

THE SIMULTANEOUS REPRESENTATION OF EXISTING
AND NON-EXISTING PHENOMENA IN BORGES' *FICCIONES*



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INTRODUCTION

Jorge Luis Borges once said about Leibniz that the latter invented a universal harmony; Borges did not say, however, that Leibniz discovered a universal harmony (Agheana 46). The difference between the two is not insignificant: it has to do both with Borges' lack of faith in an external order, and with the fact that he does not reject the possibility that an order may be constructed (in a closed and fictitious system). Yet Borges did not disagree entirely with Leibniz, who, in his *The Monadology* (1714), wrote the following passage¹:

69. Thus there is nothing fallow, nothing sterile, nothing dead in the universe, no chaos, no confusion save in appearance, somewhat as it might appear to be in a pond at a distance, in which one would see a confused movement and, as it were, a swarming of fish in the pond, without separately distinguishing the fish themselves.

¹ As translated by Robert Latta (1898).

With these words, Leibniz draws our attention to the fact that our perception of the world can deceive us. As human beings, we are captured in a space which our senses do not allow us to fully understand: a space between the incomprehensibility (and infinity) of points in the small, which concern the basic substance of life – the monad² – and the infinity of the universe, which, however, Leibniz does not mention in this passage. That man, due to the limitations of perception and its subjective character, cannot completely comprehend the world, which must therefore remain an unsolvable enigma, is not a thought which is irreconcilable with Borges. Borges also affronts the idea that man is caught in a liminal space.

But Borges was concerned with this liminal condition in more than one sense; in fact, one could say that Borges is the writer who stands, more than anyone, on that frequently illusory boarder. This becomes evident on many levels in Borges' writings. In his early works, Borges concretely sought out the boarder (which he called "la orilla") between countryside and city in the Buenos Aires of the time. Then, Borges managed to be both national (and even local) and cosmopolitan at once; i.e. to Argentineans and South Americans, it is the European vein in Borges' works which is most evident, whereas Europeans, on the other hand, have tended to be intrigued by the more non-European – mysterious, if you will – elements in the works of this Argentinean writer. Furthermore, many of Borges' fictions deal with the boarders of identity; put in simple terms, with the question of when "I" becomes "we", with the dissolution of individuation, with ecstasy, with the thought of only one body and soul (i.e. an organic world view). In more literary terms, Borges emphasises the intertextual character of literature, as well as themes such as "writing and rewriting"; that is, as a writer he is very much aware of the fact that he finds himself in a situation where he is at once both writing and writing nothing (since he is only a mediator

² Leibniz' (1646-1716) monads are absolutely simple entities, without parts, which do not exist neither in time nor space. The monad is not material, but rather spiritual, and it is closed within itself; one monad does not influence another. Nonetheless, the monad is a mirror of the entire universe. Due to its referentiality, among other things, the monad reminds us of both Borges' spaces (particularly the library) and of Foucault's heterotopias (which I will return to later).

for language and the literary heritage). All this indicates, firstly, that Borges is an at times rather vague figure, difficult to pinpoint, and secondly that he is apparently attracted to this condition of marginality.

But the most important liminal space, which will be the point of departure of the present article, is Borges' peculiar placement between literature and philosophy. In many ways, the particularly Borgesian arises from the fact that, in his fictions, this author succeeds in being both enigmatic (fantastic) and conceptually grounded at once³: the supernatural is strangely accompanied by tight plots and is not – as, for example, in García Márquez – a function of an invented richness in detail.⁴

It is not in itself remarkable to successfully fuse literature and philosophy, but in Borges' case, considering his philosophical position and his view of language, we witness the meeting of otherwise irreconcilable elements.⁵ Philosophically, Borges succeeds Berkeley and Schopenhauer⁶ and he is generally very influenced by immaterialism and subjective idealism, according to which objective reality is nothing but an illusion (a fiction), which man cannot even

³ Eagleton, for instance, points out that the awareness of a work's constructional character also demystifies that work (92). This is not exactly the case with Borges, who more often than not underlines the work's fictionality. Thus, the mysterious can also go hand in hand with sobriety.

⁴ It has often been noted that Gabriel García Márquez uses a method where he makes his descriptions before and after a magical occurrence particularly detailed and sober (descriptions of the most prosaic things) (Bell-Villada 109-122).

⁵ This is probably where we are to look for the reason for Borges' brief form and for the fact that he never produced a novel, since, in each and every one of his *ficciones*, Borges practices, in the manner of a tightrope dancer, an intricate balancing act – a project which would be far more difficult, of course, if one were to hold one's balance for several hundred pages.

⁶ Borges apparently had a very vast knowledge of the works of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), whose most important work, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1818), is a severe criticism of the world, which is seen as totally devoid of meaning and value. In this work, Schopenhauer initially states that the world is "my" conception, an assertion which entails that everything that exists, exists exclusively due to "my" imagination. When the eye does not see, and the ear does not hear, etc., then the world does not exist. Inspired by Indian mythology, Schopenhauer thus called our mistakes and illusions about the world "Maya's veil".

comprehend completely: we perceive subjectively and from our own personal perspective, so the only thing we know is how we ourselves have perceived a phenomenon – and not how that phenomenon really is.⁷ Schopenhauer’s notion of a “veil of Maya” also reigns in Borges’ world, but according to the latter it is impossible to tear down this veil definitively and to fully access the true world.⁸ This condition, where we cannot fully understand and comprehend, reappears in Borges’ view of language and literature, which he also sees as a limited entity. This is a notion already brought to our attention by another thinker, namely Saussure, who pointed out the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, whereby a doubt was shed (although not by Saussure himself) on the capacity of language to correctly reflect reality.⁹ Language and literature are not reality, they are artifices, and further, it should be noted – as does Borges – literature, just like language, cannot transcend Saussure’s distinction and write the truth about reality. When literature attempts this task (e.g. Realism), it affronts an impossible project, which is doomed to fail. Our inability to definitively comprehend the world, translates, in Borges’ works, into a great fascination with the enigma and the enigmatic, the incomprehensible and intangible, or maybe better: the frailty of conceptualisation, i.e. the fact that nothing is certain and that causal relations in reality do not exist. Paradoxically enough, Borges often uses logic to describe the incomprehensible, and he points out the infinite in the small (the illusory boarder, the “orilla”, the point one cannot fix, since – mathematically – there are an infinite amount of points on any one line) as

⁷ Thus, Borges has been called both an agnostic and a solipsist.

⁸ For instance, in “El Zahir”, from the collection *El Aleph* (1949), Borges writes: “el Zahir es (...) la rasgadura del Velo” (OC 1: 595). But the Zahir is dream-like, and not connected to a vision of the Dionysian truth (one could draw a connection between this and Nietzsche’s famous distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian in tragedy in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*).

⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) did not deny, in fact, that language could denote the world. Rather, he claimed an arbitrary relationship internally in language. Saussure divided the sign into two units, and claimed the connection between these two to be arbitrary: signifiant (expression, signifier) and signifié (content, signified).

well as the infinity of the universe, which are both intangible entities in the concrete.¹⁰

In contemplating Borges, we must keep these considerations in mind in order to spot that which is unique in his *œuvre*. Concretisation is – whether we like it or not – an indispensable condition in the creation of literature (in this case fictions and short stories), for narrative demands action, and action demands temporality, space and actors. But the concrete does not go hand in hand with the intangible and the indistinct on its own account, as Borges fervently tries to communicate to his readers.

This brings us to the working hypothesis of the present article: the focal point in Borges' fictions also contains his main problem: the simultaneous literary representation of existing and non-existing phenomena. How can this double vision between the tangible and the intangible be maintained? In Borges' literary answer, this problem has given rise to a particular topology, and furthermore it has entailed crucial problems of representation. It is the aim of this article to examine these conditions in Borges' works, through a series of analyses of some selected short stories or "ficciones". The double vision really manifests itself in two areas: first, there is a double vision between a metaphysical field (which concerns the content of the short stories) and a technical level (which concerns the concrete representation of a plot, narrative perspective, narrative levels, etc.). Inside the metaphysical field there is another double vision (or another forking path, if you will): on one hand, descriptions of the enigmatic character of life, on the other, the more concrete creations of space. It is this metaphysical field, which I would primarily like to concentrate on (in the sections called "The Library" and "The Labyrinth"), but I will also return to the question of the technical level in

¹⁰ One could say that Borges (with an approach not unlike Plato's) attempts to access another, an ideal, world (which is the mystery of the world) through the conceptual and through wisdom. The French and Spanish symbolists also had ambitions of establishing contact to an ideal world, but they had a more intuitive approach, since they departed from an exaltation (and symbolization) of the material world, which thus provided the poet with proof of a certain union between the material and the spiritual worlds. Hence, the perceptual space was far more important to the symbolists than to the immaterialist Borges (Palan de Nemes 162-163).

the section called "Representational technique and problems of exposition".

THE LIBRARY

In 1970, Borges defined "La biblioteca de Babel" as "my Kafkian story" (Shaw *Ficciones* 37), and on several other occasions he pointed out that Kafka's plots are characterised by a "terrible simplicity" (Sarlo 70) and that their aesthetic qualities rely on this fact. In fact, "La biblioteca de Babel" cannot be said to be a fiction constructed around an advanced plot, what is more, the surprising thing about this particular story is that one searches almost in vain for anything resembling a plot, which leads one to suspect that the Kafkaesque quality of this story must rely somewhere else. The story contains no specific action, it is, so to speak, devoid of drama, no dramatic tools have been employed. The entire story unfolds, instead, as a sober description of a library and its history, in essayistic form, or, more precisely perhaps –as the first person narrator of the story insinuates himself– as a sort of epistle (i.e. in the form of a letter, with everything which that entails in terms of primary addressee, etc.). The topology of the short story is thus the first thing we should examine, and one could claim that the story's *motif* is the very architectural elaboration of the library, or, in any case, that the view of the universe which dictates the story is subject to the development of the large, spatial *motif*.

The story's first paragraph provides us with the primary description of the spatial order of the library, the universe/library is made of hexagonal¹¹ rooms: "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries" (65¹²). These rooms are all connected both vertically (by

¹¹ In an interview, Borges said that his original idea for the rooms of the library was an infinite number of circles attached to each other. But the idea did not convince him, since the circles, when placed next to each other in such a structure, would leave hollow spaces between them. Therefore, he chose the hexagonal shape, which leaves no hollow spaces in the structure, and which bears a great resemblance to the circle (Sarlo 71).

¹² If not otherwise indicated, all references are to J.L. Borges: *Fictions*.

means of winding staircases) and horizontally, as far as the eye can see. In every room, four of the walls are covered with five bookshelves each, every shelf contains thirty two books (all in the same format), every book has four hundred and ten pages, every page forty lines, every line approximately eighty letters.¹³ This arrangement are all the inhabitants of the library, librarians also called “men of the Library” (66), know; this is the world/ the universe, there is no *outside*. The particular character of the story’s topology generates its philosophical problem,¹⁴ for the strict order and clear logic (also called design) with which the library is constructed, must almost inevitably be the work of a single Creator (Designer) or a single intelligence. Equally striking is the issue of the library’s infinity, both visually, and because no one knows the exact dimensions of the library, whether it is in fact infinite or whether, somewhere, it has a limit. However, these questions would not cause any problems if it were not for the fact that the apparently infinite amount of books which the library holds does not reveal anything at all. Throughout most of the story’s pages, the narrator traces the library’s philosophical history,¹⁵ which is very vague and based on assumptions and the narrator’s own experiences. One of the most important historical discoveries consists in the thesis that there are only twenty five orthographical symbols contained within the books. This thesis helped solve the riddle regarding incomprehensible content of the books: “This much is known: For every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency” (67). And further (68-69):

¹³ The numbers are, apparently, without any particular meaning: It seems that Borges was inspired by the organization of a library in Buenos Aires, where he worked for some years (and where, incidentally, he wrote this short story). Later – after Perón was overthrown in 1955 – Borges became the director of the National Library in Buenos Aires (Sarlo 70-71).

¹⁴ Practically all of Borges’ *ficciones* host a philosophical problem, but in most cases this problem is – as opposed to in “La biblioteca de Babel” – closely connected with a minutely elaborated plot.

¹⁵ Time plays an important role here. We are not only dealing with the things of the universe. Furthermore, many different philosophical tendencies are represented in the Library, e.g. idealism, mysticism and nihilism.

Those examples allowed a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This philosopher observed that all books, however different from one another they might be, consist of identical elements: the space, the period, the comma, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also posited a fact which all travellers have since confirmed: In all the Library, there are no two identical books.

This last statement, that there is only one copy of each book, can easily be put in doubt, for if it is true that the library has perhaps infinite dimensions and that it is almost impossible even to find something coherent, then it would, supposedly, be an utterly impossible task to find an identical copy of any one book, and thus, the above mentioned "fact" is consequently impossible to prove. In any case, a paradox arises: everything is in the library, but nothing can be found. For everything is based on combinatorial analysis inside the given frames (410 pages, 40 lines, 80 letters), and therefore all that is written appears casual, chaotic, and any search for meaningful sentences seems like a futile walk into empty space.

The only specimen of coherent language that has ever been found in the library is constituted by two pages, and about the deciphering of these, the narrator comments (not without humour) (68):

Within the century experts had determined what the language actually was: a Samoyed-Lithuanian dialect of Guaraní, with inflections from classical Arabic. The content was also determined: the rudiments of combinatory analysis, illustrated with examples of endlessly repeating variations.

Even these lines are not exactly remarkable for their clarity, and the reader begins to question the validity of the narrator's insistent claim that nothing is wholly without meaning in the Library: "For while the Library contains all verbal structures, all variations allowed by the twenty-five orthographic symbols, it includes not a single absolute piece of nonsense." (72). Since all possible combinations of signs inside the given frames are supposedly to be found in the Library, the narrator's statement would amount to claiming that everything has meaning - yet, rather the opposite is true, as some of the librarians have realized, cf. the almost empty hexagons and the information about a high suicide rate in the Library.

Although a search after meaning in the Library's books may seem futile, it is known, on the other hand, that the Library contains everything (or rather: Everything), that it is total, which gives rise to the hope of finding the key to an understanding of the library. And the key is a central issue here: for years, the librarians have been searching for a catalogue over all the books in the library (a catalogue which, since the library is total, has to exist), a book of books, which, by the way, shares many characteristics with the Aleph in another one of Borges' *ficciones*, "El Aleph", which is, very simply put, a single magical point, giving access to all other points.

But to return to the Kafkaesque character of Borges' story, we must assume that more than in the plot, it relies on the nightmarish and absurd character of the library's rooms, which is the result of a strange duplicity: on the one hand, the library is right there, in all its concreteness with bookshelves, etc., and on the other, it is incomprehensible, one doesn't know what the library really is, and attempts to find out are absolutely unavailing. This frustration is shared by the library's inhabitants, who, however, according to the narrator's philosophical-historical outline, were initially filled with a hope which the discovery of the library's totality had provoked (70):

That unbridled hopefulness was succeeded, naturally enough, by a similarly disproportionate depression. The certainty that some bookshelf in some hexagon contained precious books, yet that those precious books were forever out of reach, was almost unbearable.

Thus, we may affirm that the composition/structure of the library is decisive for all that happens to the persons in the library, and, in fact, the library does carry more importance than its inhabitants in Borges' story, where understanding the mystery of the universe appears to be more important than comprehending the situation of the single human being. Continuing our line of argument about Kafka, we may observe that John Updike detects a difference between Borges and Kafka precisely on this point (Updike 76):

(...) these themes of vindication and unattainability, suggest Kafka. But "The Castle" is a more human work, more personal and neurotic; the fantastic realities of Kafka's fiction are projections of the narrator-hero's anxieties, and have no communion, no interlocking structure, without him. "The Library of Babel" instead has an ada-

mant solidity. Built of mathematics and science, it will certainly survive the weary voice describing it, and outlast all its librarians, already decimated, we learn in a footnote, by "suicide and pulmonary diseases." We move, with Borges, beyond psychology, beyond the human, and confront, in his work, the world atomized and vacant. Perhaps not since Lucretius has a poet so definitely felt men as incidents in space.

First, it should be noted that the narrator in "La biblioteca de Babel" does not have very much influence on the story.¹⁶ The fantastic element in the story does not depend on his fantasy or fear, it is already there, incorporated in the universe, and the narrator's only task is to record it. Moreover, the library will continue to exist after the narrator's death, as it has existed long before his birth.

Critics of Borges' story tend to concentrate on possible ways to interpret the various metaphors (e.g. the labyrinth, the lottery and the library) in this text.¹⁷ The reason for this tendency is probably to be found in the character of the metaphors, which turn into co-actors in Borges' literary discourse (in "La biblioteca de Babel", the metaphor thus constitutes the topology of the entire short story), together with the fact that these metaphors demand translations, since they are of a particularly quiet sort: they only insinuate, their meaning is never stated explicitly. An example of a reading in search for meaning is John Sturrock's, who stresses that the story is misread every time the Library is seen as a symbol of the world. Sturrock argues that the Library - instead of representing the world outside - really represents all other representations. The Library is not, he claims, a *Book of Life*, but rather a *Book of Books*, a representation and reduction of the artificial universe of literature. This reading is no doubt possible, but not on the expense of the other, and more traditional, reading; Sturrock's reading is certainly not wrong, but the aspect of the story which he seeks to accentuate, does not contain the essence of the story (Sturrock 103). In fact, a close reading of the story does not

¹⁶ Nonetheless it should be noted that his role is decisive on the technical level of the narrative, but this is an issue which this article will not be concentrating on further.

¹⁷ Another, much less frequent, approach to the story is the analysis of Borges' style in "La biblioteca de Babel".

support Sturrock's somewhat extreme reading: both the very first sentence, which compares the Library to the universe and thus invites us to read the Library allegorically, and the fact that the Library is replaced by "world" in the last paragraph, indicates, that the Library is to be read as a metaphor of the world/ the universe. But what exactly does Borges want to say about reality?

The peculiar mixture of order and chaos, which we find in "La biblioteca de Babel", is a favourite theme of Borges'; the best examples of similar treatments of this theme are to be found in "La casa de Asterión" and "La lotería en Babilonia". Conceptually, the library seems, at first sight, to be comprehensible and ordered; we can fully understand the system according to which the library has been constructed. On the other hand, we never find the solution to the mysteries (the narrator's solution in the last paragraph is a pseudo-solution) about the dimensions of the library, and about when, how and by whom it was created. Both empirically and structurally, for the inhabitants of the library, the library contains a certain order: the rooms are ordered in such a way that one can see everything from everywhere, i.e. it is panoptical (apart from the small rooms in between the hexagonal rooms, which serve as dormitories and allow the inhabitants to satisfy their "physical necessities" (65)). This panoptical layout, where any place in the library is visible from any given hexagon, has been considered by Foucault as an authoritarian room, as an image of total control – no private rooms (or thoughts) are possible (but, admittedly, a library is usually a public place). The structure can be compared to a prison, built in a way that allows the prison guard to see all the cells from one point (Sarlo 70-71). At the same time, however, everyday life in the library is also chaotic for the librarians, for the focal points of the day, the books, are an abyss of incomprehensibility and lack of structure – although it is claimed that a formula or frame for the books' arbitrary content has been found. As is the case with the labyrinth, the library consists of a paradoxical connection between order and chaos. Furthermore, one could claim that the project for the inhabitants of the library is to find an order in the chaos which surrounds them, a chaos which is deliberate, and is, consequently, the result of some kind of intellectual order. The labyrinth hosts the same exceptional tension: it is

made to get lost in. Even the story's title hosts this contradictory pair: the library alludes to an order, a cataloguing of the books, whereas Babel connotes Babylonian confusion or chaos, as well as, for instance, the English word "babble".

In the library's and the books' universe there is no order, and since everything is written in the books, there is no ethic either. In other words, one cannot judge what is right and what is wrong, since everything is represented to an equal degree. This – together with the chaotic organisation of the words – inexorably leads to a scepticism towards causal conclusions (that A leads to B, etc.), and all utterances are thus permeated with a certain relativity, for it is very unclear what one really knows. Traditionally it is said that we understand through language and articulation, but in the Library, where the words reign, and where the only lawfulnesses are of a purely linguistic sort, language is, paradoxically enough, drained of meaning. The narrator's methodical approach to searching in the Library is therefore without meaning; "(...) To locate book A, first consult book B, which tells where book A can be found; to locate book B, first consult book C, and so on, to infinity..." (71)¹⁸; and he is just as wrong as the other librarians, whose activities he describes, not without a certain irony. The closest we get to a reasonable methodical approach to the Library is the one used by a "blasphemous sect" (70): "(...) in my childhood I have seen old men who for long periods would hide in the latrines with metal disks and a forbidden dice cup, feebly mimicking the divine disorder" (70). But this is exactly where the law is broken, for once "the authorities were forced to issue strict orders." (70). This "divine disorder" and the impossibility of establishing causal relations, leads us to some persisting themes in Borges' work: we cannot definitively grasp reality, for it is an illusion¹⁹, and life is, ultimately, nothing but a mystery.

¹⁸ This procedure is reminiscent of the one attributed to Herbert Quain's (in "Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain" from the short story collection *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1941)), who constructs his plots backwards.

¹⁹ These notions are to be understood, among other things, in the light of Berkeley's idealism.

In addition to chance becoming "the divine disorder", the Library also has the almost diametrically opposed effect of implementing fatalism in its inhabitants. Everything, as we know, is written in the books, that is to say, also the future of the inhabitants, which means that all actions are predetermined. Many have therefore attempted to find the book in which their lives were described, but – naturally – in vain. The narrator has a similar problem regarding the very epistle, which is "La biblioteca de Babel": "To speak is to commit tautologies. This pointless, verbose epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five bookshelves in one of the five bookshelves in one of the countless hexagons – as does its refutation." (73). In other words, it is impossible to create something new; the Library is far bigger than the single and disillusioned individual.²⁰ Two normally opposed approaches and world views are simultaneously at play in the Library: the belief in chance and determinism.

The topology in "La biblioteca de Babel" also entails a certain perspective. By this, I am not referring to the narrator's perspective, but rather to the perspective which must generally affect the inhabitants of the library and "life in the library" (which, after all, the narrator is a part of as well), that is to say, a basic condition which influences the kind of being that exists in the library. In the short story collection that followed *Ficciones* (1944), namely *El Aleph* (1949), we find two stories, which seem to go hand in hand: "El Aleph" (after which the collection has been named) and "El Zahir". In both fictions, the narrator is called Borges (although he is not Borges the author, but merely a persona), and in both of them the narrator's female muse, who is also his unrequited love, dies. But what interests us in our context is a difference in perspective between the two stories, which Carter Wheelock, among others, has examined more closely. In "El Aleph", "Borges" finds a magical point, the Aleph, from where he can see all other points, and in the description of this vision, the text

²⁰ This is, in part, also something Borges himself has experienced, since he was convinced of the impossibility of creating something new by oneself – only by creating new combinations of already created things, could something original arise. Thus, the writer becomes a collector of literary ideas rather than a (romantic) genius. The intertextual aspect of Borges' writings is treated in more detail in connection with his use of allusions in the section on "Representational technique and problems of exposition".

kaleidoscopically maneuvers its way across a detailed an polyphonic reality, which reveals itself to the narrator. The opposite is the case in "El Zahir", where "Borges" finds a magical coin, the Zahir, which exerts such a strong force of attraction over him (it connects him with his deceased muse, Teodelina Villar) that in the end he cannot think of anything else: "Ya no percibiré el universo, percibiré el Zahir" (OC 1: 595). In other words, this means that the Zahir constitutes the final limit of perception, and the difference between the two forms of perspective consists in the fact that the Aleph establishes contact between "Borges" and the manifold universe, whereas the Zahir rather makes "Borges" fall into himself; it entails a sort of meditation or introspection, an inner reality as lively as a dream. The movement in "El Zahir" goes from the universe to the point (which is the Zahir), while in "El Aleph" it is reversed: from the single point to the universe. Carter Wheelock contrasts the universal vision in "El Aleph" with the perspectivism in "El Zahir", a difference which, ultimately, he conceives as a difference between pantheism and monotheism respectively (12-13).

If one is to compare these two contrasting forms of perspective with "La biblioteca de Babel", where we should focus not on the narrative perspective, but on the perspective for every single librarian, then we can observe, firstly, that empirically, there is no magical point; it exists only in theory (and through the intellect) in the form of the catalogue of the Library, which - like the Aleph - provides access to everything. There is no centre or concrete Aleph in the Library, as the narrator stresses almost immediately: "Let it suffice for the moment that I repeat the classic dictum: The Library is a sphere whose exact centre is any hexagon and whose circumference is unattainable". (66)

A sort of universal vision exists in the daily life of the Library, for since the rooms are identical and are repeated, apparently, into infinity, one can see (a reflection of) everything, from everywhere. But such a vision does not have the character of an epiphany, as in "El Aleph", it is, instead, a grey and uniform reality (as opposed to the Aleph's multiplicity); it is a universal vision in a disillusioned and prosaic form; everything is the same. And ultimately, we see practically nothing; we do not see the truth, which cannot be understood

empirically, only (if possible) intellectually, we only see the veil (of Maya), which envelops everything like a mist. There are, thus, no Alephs accessible for the inhabitants of the Library, and neither is there, really, any polyphony for such Alephs to unite. In the Library, all that is polyphonic lies in the books, and there, it is already united as much as possible.²¹

A hint of the perspectivism in "El Zahir" can also be traced in "La biblioteca de Babel". The French symbolists sought, as Borges can be said to do, to gain access to an ideal world, but, as opposed to Borges', their method consisted in exalting the empirical space to impose symbolism on the concrete world, and in the belief that reality contains elements of the ideal. But when one sees the world as meaningless, as the Library's inhabitants do (as the narrator's account of the philosophical tendencies indicates), then the only thing which remains is to turn one's gaze inward. The same is true for Borges the writer, who, as we will see later (in the section on problems of exposition), also thought it meaningless to trust in empirical realities, and who, it should be added, from his idealist position, seems to consider the external world an illusion. With this in mind it is easier to understand where this monstrous Library from another world comes from: Borges' imagination.

THE LABYRINTH

As we have seen, the Library in "La biblioteca de Babel" is also characterized by its labyrinthine structure; both the Library's architecture and its books are of a labyrinthine character. In terms of space, we are dealing with a static and symmetrical labyrinth, without a centre and without entrances and exists, but the symmetry, or the rigorous structure, reveal that the Library must be the work of a Creator or Designer. As concerns the books, it is more difficult to

²¹ Yet, Borges does use his Aleph-method in "La biblioteca de Babel", a method which, put very simply, here consists in enumerations, which succeed in uniting heterogeneous elements by means of a kaleidoscopic manoeuvre. On p. 69, the narrator enumerates examples of the contents of the Library, and here we are dealing with the biggest possible multiplicity.

detect a structure, for everything is apparently chaos. It is equally pertinent that the three entities, the Library, the books and the labyrinthine, are closely related, for the librarians are searching for the Book in the rooms of the Library, which allows us to speak of the labyrinth in the labyrinth. Another thing the Library and the books have in common – apart from the fact, of course, that physically they belong together – is that there is no right way around either labyrinth, and that it is impossible either to find or to produce a map over them – or rather: the key does exist in theory, but not in practice. The labyrinth is a recurring symbol in Borges' works, used first and foremost – as is the case with "La biblioteca de Babel" – to emphasize that life is labyrinthine.

In the short story collection *El Aleph*, there is a story, called "La casa de Asterión", in which a voice describes the house, where the narrator lives in solitude, as well as his thoughts/fantasies. The narrator defends the house and denies that it is a prison. Only in the end does the reader realize that the narrator is a Minotaur, and that the house he lives in is a labyrinth. Again, one interpretation of the story is, of course, that the house is a symbol of the world, which is seen as being labyrinthine. Equally important, however, is the thought that the labyrinths which man builds are different attempts at expressing a basic labyrinthine condition.²² Thus, the labyrinth compares to life, but it compares to life by virtue of the way in which we perceive the latter, and our perception, together with the consequent abstraction, also has a labyrinthine character. Furthermore, this all relates to Borges' view of fictionality: not only can we be deceived by our perception and sense of the world, but our abstractions or thoughts are fictitious as well.

In the short story "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan", the meaning of the labyrinth is expanded even further. From being a space with a multitude of ramifications and possible choices of roads, the labyrinth is now also connected with time: any choice also means a renunciation of other possible choices, and Borges plays with the thought of the simultaneous existence of actual and discarded choices. The labyrinth is now also an expression of several

²² Among others, Tony Tanner deals with this issue (167).

different realities in time (as well as in space), and hereby Borges attempts to question that which (according to him) is the normal, chronological and one-dimensional view of time, which we erroneously attempt to impose on reality in order to be able to comprehend it.

“El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” is constructed as the confession, or rather a description, of the spy Yu Tsun’s crime. He is to be executed by guillotine, and his narration is both “dictated, reread and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun (...)” (75). Yu Tsun’s tale functions as an elaboration of Liddell Hart’s *The History of the World War*, since he provides us with an alternative (and no doubt more interesting) explanation of why a battle during World War I was postponed by five days. I will return to the importance of this frame to the story, which thus gains in realism and authenticity, later in this article.

We are told that the first two pages of Yu Tsun’s story are missing, and we accordingly begin *in medias res*: “... and I hung up the receiver” (75). Yu Tsun is a Chinese spy serving the Germans during World War I, he is stationed in Staffordshire, England, and possesses secret military knowledge about the location of the allied artillery base, which is to be used in an attack on Germany as a part of the offensive at Somme: namely in the French city Albert. This information has to be passed on to Berlin, and Tsun decides to kill a man named Stephen Albert, since he knows that “the Leader” has the habit of “poring infinitely through the newspapers” (76) and will therefore break the code, and that Albert will be bombed before the attack planned by the allies. But a counter-espionage agent, Richard Madden, is on Tsun’s trace. The latter realises this when he learns that Madden has just killed one of Tsun’s colleagues, Viktor Runeberg. Yu Tsun therefore hurries to Ashgrove, where Albert lives, but as soon as he arrives, the story changes. Tsun approaches Albert’s house as one would make one’s way towards the centre of a labyrinth: by taking a left turn at every forking of the path, and it turns out that the Sinologist Stephen Albert is the man who has solved the riddle about Yu Tsun’s ancestor, Ts’ui Pên. The latter had two projects: he wanted to write a novel, and he wanted to construct an infinite labyrinth. After his death (he was killed by a stranger), only chaotic manuscripts, which no one could make sense of, were found.

But Albert has broken the code: the novel and the labyrinth are (of course) one and the same thing; and he explains this to Yu Tsun. The novel seems chaotic because it not only tells a story, but describes all the possible ramifications, which the situations in the novel offer. When all this has been revealed to Tsun, he nonetheless kills Albert, hurried on by Madden's intrusion into the garden. Thus we return briefly to the war and spy story, which had been abandoned at Tsun's meeting with Albert. Finally, we are told that "The Leader" broke the code, and that Albert was consequently bombed.

If one disregards the outer frame of the story, which places it in a historical light, and focuses only on Yu Tsun's tale, then "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" can be said to consist of four parts: the first part ends when Tsun leaves the station in Ashgrove; the second part describes the walk from the station to Albert's house/garden; the third part deals with Tsun's meeting with Albert; and the fourth part is triggered by Madden's entrance into the garden and Albert's murder. Apart from the historical frame which is constructed around Tsun's tale in the first part of the story, there are also other frames to be found: the first and fourth parts form a kind of frame around the third part, and thus we again detect – like in "La biblioteca de Babel" – a labyrinth within the labyrinth (and even continue a few more times with the enumeration), and therewith an aesthetic manifestation of the Chinese box-system. The second part of the story plays a particularly important role, since the spy-story and the third part, the centre of the story, which takes place in Albert's "Garden of Forking Paths", are apparently unconnected, and the second part functions as a passage between the two, given that it introduces the theme of the story, the labyrinth. But to return to the divergence between the first and the third part: why has Borges chosen to give the meeting between Yu Tsun and Albert such a frame?

There are several possible answers and explanations to this question. The most obvious one is that the frame is what gives the story its suspense. Further, it must be noted that the fantastic element of the story actually relies in this lack of coherence and in the incredible fact that the man whom Yu Tsun finds by looking in the telephone book, and whom he has to kill, incidentally happens to be the man who has solved the riddle about Tsun's ancestor. There is a

clear irony of fate here: that Tsun has to kill the man who actually gives him the key (also to Tsun's own life), and that Tsun, just as he has found the key never gets to use it, since he is caught and presumably executed after Albert's murder. And an extra layer of irony is at play, since Albert, who has broken the "code" to the mystery about Ts'ui Pên, is himself part of a new code, the one that is sent to Berlin. The two different realities in the story, the spy-plot and the discussion about Ts'ui Pên, are in many ways equivalent to the difference between empirical reality and the universe of literature. As D.L. Shaw notes (*Borges' Narrative Strategy* 64), the story has a realistic frame supported by historical references, but a fantastic core, which makes the realistic frame collapse.²³

In the second part of the story, the idea of the labyrinth is introduced with Yu Tsun's reflection about the fact that the way to the centre of certain labyrinths is found by always turning to the left. Yu Tsun notes: "I am something of a connoisseur of mazes (...)" (79), and the memory of his great-grandfather leads him to imagine an infinite labyrinth, a "labyrinth of labyrinths" (79), which contains "both past and future" (79). Thus, already before his meeting with Stephen Albert, Yu Tsun affronts the idea of a labyrinth which combines both time and space, but, as opposed to Albert, he only operates with one past and one future. The thoughts about an infinite labyrinth make Tsun forget all about Madden's threat (for a while), just as literature can make the reader forget himself and his surroundings. This parallel between labyrinth and literature is explored further later in the story, when the two entities are united in Pên's novel.

Also, in the second part, the reader learns that Ts'ui Pên, Yu Tsun's great-grandfather, was killed by "the hand of a foreigner" (79), which is exactly what is about to happen to Stephen Albert. In this manner, a parallel is created between Pên and Albert, which clearly increases the irony about the fact that Tsun kills Albert, the man who is all but a reincarnation of Tsun's ancestor. This is also part of the reason why Tsun feels "contrition" (86) upon having killed Al-

²³ I will return to the issue of the historical references and the reason why the frame collapses later in this article.

bert. Thus, his plan cannot be said to have been a success, even if he did, on a purely practical level, pass his information on to Berlin.

A third very important piece of information, which is provided in the second part of the story, is the reference to *Hung Lu Meng*²⁴, a famous Chinese novel, containing a character named Yu Tsun (Irwin 88). Paradoxically, this piece of information augments Yu Tsun's – and with him, the story's – fictionality, after all the energy that has been spent on imbuing the story with authenticity, but this is a typically Borgesian trick: that certain details, if more closely examined, are actually full of meaning. As D.L. Shaw observes, the reference to *Hung Lu Meng* may carry deeper implications than just the one about the story's fictionality: "(...) it may carry the more disturbing implication of the fictionality of everything and everybody, including ourselves" (*Borges' Narrative Strategy* 64).

In pragmatic terms, the focal point of the story is a dialogue between Yu Tsun and Stephen Albert, where Albert expounds Ts'ui Pên's theory about the bifurcation of time. Thus the story hosts, as so many of Borges' stories do, a philosophical theme, which enters into a sort of transaction with the aesthetic expression. Also, it could be said that a hypothesis or a central question, which determines the story, is present here, a "what if?" (Shaw *Borges' Narrative Strategy* 65): what if there were a multiplicity of simultaneous time-lines, also for all the things we chose not to do? There is a notable element of playfulness in such a philosophy, which carries only little pragmatic value. We seem rather to be dealing with something like a game for the distanced viewer of the world, which appears to fit well with Borges' scepticism and doubt about man's ability to perceive correctly. But at the same time, it is an incredible theory, which can disturb (that which Borges indirectly sees as, or assumes is) the traditional and comfortable way of seeing the world and of understand-

²⁴ *Hung Lu Meng* or *Hung Lou Meng* (English title, *Dream of the Red Chamber*) is an unfinished novel (just like Ts'ui Pên's) written by Tsao Hsueh-Chin (1719-1764) in the last decade of his life. It was first published in 1792, and upon its publication, the "editor", Kao Ngho, claimed that the forty chapters which had suddenly been added to the end of the novel, were some of Hsueh-Chin's fragments, which Ngho had found and collected. In reality, however, Kao Ngho had composed these forty chapters himself (Irwin 88-91).

ing time, namely as a linear and chronological progress. The forked conception of time is, in many ways, an evolution of the circular conception of time, as e.g. Nietzsche has described in his notion of the eternal return, and which Borges was very fascinated by, as his literary production reveals. In both theories, we find a sort of *out-of-body* experience, a sort of ecstasy, the thought that "I" is not only that which I have and have been able to sense and understand, but that "I" also exists in another time.

Psychologically speaking, the experience of bifurcated time and of the simultaneous existence of several realities must also have a certain influence on the person involved. Firstly, it probably entails a certain distance to the surrounding reality, since one would know that it is only one of many realities. In Borges' terms, this is closely related to a universal vision, as, for instance, in "El Aleph" (and as opposed to the perspectivism in "El Zahir", where one only lives and breathes for one thing). Or, as Stephen Albert puts it (85):

(...) In most of those times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others, I do and you do not; in others still, we both do. In this one, which the favouring hand of chance has dealt me, you have come to my home; in another, when you come through my garden you find me dead; in another, I say these same words, but I am an error, a ghost.

Another effect of this conception of time is that the individual choice seems insignificant, since the choice which one discards is also chosen. This would no doubt entail a great sense of freedom, as well as an elimination of morality and responsibility. Yu Tsun, in fact, experiences the plural conception of time which Albert has outlined for him (86):

I sensed that the dewdrenched garden that surrounded the house was saturated, infinitely, with invisible persons. Those persons were Albert and myself - secret, busily at work, multiform - in other dimensions of time.

And Yu Tsun's vision even has a more nostalgic tone than Albert's interpretation of the theory; he only senses those dimensions of time where both he and Albert are present. One interpretation of

this could be that Tsun finally feels that he has found an ally in the mysterious universe of the labyrinth, for he sees himself with Albert secretly working in the garden, which is of a labyrinthine character, both because one has to turn left in order to reach it, and because Albert has named it "The Garden of Forking Paths". Albert, on the other hand, does not seem to feel any particular connection with Yu Tsun. For instance, he is convinced, throughout his meeting with Yu Tsun, that the latter is a consul called Hsi P'eng, which, incidentally, is a name more similar to Ts'ui Pên than to Yu Tsun. After Tsun's experience of forked time, one-dimensional reality comes back into play, with Richard Madden's (and consequently, Yu Tsun's mission) appearance in the garden, which makes Tsun's vision dissolve. Thus, Tsun again finds himself face to face with reality and murders Albert, which he repents of in his last sentence: "(...) (no one can know) my endless contrition, and my weariness" (86). Yet he tries to console himself both with the thought that everything went according to the plan ("the Leader" broke the code), and by emphasising that he - after having told Albert that he was his friend - killed him in a humane way (86):

(...) he turned his back to me for a moment. I had cocked the revolver. With utmost care, I fired. Albert fell without a groan, without a sound, on the instant. I swear that he died instantly - one clap of thunder.

D.L. Shaw argues that the murder of Albert is insignificant to Tsun, because he accepts Pên's plural conception of time according to which Albert lives in other times as well (Shaw *Borges' Narrative Strategy* 66). However, the case is rather that the linear conception of time returns with Tsun, who experienced Pên's circuit of time as a "gossamer nightmare" (86), and therefore, after the murder, feels responsibility and guilt, for he has actually killed Albert, whom he had grown fond of. The thoughts about the bifurcation of time were only unreal, a closed train of thought, disconnected from reality, a game equivalent to (it seems) literature, the labyrinth and the game of chess. The latter is also of great interest to Borges, and in our story it is mentioned, for instance, that Pên was "a chess player" (81), and the solution to Albert's example of a riddle, is precisely the

word “chess” (85). Regarding the relationship between Tsun and Albert, it is important to note that Tsun does not perceive the murder as part of a game – instead, his action is serious and full of pathos, as Borges himself stressed on a later occasion (qtd. in Shaw *Ficciones* 43):

Yu Tsun doit tuer Albert pour que l’effet soit bouleversant, pathétique. La personne qu’il tue doit compter pour lui; autrement, cela n’aurait aucun sens. Il est plus pathétique que Yu Tsun tue un homme ayant su comprendre l’énigme de son propre ancêtre, un homme devenant presque son parent.

The irony is increased by the revelation that Yu Tsun’s mission was, in the end, rather useless, although he himself believes the contrary: “I have almost abhorrently triumphed ...” (86). Firstly, as we learn from Borges’ introductory paragraph, the allied attack on the German front was only postponed for five days, a “(...) delay that entailed no great consequences, as it turns out” (75); Yu Tsun, that is, had lost in any case. Next, it turns out, as Jack Himelblau has pointed out in an article, first, that Borges’ reference to Liddell Hart is deliberately inaccurate, and second – and no less important in this context – that Yu Tsun’s otherwise successful mission is useless, since the Germans already knew that the British were engaging in military activities in the vicinity of Albert (Himelblau 37-42). Thirdly, in the last paragraph, Yu Tsun remarks the following about the town of Albert (86):

Yesterday it was bombed – I read about it in the same newspapers that posed to all of England the enigma of the murder of the eminent Sinologist Stephen Albert by a stranger, Yu Tsun. The Leader solved the riddle.

But if the notice about the bombing of Albert and the murder of Stephen Albert are in the same newspaper, then Yu Tsun’s code has not had much importance, for the code is only sent with the paper where the bombing of Albert is reported, i.e. too late. In this way, Borges illustrates – as he did in “La biblioteca de Babel” – that action is, in many cases, a futile activity, because as individuals we are a limited entity which cannot control external reality. Hence it is very

difficult (not to say impossible) to create causal relations, as well as to draw logical conclusions. Moreover, as we have seen, Yu Tsun's plan collapses (just like the historical frame), since he cannot force it on reality.

Borges' double vision, which, as we said earlier, encompasses both the tangible and the incomprehensible, is also a condition or an effect which is present in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan". But in this story (as opposed to "La biblioteca de Babel"), the double vision is less a result of the story's topology, the labyrinth, than a product of the literary form of exposition. Generally speaking, the indistinct element in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" consists in two things: a) a tension between fiction and reality, which is disturbed, in particular, by the realistic frame surrounding the story; b) the effect which the thought of several simultaneous realities has on the reader, in terms of the techniques of reception.

A recurring literary strategy in Borges' writings has to do with the relationship between fiction and reality. He often uses a "realistic" genre, such as the essay, the book review or the obituary, in order to increase the reader's empathy and to imbue his writings with more "closeness". For instance, if one didn't know better, Herbert Quain might well have been a real person, but the fact that "Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain" appears in the short story collection called *Ficciones*, naturally causes some scepticism in the reader concerning the text's authenticity. In "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote", the fictitious element is yet more evident, since the realistic form encloses an incredible and improbable project, which Menard has supposedly elaborated in all secrecy: the re-creation of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, word for word.

A similar literary strategy is at play in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan", where the extraordinary theory about the bifurcation of time is wrapped in a concrete war story. As we have seen, however, there are certain crevices in the historical frame, e.g. the inaccuracy of the reference to Liddell Hart and the improbability of Yu Tsun's tale: both the casual meeting with Albert and Pên's novel are unlikely entities. Apart from all this, the fictionalisation is activated by means of the reference to *Hung Lu Meng*, which communicates to the reader that authenticity is neither a necessity nor something

aimed at in Borges' literary production. Nonetheless, certain realistic tools are employed in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan". These have the effect of making the reader imagine the story's space in empirical reality and with the laws of that reality, whereby the fantastic element, when it enters into play, becomes stronger and seems even more incredible than usual.

But the primary double vision in the story stems from the very thought of forking paths in time. When the reader – as Yu Tsun before he kills Albert – identifies with the theory, the text and the narrative, where the theory is expressed, stand out like an unclear entity. For in many times, *El jardín* does not exist; in others it does exist, but the reader does not read it; in yet others, the reader reads *El jardín* in a slightly different version (in a time where Borges decided to write something which in this time he rejected); and so on. In this manner, the story also implies everything that it is not, it is merely one example of language, and it is not necessarily superior to other versions, although it was this version, which Borges chose to write. Such a view of writing is to be seen in the light of the author's feeling of impotence towards language, which is so much vaster than the single human being. The author is subject to the world which has created him, and since he does not dominate either language or the world, he cannot claim to have "seen the light": he can provide examples of language, but he cannot create an ultimate or true representation of reality. If one follows this train of thought, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" ends up being like one of the books in the library of "La biblioteca de Babel".

Borges' scepticism towards the possibility of faithfully representing the world can be extracted from Ts'ui Pên's novel.²⁵ Albert reads out a fragment from the novel to Yu Tsun in which two different solutions, or bifurcations, to the same situation are described (84):

He read with slow precision two versions of a single epic chapter. In the first, an army marches off to battle through a wilderness; the horror of the rocks and darkness inspires in them a disdain for life,

²⁵ Pên can be seen as a sketch of Borges because he connects the labyrinthine with language.

and they go on to an easy victory. In the second, the same army passes through a palace in which a ball is being held; the brilliant battle seems to them a continuation of the fête, and they win it easily.

Several things should be noted here. Firstly, that the two routes are each other's opposites; the first is rough, while the second is merry; and in between these two extremes, an infinite amount of other versions of the army's route can be imagined. Next, it is remarkable that the two versions end in the same way: the army wins the battle; thus, the different bifurcations can come to cross each other again. Furthermore, it does not seem to be incidental that in the second version, a sort of veil is cast over the army, due to which they confuse the battle with the party. But the two versions become really interesting when they are read allegorically: as images of different types of representation. As John Sturrock detected, the two different routes are very similar to Liddell Hart's short account of the postponement of the battle and Yu Tsun's/Borges' far more elaborate and incredible version of the historical event respectively. This reading is supported by the fact that "the palace", according to Sturrock, is one of Borges' recurring symbols of fiction, itself a superb stylistic construction (Sturrock 192). Fiction, of course, has the particular capacity of blurring the distinction between the imaginary and the real, which is exactly what happens to the army in the second version – although it does not weaken the army's effectiveness. Liddell Hart has thus chosen the dark and uninteresting route through the unlimited universe of representation, while Yu Tsun – who belongs to the "Dynasty of Light" – "throws an unexpected light on the case" (75). The outcome of the two versions is thus the same (the army wins), but what one does is apparently much less important than how one does it.

The labyrinth resembles the Library in the way it is constructed, and both entities function as images of literature. In the context of "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" we can – as with the Library – speak of ordered chaos: reality is seen as chaotic, and therefore Borges chooses to direct his look towards the inside, for the only thing one can be certain of is one's own thoughts and senses. It is with this movement of internalization that one/Borges constructs

the labyrinth (and literature), which comes to be an image of how reality is perceived. On this point, Borges' position is exactly opposite to some of the prevalent ideas in a century, where, for instance, Freud unveiled the unconscious (and, consequently, laid bare how little we know about what goes on in our psychological life), and when positivism raged to prove the external laws of life. With Borges, the situation seems to be different: here we find, rather, an inner, tangible order and an outer, incomprehensible chaos.

THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTING AND BORGES' MEANS TO OVERCOME IT

As we have seen throughout this article, Borges is very conscious of the fact that fictionalisation is inevitable in linguistic representation. In "La biblioteca de Babel", all books are placed side by side; they are not ranked in any way, and "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" is but one possible bifurcation among a multitude of other bifurcations. This indicates that Borges is – as is Foucault, incidentally – sceptical about the epistemological foundation on which experience is represented by language (Agheana 10), a scepticism which, naturally, has an influence on the representational techniques applied. Thus, in Borges' literary production, we find only very few examples of detailed descriptions of rooms where they do not carry a particular symbolical value. Borges in no way applies the literary method described by Roland Barthes²⁶, where meaningless details, "left-overs", imbue the fiction with authenticity and increase its realism by making the fiction look more like reality (which, according to Barthes, is itself full of rudimentary details). Such a strategy is quite disadvantageous for Borges, because it counteracts the construction of plot, which contains a variety of possibilities to create representational effects. Moreover, such details are misleading, since they attempt to conceal that the fiction is a fiction. It could be argued that

²⁶ The meaningless "left-overs" are described in *L'effet du réel* (1967). Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was, initially, a central figure in the Structuralist movement, but, towards the end of his activity, he turned against Structuralism (and himself), and moved towards Poststructuralism. In the latter movement, the role of the reader has gained notably in importance. The production of texts is seen as relying inexorably on the reader's decisive presence, the text is an activity, and the author is "dead".

Borges himself uses certain methods (among other things, the realistic genres, e.g. the essay) to eliminate the fictionality of the short stories. But it is important to keep in mind that these methods normally function only as entrance ways to the narration, and that they are dissolved, in one way or the other, at a later stage, whereby the fiction suddenly seems even more fictitious than it would have. A good example of this can be found in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", where, at the end of the story, fantastical and supernatural objects from the imaginary planet of Tlön are claimed to have invaded reality; a claim which, as the reader knows, is totally unfounded. This piece of information makes the fictionality of the story particularly evident and forces the reader to play an active role in the process. It is not a question of the reader getting caught up in the fiction and seeing it as an example of reality, or, simply, as reality, but rather one of the reader playing an active role with a critical approach to the text.

Apart from the fact that the limitations of language make fictionalisation necessary, Borges' pure style is also a result of this condition. In a more traditional use of literary language, its expressive qualities²⁷ are often emphasised, and the poet tends to search for the linguistic expression which is thought to represent, for instance, his inner reality. Such an approach to literature must necessarily arise from the premise that language is capable of expressing reality in all its complexity. But when one is convinced, like Borges, that only the fewest things can be expressed truthfully, then the expressive use of language becomes equivalent to a naive idea about the poet's control over the written word. For Borges, the alternative to expression is, as Ferrari has noted, the allusion, which has the effect of making the text point to a world outside itself. Borges tends to emphasise certain things and words in his use of allusions, which, in most cases, refer to other texts. Here, it is possible to distinguish between two types of reference: first, allusions to Borges' own texts ("internal allusions"), and second, allusions to the writings of other authors

²⁷ Here, I do not intend to refer specifically to Expressionism, which is a more radical view of language. I mean to refer, rather, to a common use of literary language, where the expressive possibilities of language are seldom rejected completely.

(“external allusions”) (Ferrari 110-111). Also on this point the reader’s role is emphasised, since he is expected to intercept the references, which demands quite an effort. Even after a quick reading of Borges, one cannot fail to notice the innumerable references, and therefore layers of meaning, present in any one of his texts. Yet, a Borgesian text does not function as a kind of rebus, where only one solution can add meaning to the text. The role which is attributed to the reader is freer than such, since Borges – despite the concreteness of his references – leaves a great openness in the language. In general, Borges shies away from hypostases and the denotative meaning of words (for instance, the Library is not just a library, and “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” is far more than a labyrinthine garden, it is also a novel by Ts’ui Pên, a short story by Borges and the title of a short story collection by Borges), which are entities that function as tools to fix the world and literature in an unequivocal image. However, if one repeatedly attempts, like Borges, to recreate the world mentally (by means of fantasy and imagination)²⁸, then connotation becomes indispensable as a literary tool. By means of connotation, new semantic connections, invisible to the prosaic eye, can be created. And the putting in doubt of a hypostases entails, as Wheelock argues (22), the negation of the history of thought and the return to an original chaos, a non-conceptualised world; a return to the un-created and amorphous. This may be true, but it should likewise be noted that the intertextual element is exactly what keeps the text within a certain (albeit very wide) frame. The allusions function like a boomerang, or like the hermeneutical spiral²⁹, since they take the reader on excursions outside the text, only to let him return with a bigger insight to the latter.

²⁸ Many of Borges’ short stories contain a new vision of the world, e.g. “La biblioteca de Babel” and “Tlön”.

²⁹ Hermeneutics is a doctrine of interpretation, which is characterized, among other things, by Friedrich Schleiermacher’s (1768-1834) hermeneutical circle. The circle describes a reciprocal action between part and whole. More concretely, the thought that one has to set off from a part (a guess) and compare it with the text’s whole, etc. This should bring the reader closer to an understanding of the text, since the part and the whole are brought closer together – but, in principle, the process is inconclusive.

The reader's role is thus emphasised in several ways, both in relation to the de-coding of the fictionalisation, and by giving the reader the task of filling in the blanks left by allusions and connotative meanings. As far as the latter are concerned, they set particularly high demands on the reader's imagination, for the connotation does not so much demand an exact knowledge about the reference (which often unfolds in several directions) as a capacity to create a link by force of imagination. Thus, it could be argued that Borges implicitly works with two different approaches to conscious existence: on the one hand, "to think", and on the other, "not to think" (Wheelock 31).

"Thinking" is here synonymous with fantasy and imagination, which both contain elements of the creational act (the creation of fiction³⁰), and is furthermore connected with the act of dreaming. "Not thinking" means possessing knowledge, and thereby a precise and clear fiction. It is a sort of automatism, where one is present to the material world without posing any metaphysical questions – in other words, an uncritical approach to existence. Thinking is the absence of knowledge, while the use of knowledge is an automatism, something ritualistic. Such a view of knowledge and language is influenced by both Valéry's claim that to name an object (a living reality) is to kill it, and Schiller's dictum that knowledge equals death. Life can thus be said to be made of illusion, i.e. creation.

Just as the reader is encouraged to use his imagination, so Borges uses it. According to John Ashbery, Borges does not believe (as opposed to Kafka) in the existence of an external order, and this circumstance determines his art, which, says Ashbery, is closed and "self-contained" (Ashbery 93-96). But it is not wholly true that Borges' literature is a closed universe comparable to, for instance, the European avant-garde tradition, for Borges' literature resembles reality, which is also – like the Library – both tangible and incomprehensible at once. And, as mentioned above, much of Borges' literary strategy relies in creating openness, in order to let the reader partake in the creation of the fiction. It is true that Borges looks inwardly,

³⁰ Here, Borges is working with a definition of "fiction" which encompasses our thoughts and our knowledge, since we cannot comprehend the world truthfully.

but not in order to create an isolated world or an autonomous form of literature. Rather (apart from the fact that this internalization is a necessary consequence of Berkeley's subjective idealism), he aims at creating a topology containing both an empirical reality and fantastic elements, which will help open the reader's eyes to the mystery of life. There are two ways out of this internalization: firstly, the strong imaginary force in which it results; and secondly, the clear logical thought, which is produced by means of the plot. These two contradictions are fused in Borges' writings, just as they are fused in the image of the labyrinth, which, with its incomprehensibility, is a rationally created chaos.

With one or more modern literary theories in hand, Borges could be a very fruitful read, but even if Borges must be said to be both modernist and an innovator of literature, his thought is not really rooted in modern philosophy. The biggest philosophical influence seems to be of a somewhat older date; first and foremost it stems from the Irish Enlightenment philosopher, George Berkeley, but also, for instance, David Hume, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Arthur Schopenhauer and Hans Vaihinger seem to have had great influence on Borges. Berkeley's primary contribution to philosophy regards the so-called problem of the external world, with which he denied that the external world existed independently of the perceiving consciousness. The objects in our experience exist only because they are perceived: *esse est percipi*. With this notion he rejected, for instance, Locke's assumption of a material world. This problem of the external world found its way to Borges, who does not attempt to describe the world objectively, but instead stresses the fictionality of the narrative. Even our knowledge (with which we think we understand the world, or, at least, see a certain coherence in it) is constituted by nothing more than useful fictions, as Berkeley noted. Perception can be said to be a connecting link between the outer world and our imagination, and therefore these two entities cannot be kept separate, since, by means of perception, they fuse into each other. For we do not perceive truthfully: when, for instance, we walk on the street, we do not perceive everything in our field of vision at once; in order to be able to frame the picture, we must choose something at the expense of something else, otherwise we would be un-

able to abstract and understand (this is the theme of Borges' short story "Funes el memorioso", which deals with a man who remembers everything and cannot abstract and communicate – he can see all differences, and only appreciates the non-identical³¹). The Borge-sian topology can be said to reflect the fact that the imaginary and the real cannot be kept separate, and Borges' spaces are thus – as we have seen – constructed in such a way that they contain and connect both elements: both logic and fantasy, both the tangible and incom-prehensible.

This particularly Borge-sian topology shares many characteristics with Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopias, which, put briefly, are different or other places where the world is condensed, reflected and turned upside down. In "Des espaces autres", Foucault estab-lishes a series of principles which are valid for heterotopias, which are a kind of counter-space that can be considered as the true char-acter of utopias. According to Foucault, heterotopias can be, for in-stance, the churchyard, the museum, the brothel, the ship or – and more interestingly in this context – the library and the garden. The library has the particular capacity of accumulating time, and we cannot but sense a certain similarity to the Aleph (Foucault 759):

(...) l'idée de tout accumuler, l'idée de constituer une sorte d'archive générale, la volonté d'enfermer dans un lieu tous les temps, toutes les époques, toutes les formes, tout les goûts, l'idée de constituer un lieu de tous les temps qui soit lui-même hors du temps, et inaccessi-ble à sa morsure, le projet d'organiser ainsi une sorte d'accumulation perpétuelle et indéfinie du temps dans un lieu qui ne bougerait pas, eh bien, tout cela appartient à notre modernité.

About the garden, Foucault remarks that in ancient Persia it was a particularly sacred place, "(...) qui devait réunir à l'intérieur de son rectangle quatre parties représentant les quatre parties du monde (...) » (Foucault 759). The heterotopias are thus an argument against

³¹ This is a concept used by T.W. Adorno (1903-1969). The non-identical is, simply speaking, all that is individual in a phenomenon. Under objective conceptualization, the non-identical disappears. The concept "horse", for instance, turns all horses into comparable entities.

the fact that things and places are both arbitrary and insignificant; for they carry a referential value, and therefore a kind of meaning. The similarity to Borges is striking, for his rooms are not arbitrary either; they are, on the contrary, carefully selected and minutely constructed, since they are to reflect the world as well as contain both the imaginary (the phantasmagorical) and the real. Or, as Foucault states: "(...) nous ne vivons pas dans un espace homogène et vide, mais, au contraire, dans un espace qui est tout chargé de qualités, un espace que est peut-être aussi hanté de fantasme (...) » (Foucault 754).

Although Borges creates counter-space, one cannot say (as one can say about many literary modernists) that he creates a counter-language. Borges' scepticism and his literary strategy, which demands the reader's active collaboration, attest to a critical approach to reality. But Borges does not as such insinuate that literature should offer resistance in relation to that which is enduring. As a writer, standing on the shoulders of literary heritage (cf. intertextuality) and being a product of the enduring, one ought not to try and change the world. Instead, Borges has attempted to create new worlds not – in my opinion – for readers to take refuge in, but rather in order to be able to (with his fantastic trains of thought and his "what if?") to create the world again and again. This way of viewing the world seems like a counterpart to the method suggested by the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev with his commutation test: one takes a look at the alternatives to the enduring, which thereby ultimately gains new life, by virtue of the new perspective from which it is perceived, and by virtue of what it is not.

SUMMARISATION

Jorge Luis Borges' ficciones host a special topology, which is generated by the wish for spaces to reflect duplicity between the tangible and the incomprehensible. The external world is, according to Borges, permeated with the paradox that we – as human beings – can at once sense it in all its concretion and perceive only a very limited part of it. Therefore, our image of reality does not coincide with the real world, and we are forced to accept that we are all tied inexora-

bly to a subjective perspective, which can never be definitively surmounted.

Thus, Borges' short stories are not designed to be a realistic and undistorted reflection of the external world, although they do borrow certain elements from empirical reality, and are an attempt to communicate a view of the world.

"La biblioteca de Babel" is to be read, first and foremost, allegorically, as an image of the world. The Library is characterised by being both minutely ordered and vastly incomprehensible. From an architectural point of view, the Library's structure is easily comprehensible, for it consists exclusively of hexagons, stacked closely together like in a beehive. All the rooms are identical; each room contains the same number of bookshelves and the same number of books (of the same format). On the other hand, the Library is apparently of infinite dimensions, both vertically and horizontally, and its books reveal no coherences, for they are utterly chaotic, although a structuring principle has been discovered: there are no two identical books in the Library, and all possible combinations within the given and uniform format are represented. The Library's spatial structure, as well as the books' structuring principle, suggests the existence of a creator, but any attempt to search for the book that might shed light on the Library's genesis is doomed to fail. It would be utterly without meaning to search, both because it is almost impossible to find books with the least bit of linguistic coherence, and because, even if one were to find the Book, its truthfulness would be highly questionable (it might as well be a false account of the Library's origin). It could be said that the Library can only (if possible) be understood intellectually, whereas an empirical approach is futile. The Library's topology triggers a paradox: everything is in the Library, but nothing can be found. Ultimately, this incredible world entails that two normally opposed worldviews have been adopted by its inhabitants: a belief in coincidence ("the divine disorder") and determinism (all fates must already be written somewhere, since the Library is total).

In "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan", Borges' double vision manifests itself in a different manner. The labyrinth, which is the main theme of the story, shares many characteristics with the Li-

brary, since they can both be said to be an ordered chaos: they are made to lose one's way in. But in this case, the connection is created more by the literary exposition than by the story's topology. Firstly, Borges employs a historical frame, which adds to the authenticity of the story, and the reader therefore finds himself reading an incredible story (the fantastic element relies, especially, in the coincidence: that, incidentally, the man Yu Tsun must kill, should be the only man who has solved the mystery about Yu Tsun's ancestor) in a realistic frame, i.e. an intangible text, which is not easily fixed. Secondly – and more importantly – the double vision in this story is related to Ts'ui Pên's thought or theory about a labyrinth in time, about the bifurcation of realities, which entails that other, simultaneous, realities exist (no less real than the one we are experiencing) side by side with our reality. This theory simultaneously suggests the obscurity or fictionality of Borges' story, for as a reader one cannot help but imagine the bifurcations of time where this story does not exist. Thus the story itself points to its own nature: it is only an example of language, it is, like one of the books in "La biblioteca de Babel", only one possibility of an infinite amount of possibilities. "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" is also a very good example of Borges' use of the plot: the introvert process of creation not only promotes the imagination; also the clear, logical vein has favourable circumstances here.

Borges' topology compares well to Foucault's heterotopias, which likewise contain a mixture of the clear and the indistinct, since they are the true character of the utopia. And just as the heterotopias are connected with other spaces than themselves and, thus, have a referential value, Borges' universe is not closed either – although it is fantastical. Borges creates another and incredible view of the world, which requires that we compare it to our world.

The realisation – that we can neither perceive the world truthfully nor provide a true linguistic communication of it – entails this double vision in Borges, but apart from that it also implies certain problems of exposition, which result in the use of a series of literary tricks. And it is due to one of these that we can affirm that Borges' literary universe is not closed – but open. In the fictions, innumerable allusions are made to Borges' own and other writers' works

and these allusions go beyond the text. In this intertextual³² game, the reader's role is emphasised, since the reader is expected to fill in the text's blanks, which arise, among other things, due to the fact that Borges' spaces are hardly ever described in detail. In any case, the reader's work with the allusions is not as mapped out as it may seem, for the allusions usually extend into several directions, and Borges' stories thus evade definitive interpretations.

The point is not to have a knowledge, which is held to explain events (as Liddell Hart), the point is to create a fiction.

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³² Intertextuality is, moreover, also present in "La biblioteca de Babel", where one of the points is that it is impossible to create something new, since the Library is total.

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