold, another ten flies, a third ten dormice, a fourth ten bears. It should be remembered that Elagabalus was educated in Asia Minor among priests of the divinity whose name he bore.

There are also impersonal draws, with unspecific aims. One decrees that a Taprobane sapphire be flung into the waters of the Euphrates; another, that a bird be released from a tower roof; yet another, that once a century a grain of sand be removed from (or added to) the numberless grains on a beach. The consequences are sometimes terrible.

Under the Company's benevolent influence, our customs are permeated with chance. Anyone who purchases a dozen amphorae of Damascene wine will not be surprised if one of them contains a talisman or else a viper; the scribe who drafts a contract seldom fails to work in some piece of false information. I myself, in these hasty words, have distorted some of the splendour, some of the cruelty. Perhaps also some of the mysterious sameness. Our historians, who are the shrewdest in the world, have invented a method of adjusting chance. The mechanics of this method are widely known and (generally) reliable, although of course they are never disclosed without a pinch of falsehood. Aside from this, nothing is so tainted with fiction as the Company's history. A stone tablet excavated in a temple may refer to a draw made only the other day or to one made centuries ago. Not a volume is published without

## THE GARDEN OF BRANCHING PATHS

some difference in each copy. Scribes swear a secret oath to delete, insert, or change. Evasion is also employed.

The Company, with godlike restraint, shuns all publicity. As is only to be expected, its agents are covert, and the directives it continually (perhaps incessantly) issues are no different from those liberally dispensed by impostors. For who would boast of being a mere impostor? The drunkard who comes out with an absurd order, the dreamer who suddenly wakes and with his bare hands strangles the woman sleeping beside him - are they perhaps not carrying out one of the Company's secret decisions? These silent workings, so like those of God, give rise to all manner of speculation. One is the heinous suggestion that the Company has not existed for centuries and that the hallowed confusion in our lives is purely inherited, a tradition. Another deems the Company to be eternal and teaches that it will endure until the last trumpet, when the last remaining god will destroy the world. Still another holds that the Company is everywhere at all times but that its influence is only over miniscule things - the call of a bird, the hues of rust or of dust, one's waking moments. Another, out of the mouths of masked heresiarchs, 'that it never existed and never will'. Another, equally base, reasons that to affirm or deny the existence of the phantom corporation is of no consequence, for Babylon itself is nothing more than one unending game of chance.

[1941]

## A Glimpse into the Work of Herbert Quain

When Herbert Quain died recently, at his home in Roscommon, it came as no surprise to me that *The Times Literary Supplement* granted him a bare half column of pious valediction, none of whose complimentary adjectives went unmodified - and considerably tempered - by an adverb. *The Spectator*, in its relevant issue, was undeniably less brief and perhaps kinder. However, to liken *The God of the Labyrinth*, Quain's first book, to Mrs Agatha Christie and other of his writings to Gertrude Stein are not comparisons that inevitably spring to mind, nor would the late author have been cheered by them. Quain never considered himself a genius, not even on those peripatetic nights of literary discussion when, having by then exhausted the printing presses, he played at being Monsieur Teste or Dr Samuel Johnson. Herbert Quain was fully aware of the experimental nature of his books, which were admirable perhaps for their novelty and for a certain blunt honesty but not for the power of their passion. 'As with Cowley's odes,' he wrote to me from Longford on the sixth of March, 1939, 'I belong not to art but to the mere history of art.' To him there was no lower discipline than history.

I stress Herbert Quain's modesty - a modesty that is not, of course, the sum total of his thought. Flaubert and Henry James have led us to believe that works of art are rare and painstakingly created, but the sixteenth century (let us recall Cervantes's *Voyage to Parnassus*, let us recall

## THE GARDEN OF BRANCHING PATHS

Shakespeare's career) did not share this dismal view. Nor did Herbert Quain. In his opinion, good writing was not uncommon; he held that almost any street talk reached similar heights. He also felt that the aesthetic act demanded an element of surprise and that it was difficult to be surprised by something remembered. Smiling sincerely, he would deplore 'the stubborn, slavish preservation' of books from the past. I do not know whether his woolly theory can be justified, but I know his books are too eager to surprise.

I regret that I lent a certain lady - irrecoverably - the first thing he wrote. This I have said was a detective novel called *The God of the Labyrinth*; I can add that it was published towards the end of November, 1933. By early December, the pleasing but laboured convolutions of Ellery Queen's *Siamese Twin Mystery* had London and New York engrossed; I would suggest that the failure of our friend's novel should be blamed on this disastrous coincidence. Also - and I want to be absolutely honest - on the book's flawed construction and on a number of stiff, pretentious passages that describe the sea. Seven years on, I find it impossible to recollect the details of the plot. Here, then, is its outline, now impoverished (or purified) by my dim memory. There is a puzzling murder in the opening pages, plodding conversation in the middle, and a solution at the end. Once the mystery is solved, we come upon a long paragraph of retrospection containing this sentence: 'Everyone thought that the meeting between the two chess players had been accidental.' The words lead us to believe that the solution is wrong. The anxious reader, going back over the relevant chapters, discovers a different solution,



## A GLIMPSE INTO THE WORK OF HERBERT QUAIN

the true one. In so doing, the reader of this curious book turns out to be cleverer than the detective.

Still more unconventional is Quain's 'retrogressive, branching novel' *April March*, whose third (and only) part appeared in 1936. Nobody on studying the book could fail to see that it is a game. Allow me to recall that the author never regarded it as anything else. 'I claim for this work', I once heard him say, 'the essential features of all games - symmetry, arbitrary rules, and tedium.' Even the title is a feeble pun. It does not mean the 'march of April' but literally 'April, March'. Someone has pointed out in it an echo of the theories of J. W. Dunne; in fact, Quain's foreword is more reminiscent of F. H. Bradley's reversed world, where death precedes birth, the scar the wound, and the wound the blow (*Appearance and Reality*, 1893, p. 215\*). The worlds depicted in *April March* are not backwards-moving, only Quain's method of chronicling them is. Retrogressive and branching, as I have said. The novel consists of thirteen chapters. The first relates a cryptic conversation among strangers on a railway platform. The second relates the events of the evening in the first chapter. The third,

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\* So much for Herbert Quain's learning; so much for the learning on page 215 of a book published in 1893. A speaker in Plato's *Statesman* had long since described a similar regression - that of an earth-born race who, subjected to the power of a contrary rotation of the universe, went from old age to manhood, from manhood to boyhood, from boyhood to disappearance, or wasting away. Then there is Theopompus, who, in his *Philippics*, speaks of certain northern fruits that produce in those who eat them the same backward progression. More interesting is the idea of a reversal of Time, when we might remember the future and forget, or barely perceive, the past. Cf. the tenth canto of the *Inferno*, lines 97-102, in which prophetic and presbyopic sight are compared.



## A GLIMPSE INTO THE WORK OF HERBERT QUAIN

book's odd flavour. Two of the tales— $x_7$  and  $x_8$ —do not hold up on their own; only their placement, one after the other, makes them work. It may or may not be worth pointing out that once *April March* was published, Quain regretted its ternary arrangement and predicted that his imitators would opt for the binary

$$z \left\{ \begin{array}{l} y \ 1 \\ y \ 2 \end{array} \right. \left\{ \begin{array}{l} x \ 1 \\ x \ 2 \\ x \ 3 \\ x \ 4 \end{array} \right.$$

and the gods and demiurges for an infinite scheme—infinite stories, branching off infinitely.

Quite different, but also moving backwards, is Quain's two-act heroic comedy *The Secret Mirror*. In the books considered above, complexity of form restricted the author's imagination; in the play, it has freer rein. The first (and longer) act takes place in a country house near Melton Mowbray, belonging to a certain General Thrale, C.I.E. The pivot of the plot is the absent Miss Ulrica Thrale, the general's eldest daughter. Through the dialogue, we build up a picture of her as a haughty Amazon and we suspect that her forays into literature are infrequent. The newspapers announce her engagement to the Duke of Rutland, then belie the event. The playwright Wilfred Quarles worships Miss Thrale, who, at some time or other, has granted him an absent-minded kiss. The characters are all immensely rich and blue-blooded; their affections, noble though vehement. The dialogue seems to waver between

## THE GARDEN OF BRANCHING PATHS

Bulwer-Lytton's mere verbosity and the epigrams of Wilde or Mr Philip Guedalla. There is a nightingale and a night; there is a secret duel on a terrace. (Certain strange contradictions and sordid details hover in the background.) The characters in the first act reappear in the second - with different names. The 'playwright' Wilfred Quarles is a sales representative from Liverpool whose real name is John William Quigley. Miss Thrale actually exists. Quigley has never laid eyes on her but he morbidly collects photographs of her out of *The Tatler* or *The Sketch*. Quigley is the author of Act One. The unlikely or improbable 'country house' is the Judaeo-Irish boarding-house he lives in, transfigured and exalted by him. The plot line of the two acts is parallel, but in Act Two everything is tinged with horror, everything is postponed or frustrated. When *The Secret Mirror* opened, critics invoked the names of Freud and Julian Green. Mention of the former seems to me completely unjustified.

Word spread that *The Secret Mirror* was a Freudian comedy, and this providential but false interpretation guaranteed the play's success. Unfortunately, Quain, by then forty, was inured to failure and did not resign himself graciously to a change of regimen. He decided to seek revenge. Towards the end of 1939, he published *Statements*, perhaps the most original and certainly the least praised or known of his books. Quain had taken to arguing that readers were an extinct species. 'Every European', he declared, 'is either potentially or actually a writer.' He also held that of the various pleasures writing can provide, the greatest was inventiveness. Since few of these would-be writers had any capacity for invention, most would have

## AGLIMPSE INTO THE WORK OF HERBERT QUAIN

to make do with mimicry. For these 'deficient writers', whose name was legion, Quain wrote the eight stories in *Statements*. Each foreshadows or promises a good plot, which the author then deliberately sabotages. One or two - not the best - hint at *two* plots. The reader, carried away by vanity, thinks he has invented them. From the third tale, 'Yesterday's Rose', I was ingenious enough to fashion 'The Circular Ruins', a story which appears in my book *The Garden of Branching Paths*.

[1941]



# The Library of Babel

By this art you may contemplate the variation of the 23 letters . . .

*The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Partition 2, Section 2, Member 4

The world (which some call the Library) is made up of an unknown, or perhaps unlimited, number of hexagonal galleries, each with a vast central ventilation shaft surrounded by a low railing. From any given hexagon, the higher and lower galleries can be seen stretching away interminably. The layout of every floor is identical. Twenty-five long shelves, five on each side, fill all the sides but one; the height of the shelves, which is the height of the walls, is little more than that of the average librarian. From the unshelved side, a narrow passageway leads off to another gallery, which is identical to the first and to all the others. To left and right of the passageway are a pair of tiny cupboards. One is used for sleeping upright; the other, for satisfying faecal necessities. From this passage a spiral stairway climbs up, or goes down, to the uttermost reaches. The passageway contains a mirror, which faithfully duplicates what appears before it. From this, most people infer that the Library is not infinite, for, if it were, why this illusion of duplication? I prefer to imagine that the mirror's gleaming surface depicts and promises infinity. Illumination comes from spherical fruit called lamps. There are two, opposite each other, in each hexagon. Their light is inadequate, though continuous.

## THE GARDEN OF BRANCHING PATHS

Like all men in the Library, in my youth I travelled, roaming in search of a book, perhaps of a catalogue of catalogues. Now, when my eyes can barely make out what I write, I am getting ready to die a league or two from the hexagon where I was born. Once I am dead, there will be no want of pious hands to hurl me over the railing. My grave will be the bottomless air; my body will plummet for a long, long time, decaying and dissolving in the wind generated by my fall, which will be infinite. I have said that the Library is limitless. Idealists argue that hexagonal chambers are the quintessential form of absolute space or, at least, of our perception of space. A triangular or five-sided chamber, they reason, is unimaginable. (Mystics claim that their ecstasies reveal a circular chamber with a great circular book, whose continuous spine runs all the way round the walls, but the evidence of these seers is suspect and their words obscure. Such a cyclical book is God.) For now, I need only quote the classic dictum that 'The Library is a sphere whose exact centre is any hexagon and whose circumference is beyond reach.'

Each wall but one of each hexagon has five shelves; each shelf holds thirty-two books of a uniform size. Each book contains four hundred and ten pages; each page, forty lines; each line, eighty characters in black letter. There are also characters on the spine of each book but they give no indication or forewarning of what is inside. I know that this discrepancy was once looked on as a mystery. Before I run through the explanation (whose discovery, despite its tragic ramifications, may be the most important event in history), let me call to mind a few salient facts.



## THE LIBRARY OF BABEL

First, that the Library has always existed. Of this truth, whose direct corollary is that the world will always exist, no reasonable mind can be in doubt. Man, the imperfect librarian, may be a creation of chance or of evil lesser deities. The world, with its elegant supply of bookshelves, of baffling volumes, of inexhaustible stairways for the traveller and privies for the seated librarian, can only be the creation of a god. To appreciate the distance between the divine and the human, all we need do is compare the crude, spidery symbols my fallible hand is scrawling on the endpapers of this book with the organic letters on the inside, which are precise, fine, deep black, and perfectly symmetrical.

Second, that the number of these symbols is twenty-five.\* The discovery of this fact three hundred years ago led to the formulation of a general theory of the Library and to a satisfactory solution of a problem which, until then, no hypothesis had addressed - namely, the formless and random nature of almost all books. One, once seen by my father in a hexagon of Circuit 1594, consisted of a relentless repetition, from beginning to end, of the letters M C V. Another, frequently consulted in this zone, is nothing more than a labyrinth of letters but its second-to-last page reads, 'O time your pyramids.' We now know that for every coherent or straightforward line there are leagues of nonsensical, clashing sounds, verbal hodgepodge, and gibberish. (I know of a wild hinterland whose librarians

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\* The original manuscript has neither numerals nor capital letters. Punctuation was limited to the comma and full stop. These two signs, the space, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet were the twenty-five symbols found to be sufficient by the unknown author. [*Editor's Note.*]

## THE GARDEN OF BRANCHING PATHS

reject the superstitious and pointless custom of looking for meaning in books, which they equate with seeking meaning in dreams or in the haphazard lines of one's hand. They admit that the inventors of writing imitated the twenty-five natural symbols, but they maintain that their use is accidental and that books in themselves mean nothing. This notion, as we shall see, is not entirely false.)

For a long time it was believed that these impenetrable books were works in dead or remote languages. It is true that earliest man, the first librarians, used a language very different from the one we speak now; it is true that some miles to our right the language spoken is a dialect and that ninety floors above us that dialect is incomprehensible. All this, I repeat, is true, but four hundred and ten pages of unbroken lines of M C V can be part of no language, however primitive or however much of a dialect it may be. Some people suggested that each letter might have a bearing on the one after it and that the meaning of M C V in the third line of page 71 was not the same as that of these letters in another position on another page, but this embryonic theory came to nothing. Others believed that these letter sequences were codes, a hypothesis that has been widely accepted, although not in the sense intended by its originators.

Five hundred years ago, the head of an upper hexagon\* came across a book as confused as the rest but which had almost two pages of identical lines. He showed his find

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\* Formerly, for every three hexagons, there was one man. Suicides and lung diseases have upset the ratio. There have been times when I travelled for nights along corridors and worn stairways without finding a single librarian. The memory of this fills me with inexpressible melancholy.

## THE LIBRARY OF BABEL

to a peripatetic cryptographer, who told him they were in Portuguese. Others said they were Yiddish. Within a hundred years, the language had been established as a Samoyed-Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with inflections from classical Arabic. The contents, which were also decoded, proved to be theories of synthetic analysis, illustrated by endlessly repeated examples of variations. Such examples led one librarian of genius to stumble on the Library's fundamental law. This thinker noted that all the books, however different they may be, have identical elements - the space, the full stop, the comma, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also claimed something that all travellers have confirmed - that in the whole vast Library no two books are the same. From these undeniable premises he deduced that the Library is complete and that its shelves hold all possible permutations of the twenty-odd symbols (a number which, although vast, is not infinite) or, in effect, everything that can be expressed in all languages - a history of the future down to the last detail, the autobiographies of the archangels, a true catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false ones, a proof of the falseness of these catalogues, a proof of the falseness of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, a commentary on this gospel, a commentary on the commentary on this gospel, a true account of your death, translations of each book into all languages, interpolations from each book into every other book.

When it was announced that the Library was the repository of all books, the initial response was one of unrestrained joy. Men everywhere felt they were lords of a secret and still intact treasure. There was no individual or

## THE GARDEN OF BRANCHING PATHS

world problem for which an eloquent solution did not exist in some hexagon. The universe had been justified and at a stroke had usurped the limitless dimensions of hope. At the time, there was much talk of the Vindications - books of apologia and prophecy, which justified for ever the actions of each man on earth and held wondrous mysteries concerning his future. Thousands of avid seekers abandoned their comfortable native hexagons and rushed upstairs and down, driven by a fruitless urge to find their particular Vindication. These pilgrims wrangled in the narrow passageways, uttering dark curses and seizing each other by the throat on the divine stairways; they flung the deceiving books into the bottomless pit of the shafts and were hurled to their deaths by men from distant regions. Others went mad. The Vindications exist (I have seen two that tell of people in the future, who may not be imaginary), but the seekers forgot that the likelihood of a man's finding his own apologia - or some false version of it - is next to nil.

It was also hoped at that period that the fundamental mysteries of human life - the origin of the Library and of time - would be revealed. Clearly, these deep mysteries can be explained in words, and, should the language of philosophers be inadequate, the multiform Library will doubtless have produced the undiscovered language that is required, together with its vocabulary and grammar. For four hundred years, men have been exhausting the hexagons. There are official searchers, or inquisitors. I have seen them in the performance of their work. They always arrive bone weary, talking about a stairway with missing steps, which was nearly the death of them. They talk to the librarian about galleries and staircases. Sometimes they pick out

## THE LIBRARY OF BABEL

the nearest book and leaf through it in search of shameful words. Plainly, none of them expects to find anything.

Of course, the excessive hope was followed by extreme depression. The conviction that some shelf in some hexagon held precious books and that these precious books were inaccessible seemed almost too much to bear. A blasphemous sect suggested that the searches stop and that everyone keep scrambling and re-scrambling the letters and symbols until, through an improbable stroke of luck, the canonical books emerged. The authorities felt obliged to lay down strict rules. The sect disappeared, but in my childhood I saw old men who for long periods hid in the privies, with some metal disks in a forbidden shaker, trying feebly to ape the divine disorder.

Others, conversely, believed that the most important thing was to eliminate useless works. These men, showing credentials that were not always false, invaded the hexagons, pored over a single volume and condemned whole shelves. To their ascetic zeal for cleansing we owe the senseless loss of millions of books. The names of these perpetrators are still cursed, but those who mourn the 'treasures' destroyed in such frenzy overlook two well-known facts. One, that the Library is so vast that any loss caused by humans is necessarily minute. The other, that each copy is unique, irreplaceable, but since the Library is a totality there are always several hundred thousand imperfect copies - works that differ in no other detail than a letter or a comma. Contrary to general opinion, I take the view that the damage caused by the Purifiers' raids has been exaggerated as a result of the terror these fanatics unleashed. A madness drove them to defeat the books of

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the Crimson Hexagon - books of a smaller than average size, which were all-powerful, illustrated, and magical.

We also know of another superstition of that time - that of the Man of the Book. On some shelf in some hexagon, it was said, there must be a book that is the sum and substance of all the others. A certain librarian has studied it and he is akin to a god. In the language of this particular zone, traces of the worship of this long-dead official remain. Many have made pilgrimages in search of Him. For a hundred years, they vainly exhausted every possible path. How were they to discover the venerated secret hexagon that gave Him shelter? Someone suggested that they should try working backwards. To find book A, first consult book B, which will tell where A is; to find book B, first consult book C, and so on ad infinitum. I have squandered and used up my years in quests of this kind. It seems to me quite possible that on some shelf or other in the world there may be an all-embracing book.\* I pray the unknown gods that one man - just one, even if thousands of years ago - has examined and read it. If honour and wisdom and happiness are not my lot, may they be the lot of others. May heaven exist, even if my place is in hell. Let me be reviled and obliterated, so long as for a single instant - in a single being - Your vast Library finds justification.

Unbelievers insist that in the Library nonsense is the norm, while reason (or even simple, lowly coherence) is an almost miraculous exception. I know they speak

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\* Let me reiterate that for a book to exist it has only to be possible. The impossible alone is excluded. For example, no book is also a stairway, although there are certainly books that argue or deny or demonstrate the possibility and others whose structure resembles that of a stairway.

## THE LIBRARY OF BABEL

of 'the feverish Library, any one of whose haphazard volumes runs the endless risk of turning into any other and that all books affirm, deny, or cast confusion on this fact like a god in a state of delirium'. These words, which not only denounce but also exemplify chaos, are a clear proof of bad taste and hopeless ignorance. In fact, the Library includes every verbal structure and every permutation that the twenty-five symbols permit but not a single piece of sheer nonsense. It is of no purpose to point out that the best book in the many hexagons I administrate is entitled *Combed Thunder*, and another *The Plaster Cramp*, and a third *Axaxaxas Mlö*. These titles, although at first sight meaningless, must lend themselves to some coded or allegorical interpretation. Such an interpretation consists of words and so, by definition, is in the Library. I can make no combination of letters - even *dhemrlchtdj* - which the divine library has not envisaged and that in one or another of its secret languages does not hold some fearful meaning. Any syllable full of tenderness or fear uttered in any one of those languages is the all-powerful name of a god. To speak is to fall into tautology. The present futile, long-winded epistle already exists in one of the thirty-two volumes of the five shelves in one of the numberless hexagons - as does its refutation. (An  $n$  number of possible languages use the same vocabulary; in some, the symbol for 'library' correctly denotes 'a ubiquitous, ever-lasting system of hexagonal galleries', but in others 'library' is 'bread' or 'pyramid' or anything else, and the seven words that define it have another meaning. Are you sure, you who are reading this, that you understand my language?)

## THE GARDEN OF BRANCHING PATHS

The act of writing methodically distracts me from the current condition of mankind. The certainty that everything is already written negates or makes phantoms of us. I know of regions where young people prostrate themselves before books and crudely kiss their pages but do not know how to decipher a single letter. Epidemics, heresies, pilgrimages that inevitably degenerate into hooliganism, have decimated the population. I believe I mentioned suicides, whose numbers rise every year. Perhaps age and fear deceive me, yet I suspect that the human race - the only race - stands on the brink of extinction but that the Library will live on - its lights burning, unvisited, infinite, perfectly still, and bristling with precious, useless, incorruptible, secret volumes.



## THE LIBRARY OF BABEL

I have just used the word 'infinite'. I did not choose this adjective out of rhetorical habit. I do not find it illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who judge the world to be limited put forward the notion that in remote parts the passageways and stairways and hexagons might inconceivably end. This is absurd. Those who imagine the world to be without limits forget that these are defined by the possible number of books. I make bold to suggest the following solution to the age-old question: The Library is limitless and recurrent. If an eternal traveller were to cross it in any direction, he would discover after centuries that the same volumes were repeated in the same random order. This, when it occurred, would be an order - the Order. My solitude is cheered by this elegant hope.\*

*Mar del Plata, 1941*

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\* Letizia Alvarez de Toledo has remarked that the vast Library is useless. In point of fact, a single ordinary-sized volume, printed in nine- or ten-point type and consisting of an infinite number of infinitely thin leaves, would be enough. (Early in the seventeenth century, Cavalieri noted that all solids are the superimposition of an infinite number of planes.) Handling such a silky vade-mecum would be awkward, for each apparent leaf would divide into others. The unimaginable middle leaf would have no reverse.



# The Garden of Branching Paths

*To Victoria Ocampo*

**I**n his *History of the World War* (page 252), Liddell Hart writes that an assault on the Serre-Montauban line intended for the twenty-fourth of July, 1916, and consisting of thirteen British divisions supported by fourteen hundred guns, had to be postponed until the morning of the twenty-ninth. The cause of this otherwise inconsequential delay, he goes on, was torrential rain. The following statement, dictated, checked, and signed by Dr Yu Tsun, one-time head of English at the Tsingtao *Hochschule*, throws new light on the event. The first two pages are missing.

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...and replaced the receiver. Immediately afterwards, I realized I knew the voice, which had answered in German. It was that of Captain Richard Madden. Madden speaking from Viktor Runeberg's flat meant the end of all our efforts and - but this seemed, or should have seemed, quite secondary - of our lives as well. It meant that Runeberg had been arrested - or killed.\* Before the sun set that day, I would suffer the same fate. Madden was implacable. Or, rather, he felt bound to be implacable. An Irishman in the service of England, a man accused of half-heartedness and

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\* An outrageous and despicable suggestion. The Prussian spy Hans Rabener, alias Viktor Runeberg, drew an automatic pistol on Captain Richard Madden, the bearer of an arrest warrant. In self-defence, Madden inflicted wounds from which Runeberg later died. [Editor's Note.]

## THE GARDEN OF BRANCHING PATHS

even treason, how could he fail to welcome and seize upon such a miraculous gift - the discovery, capture, and perhaps death as well, of two agents of the German Empire?

I went up to my room; absurdly, I locked the door and threw myself down on the narrow iron bedstead. Outside the window were the usual slate roofs and an overcast six o'clock evening sky. It was hard to believe that this unremarkable day, without an omen, without a warning, was to be the day of my inescapable death. Despite my dead father, despite having been a child in one of Hai Feng's symmetrical gardens, was I about to die? I then reflected that everything that happens does so only to oneself and only now. Centuries of centuries pass, but events take place only in the present; countless men are battling in the air, on land, and at sea, yet all that really happens is happening to me.

The almost unbearable memory of Madden's horse-like face put an end to these ramblings. In the depths of my hatred and fear (now that I have outwitted Richard Madden, now that my neck yearns for the noose, I can admit my fear), I realized that this troublesome and doubtless happy warrior had no idea that I possessed the secret - the name of the place on the Ancre where the new British artillery depot was located. A bird streaked across the grey sky, and automatically I converted it into an aeroplane and that aeroplane into many - over France - demolishing the depot with a rain of bombs. If only, before a bullet silenced my mouth, I could shout out the name of that place so that it could be heard in Germany! But a human voice is feeble. How could I make mine reach my commander's ears? The ears of that warped, loathsome man, who knew nothing of Runeberg or me except that we were in Staffordshire but

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who, in his drab Berlin office, was poring over endless newspapers, vainly awaiting information from us.

'I must get out of here,' I said aloud. Without making a sound, I stood up. It was a pointless perfection of silence, as if Madden were about to pounce. Something - perhaps the simple need to confirm that my resources were nil - made me go through my pockets. I found what I knew would be there. My American watch; a nickel-plated chain and square coin; a key- ring with the useless but compromising keys to Runeberg's flat; my notebook; a letter I decided to destroy at once (and didn't); a crown, two shillings, and a few pence; my blue-and-red pencil; a handkerchief; my revolver with a single bullet. Foolishly, I picked it up and, to bolster my courage, weighed it in my hand. A gunshot can be heard from some distance, I vaguely judged. Ten minutes later, my plan was ripe. The telephone directory gave me the name of the one person who could transmit my message. He lived out in the suburbs, in Fenton, less than half an hour away by train.

I am a coward. I now confess it, now that I have carried out a plan which was nothing if not risky. I know it was a terrible thing to do. I certainly did not do it for Germany. I care nothing for a barbaric country that forced me into the ignominy of spying. What is more, I now know of an Englishman - a modest man - who in my view is Goethe's equal. I only spoke to him for an hour, but for that hour he was Goethe. I did the deed because I felt my commander had little regard for men of my race - for my numerous ancestors, who unite in me. I wanted to prove to him that a yellow man could save his armies. Meanwhile, I had to get away from Captain Madden. At any moment his hand and

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his voice could sound at my door. I dressed quietly, bade myself farewell in the mirror, went downstairs, peered along the empty street, and slipped out. The station was only a short distance away, but I thought it best to take a taxi. That way, I told myself, I would run less risk of being spotted. As it was, in the deserted street I felt utterly visible and defenceless. I remember telling the driver to stop just before he reached the entrance. I alighted with deliberate, almost painful, slowness. My destination was the village of Ashgrove, but I bought a ticket for a station farther along the line.

The train was due to leave in a minute or two - at eight fifty. I quickened my step; the next train would arrive at nine-thirty. There was hardly anyone on the platform. Boarding, I made my way along the corridor. I remember some farmworkers, a woman in mourning, a youth engrossed in Tacitus's *Annals*, a wounded but happy soldier. Finally, we moved off. A man I recognized came dashing, too late, onto the platform. It was Captain Richard Madden. Devastated, trembling, I shrank down in my seat, pulling away from the fearful window.

My devastation changed to a state of almost abject bliss. I told myself that I had already crossed swords and had scored the first hit by eluding, if only for forty minutes, if only by a stroke of luck, my adversary's attack. This small triumph, I argued, foreshadowed total victory. Nor was it such a small triumph, since without the precious advantage afforded me by the train timetable I would be in prison or dead. I argued (no less falsely) that my cowardly joy proved I was a man who could bring the assignment to a successful end. Out of my weakness, I drew a strength

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that did not let me down. I foresee that man will daily give in to ever more hideous deeds, and that soon there will be no one but warriors and bandits. I give them this advice: To perform a hideous deed, a man must tell himself that he has already done it; he must force upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past. This I did, as my eyes - those of a man already dead - took in the passing of that day and the gathering of the night. The train ran smoothly past a copse of ash trees, coming to a halt in what seemed open countryside. No one called out the name of the station.

'Ashgrove?' I asked some boys outside the window. 'Ashgrove,' they replied.

'I got down. A street lamp lit up the platform, but the boys' faces remained in shadow.

'Are you going to Dr Albert's house?' one of them asked.

Before I could reply, another said, 'It's a good distance from here, but if you take the first road on the left and then left again at each turning, you can't go wrong.'

I tossed them a coin (my last), made my way down some stone steps, and set off along the lonely road. It descended slowly, its surface unmade. Branches met overhead, and a low full moon seemed to keep company with me.

For a moment, I thought that Richard Madden had somehow fathomed my desperate plan, but soon I realized this was impossible. It occurred to me that the advice to keep taking a left turn was the normal way to reach the central point of certain mazes. I know something about labyrinths. Not for nothing am I the great-grandson of the famous Ts'ui Pên, who was governor of Yunnan and who renounced office in order to write a novel that teemed with more characters than the *Hung Lu Meng* and to construct

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a maze in which all mankind might lose its way. Thirteen years he dedicated to these diverse labours, but a stranger's hand struck him down, and his novel proved meaningless and no one ever found the maze.

Under English trees I contemplated that lost labyrinth, imagining it pristine and inviolate in a mountain fastness. I imagined it obliterated by paddies or under water; I pictured it endless, no longer consisting of octagonal pavilions and of paths that turn back on themselves but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms. I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of a meandering, ever-growing labyrinth that would encompass the past and future and would somehow take in the heavenly bodies. Absorbed in these imaginings, I forgot my predicament as a hunted man. For untold moments, I felt I was a detached observer of the world. The living, twilight fields, the moon, the remains of the evening were playing on me; as was the easy slope of the road, which removed any chance of tiring. The evening was intimate, infinite. The road descended and branched across now shadowy pastures. A high-pitched, almost syllabic music drifted in, blurred by leaves and distance, and then moved off on wafting breezes. I reflected that a man can be an enemy of other men, of other moments of other men, but not of a country - not of fireflies, words, gardens, waterways, sunsets.

I came to a high, rusty gate. Through its bars I made out an avenue and a sort of pavilion. At once, I grasped two things. The first was trivial, the second almost beyond belief. The music came from the pavilion, and the music was Chinese. This was why I had accepted it, without paying it any special heed. I do not remember whether there was



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a bellpull or a button or whether I called by clapping my hands. The scratchy music went on.

From the inner depths of the house came a light, whose beam the trees intersected and sometimes blotted out. Shaped like a drum, the paper lantern was the colour of the moon. It was carried by a tall man, whose face I could not see, because the light blinded me. Opening the gate, he said slowly, in my language, 'I see that the pious Hsi P'êng feels bound to correct my solitude. You have no doubt come to inspect the garden?'

I recognized the name of one of our consuls and echoed, baffled, 'The garden?'

'The garden of branching paths.'

Something stirred in my memory, and with utter conviction I said, 'The garden of my ancestor Ts'ui Pên.'

'Your ancestor? Your illustrious ancestor? Step inside.'

The damp path zigzagged as in my childhood. We entered a library of Eastern and Western books. I recognized, bound in yellow silk, some manuscript volumes of the Lost Encyclopedia compiled for the Third Emperor of the Luminous Dynasty but never printed. A gramophone record still revolved beside a bronze phoenix. I also remember a *famille rose* vase and another, many centuries older, in that shade of blue copied by our potters from Persian craftsmen.

Dr Albert watched me, smiling. He was, as I have said, tall, with sharp features, grey eyes, and grey whiskers. There was something of the priest and also the sailor about him. He told me he had been a missionary in Tientsin 'before aspiring to become a Sinologist'.

We sat down - I on a long, low divan, he with his back to

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the window and to a grandfather clock. I worked out that my pursuer, Richard Madden, would not appear for at least an hour. My irrevocable plan could wait.

'A strange fate, Ts'ui Pên's,' said Stephen Albert. 'Governor of his native province, a learned astronomer and astrologer, a tireless interpreter of the canonical books, a chess player, a famous poet and calligrapher - he gave up everything to write a book and build a maze. He renounced the pleasures of oppression, justice, the plural bed, banquets, and even learning to cloister himself for thirteen years in the Pavilion of Limpid Solitude. Upon his death, his heirs found nothing but a chaos of manuscripts. The family, as you must know, wanted to consign them to the flames, but his executor - a Taoist or Buddhist monk - insisted on their publication.'

'Ts'ui Pên's blood kin still curse that monk,' I replied. 'The publication was pointless. The book is an indecisive pile of contradictory drafts. I have examined it on a couple of occasions. In the third chapter the hero dies, in the fourth he is alive. As for Ts'ui Pên's other enterprise, his labyrinth - '

'Here it is,' Dr Albert said, pointing to a high, lacquered writing cabinet.

'An ivory labyrinth!' I exclaimed. 'A miniature labyrinth.'

'A labyrinth of symbols,' he corrected. 'An invisible labyrinth of time. It has been granted to me, a barbarous Englishman, to unravel this delicate mystery. After more than a hundred years, the details are irrecoverable, but it is not difficult to surmise what took place. Ts'ui Pên may once have said, "I am retiring to write a book." And on another occasion, "I am retiring to build a maze." Everyone imagined these to be two works; nobody thought that book

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and labyrinth were one and the same. The Pavilion of Limpid Solitude stood in the centre of what was perhaps an elaborately laid-out garden. This may have suggested a physical labyrinth. Ts'ui Pên died, and no one in his vast domains ever found the labyrinth. The confusion of the novel suggested to me that it was the labyrinth. Two facts corroborated this. One, the curious story that the maze Ts'ui Pên had planned was specifically infinite. The second, my discovery of a fragment of a letter.'

Albert got up. For several moments he stood with his back to me, opening a drawer of the black-and-gold writing cabinet. He turned and held out a squarish piece of paper that had once been crimson and was now pink and brittle. The script was the renowned calligraphy of Ts'ui Pên himself. Uncomprehending but with deep emotion, I read these words written with a tiny brush by a man of my own blood: 'I leave to various futures (but not all) my garden of branching paths.' In silence, I handed back the page.

'Before unearthing this letter,' Albert went on, 'I wondered how a book could be infinite. I came up with no other conclusion than that it would have to be a cyclical, or circular, volume - one whose last page was the same as its first, and with the potential to go round and round for ever. I recalled the night in the middle of the Thousand and One Nights, in which Queen Scheherazade - having distracted the scribe by a trick of magic - starts to recount the history of the Thousand and One Nights, thereby running the risk of coming back full circle to this same night and continuing forever more. I also imagined an archetypal, hereditary work handed down from father to son, wherein each new heir would add a chapter or, piously, rewrite a page

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of his forebears. These speculations engaged my mind, but none seemed even remotely relevant to Ts'ui Pên's contradictory chapters. In my perplexity, I received from Oxford the manuscript you have just seen. One sentence caught my attention: "I leave to various futures (but not all) my garden of branching paths." Almost at once, light dawned. The garden of branching paths was the chaotic novel; the phrase 'to various futures (but not all)' conjured up an image of a branching in time, not in space. A re-reading of the book confirmed this theory. In all works of fiction, each time the writer is confronted with choices, he opts for one and discards the rest. In the inextricable Ts'ui Pên, he opts - at one and the same time - for all the alternatives. By so doing, he creates several futures, several times over, and in turn these proliferate and branch off. Hence, his novel's contradictions. Fang, let us say, has a secret. A stranger calls at his door; Fang decides to kill him. Naturally, there are several possible outcomes. Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, both can be spared, both can die, and so forth. In Ts'ui Pên's novel, all of these happen, and each is a point of departure for other branchings off. Now and again, the paths of this labyrinth converge. For example, in one possible past you come to this house as an enemy, in another as a friend. If you can bear my incurable pronunciation, we shall read some pages.'

In the bright circle of lamplight, his face was clearly that of an old man, yet with something unconquerable and even immortal about it. Slowly, precisely, he read two forms of the same epic chapter. In the first, an army marches into battle across a bare mountain; dread of the rocks and the darkness makes the troops hold life cheap,

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and they easily win a victory. In the second, the same army storms a palace, which is in the midst of festivities; the resplendent battle seems to them an extension of the revelry, and they are victorious. I listened with seemingly veneration to these old tales, which were perhaps less of a marvel than the fact that my blood had contrived them and that a man from a distant empire had restored them to me while I was engaged in a desperate assignment on an island in the West. I remember the concluding words, repeated at the end of each version like a secret watchword: 'So battled the heroes, their stout hearts calm, their swords violent, each man resigned to kill and to die.'

From that moment, I felt around me and within my dark body an invisible, intangible swarming. Not that of diverging, parallel, and finally converging armies but a more inaccessible, more intimate turmoil, which these armies somehow foreshadowed.

'I do not think your illustrious ancestor toyed idly with different versions,' Stephen Albert went on. 'I do not consider it likely that he would sacrifice thirteen years to the endless compilation of a rhetorical experiment. In your country, the novel is a lesser genre; at that time, it was a genre that was not respected. Ts'ui Pên was a novelist of genius, but he was also a man of letters who certainly did not look on himself as a mere novelist. The testimony of his contemporaries proclaims - and his life confirms - his metaphysical and mystical leanings. Philosophical argument usurps a good part of his novel. I know that of all quandaries, none so troubled or exercised him as the fathomless quandary of time. But, then, time is the only problem that does not appear in the pages of his *Garden*. He

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does not even use the word that means "time". How do you explain this deliberate omission?'

I put forward several suggestions, all inadequate. We discussed them.

'In a riddle about chess,' Stephen Albert concluded, 'what is the one forbidden word?'

I thought for a moment and replied, 'The word "chess".'

'Exactly,' said Albert. '*The Garden of Branching Paths* is a vast riddle, or parable, about time. This is the hidden reason that prevents Ts'ui Pên from using the word. To omit a particular word in all instances, to resort to clumsy metaphors and obvious circumlocutions, is probably the surest way of calling attention to it. This was the convoluted method that the oblique Ts'ui Pên chose in each meandering of his unrelenting novel. I have studied hundreds of manuscripts, I have corrected the mistakes introduced by careless copyists, I have deduced the plan behind that chaos, I have reestablished—I believe I have re-established—its original order, and I have translated the whole work. I can guarantee that he does not use the word "time" even once. The explanation is plain - *The Garden of Branching Paths* is an incomplete but not false picture of the world as Ts'ui Pên perceived it. Unlike Newton or Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing and dizzying web of diverging and converging and parallel times. This mesh of times that merge, split apart, break, and for centuries are unaware of each other, embraces all possibilities. In most of these times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but not I; in others, I but not you; in still others, both of us. In our present time, granted me by a lucky chance, you have

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come to my house; in another, on making your way across the garden, you find me dead; in still another, I speak these same words, but I am a delusion, a ghost.'

'In all,' I said, not without a shudder, 'I thank you and honour you for your recreation of Ts'ui Pên's garden.'

'Not in all,' he murmured, smiling. 'Time keeps branching into countless futures. In one of them, I am your enemy.'

I felt again that swarming of which I have spoken. It seemed to me that the dank garden around the house was utterly saturated with invisible beings. These were Albert and myself, secret and busy and in numberless guises, in other dimensions of time. I lifted my gaze, and the tenuous nightmare fled. In the yellow and black garden, stood one man alone. But the man was strong as a statue, and he was coming towards me down the path. He was Captain Richard Madden.

'The future is already here,' I replied, 'but I'm your friend. May I see the letter again?'

Albert got up. Tall, he opened the drawer of the writing cabinet, and for a moment his back was to me. I had drawn my revolver. I fired with great care; Albert collapsed instantly, without a groan. I swear his death was immediate, a thunderbolt.

The rest is unreal, meaningless. Madden burst in and seized me. I have been condemned to hang. Horrible to say, I won. I passed on to Berlin the secret name of the city to be attacked. Yesterday the Germans shelled it; I read this in the same newspapers that reported to all England the curious case of the learned Sinologist Stephen Albert, who had been murdered by a perfect stranger, one Yu Tsun. My

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commander solved the riddle. He knew that my dilemma was how - in the din and confusion of war - to signal the name of the place to be targeted and that the only way I could find was to kill someone named Albert. My superior knows nothing - nor can anyone - of my weariness and unceasing remorse.

*[1941]*





An author who frequently played with the borders of his own identity, Borges loved to create works in collaboration with others. One of his longtime companions in this literary game of exquisite corpse was Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, who translated this edition of *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*. They worked together on English editions of much of Borges' fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, all of which was signed by both authors together as a collaborative effort. Borges loved translation, and brought a creative infidelity to the effort that embraced the inevitable transformations of the original and highlighted his own interests in the source text. His translations of his own work with Di Giovanni are no more faithful, and represent an important part of his literary output. Unfortunately, they were allowed to go out of print after Borges' death, most likely because Borges' widow María Kodama and Viking-Penguin could secure more royalties for themselves if they broke the 50/50 agreement Borges had established with Di Giovanni for all their shared projects. Di Giovanni has even been legally barred from making his translations available for free on his website. The present edition gathers his translations of Borges' most important collection of fiction, including versions of "The Library of Babel" and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," and other translations which have never appeared in print. All their published translations can be downloaded from

[http://libraryofbabel.info/Borges/  
borgesdigiovannitranslations.zip](http://libraryofbabel.info/Borges/borgesdigiovannitranslations.zip)