

Jorge Luis Borges

## The Babylonian Lottery

LIKE EVERYONE in Babylonia, I have been a proconsul, and like everyone a slave; I have known omnipotence, opprobrium and imprisonment. Look; the first finger of my right hand is missing. Look; through this rent in my cloak you can see a scarlet tattoo-mark on my stomach. It is the second sign, Beth. On nights when the moon is full, that letter gives me power over those men whose sign is Ghimel, but it subjects me to those with Aleph, who on moonless nights owe obedience to those with Ghimel. In the dawn twilight I have throttled the sacred bulls, in a cellar, before a black stone. For a whole lunar year I have been pronounced invisible. When I cried out no one answered, I stole bread and they did not behead me. I have known uncertainty: a state unknown to the Greeks. In a bronze room, before the silent handkerchief of the strangler, hope has not departed from me; in a stream of pleasures panic has not departed. Heraclides Ponticus reports with astonishment that Pythagoras remembered having once been Pyrrhus, and before that Euphorbus, and before that some other person; to recall similar vicissitudes, I have no need to call in death, or to resort to imposture.

JORGE LUIS BORGES is the brilliant and distinguished Argentinian poet who was practically unknown and untranslated in the English-speaking world until he was awarded (together with Samuel Beckett) last year's Formentor International Prize.

A note about him by his present translator, Mr. J. M. Cohen, appears in "Notes and Topics."

This almost appalling variety I owe to an institution that is unknown in other states, or that works there in an imperfect or secretive manner: the lottery. I have never traced its history; I know that the magi cannot agree about it; I know no more about it than a man unskilled in astrology can know about the moon. I belong to a crazy country in which the lottery is an essential part of reality; till to-day, I had never given it any more thought than to the behaviour of the inscrutable gods or of my own heart. Now, far away from Babylonia and its beloved customs, I reflect on the lottery with some astonishment, and remember the blasphemous conjectures that veiled men mutter in the twilight.

My father used to say that in olden days—was it centuries ago, or years?—the lottery in Babylonia was a game of the plebeian sort. He used to say (I do not know whether he was right) that barbers used to sell for a copper coin squares made of bone or parchment and inscribed with symbols. Then there used to be a draw in full daylight; and the winners received, without further resort to chance, some coins struck in silver. The procedure was rudimentary, as you see.

Of course these "lotteries" failed. Their moral value was nil. They were not directed at the whole of man's faculties, only at his hopes. Faced with the public's lack of interest, the merchants who started these trivial lotteries began to lose money. Someone tried to improve them; a few unlucky chances were inserted among the crowd of lucky numbers. By this improvement, buyers of

numbered squares ran the double chance of winning some money or paying a fine that was sometimes quite large. This slight risk (there was only one unlucky number for each thirty that were lucky) naturally aroused the public interest. The Babylonians gave themselves up to the game. The man who did not buy lots was considered a spiritless coward. In time this justifiable contempt found a second object. Not only the man who did not play, but also the loser who paid his fine was despised. The Company (as people then began to call it) then had to watch the winners' interest, for the prizes could not be given if almost the complete revenue from penalties failed to reach their coffers. It started a lawsuit against the losers, and the judge sentenced them either to pay the original fine and the costs or to spend some days in prison. In order to defraud the Company, all opted for prison. From this defiance by a few men the absolute power, the ecclesiastical and metaphysical force of the Company, originates.

A LITTLE LATER, the lottery lists ceased to mention the fines, and confined themselves to announcing the number of days' imprisonment carried by each unlucky number. This omission, which was almost unnoticed at the time, was of capital importance. *It marked the first appearance in the lottery of a non-pecuniary element.* The results were great. Under pressure from the players, the Company found itself compelled to increase the number of unlucky lots.

Everyone knows that the Babylonian people are deeply devoted to logic, and also to symmetry. It was inconsistent that the lucky numbers should be reckoned in round sums of money and the unlucky in days and nights in prison. Some moralists argued that the possession of money did not always bring happiness, and that other kinds of good-fortune are perhaps more efficacious.

A different dissatisfaction spread through the poorer districts. Members of the sacerdotal college bought a number of chances, and enjoyed every vicissitude of fear and

hope. The poor (reasonably or unavoidably envious) found themselves debarred from these risks, which were well-known to be delightful. The just desire that all, poor and rich alike, should participate equally in the lottery aroused an indignant agitation, the memory of which has not been effaced by the years. Some stubborn people did not understand (or pretended not to understand) that they were dealing with a new order of things, a necessary historical advance. A slave stole a crimson ticket, which in the draw carried the penalty that his tongue must be burned. But the law awarded the same penalty to anyone who stole a ticket. Some Babylonians argued that he deserved the red-hot iron on account of the theft; others who were more generous said that the executioner should burn his tongue in fulfilment of the lot he had drawn. There were riots and, most lamentably, there was bloodshed. But the Babylonian people finally imposed their will in face of opposition from the rich. They obtained the whole of their generous demands. Firstly, they succeeded in making the Company assume sole plenary powers. (This unification was necessary on account of the vastness and complexity of the new operations.) Secondly, they succeeded in making the lottery secret, free and universal. The sale of tickets for money was abolished. Once he was initiated in the mysteries of Bel, every free man automatically took part in the sacred lotteries, which were drawn every sixty nights in the labyrinths of the god, and which decided his fate until the next draw. The consequences were incalculable. A lucky draw could secure a man's promotion to the council of the magi or the imprisonment of an enemy (public or private), or a meeting, in the peaceful darkness of a bedroom, with the woman who is beginning to disturb us or whom we did not expect to see again; and an unlucky draw could bring mutilation, various kinds of disgrace, or death. Sometimes a single act—the assassination of C in a tavern, or the mysterious apotheosis of B—was the fortunate outcome of thirty or forty draws. This combination of chances was difficult. But it must

be remembered that the members of the Company were (and are) both all-powerful and astute. In many cases, the knowledge that certain pleasures were merely the outcome of chance might have diminished their virtue; to obviate this difficulty the agents of the Company resorted to suggestion and to magic. Their methods and manœuvres were secret. To discover the secret hopes and hidden terrors of each person, they made use of astrologers and spies. There were certain stone lions, there was a sacred latrine called Qaphqa, there were certain clefts in a dusty aqueduct which, according to popular belief, *led to the Company*; well-wishers or ill-wishers left their reports in these places. This information, which was of variable authenticity, was preserved in an alphabetical file.

STRANGE though it may seem, there was no lack of complaints. The Company, with its habitual discretion, did not answer them directly. It preferred to scribble on the ruined walls of a mask-factory a short argument, that has now been incorporated in the holy scriptures. This doctrinal statement observed that the lottery marks the interference of chance in the world-order, and that the acceptance of errors did not invalidate, but, on the other hand, increased its power. It observed furthermore that those lions and the sacred receptacle, although not disowned by the Company (which did not renounce its right to consult them) functioned without official guarantee.

This declaration dispelled the public unrest, but also produced other results, perhaps unforeseen by its author. It profoundly modified the spirit and the activities of the Company. I have not much time left; we have been warned that our ship is about to sail. But I will try to explain.

Incredible though it may seem, no one had so far tried to discover any general theory of probability. Babylonians are not much given to speculation. They respect the decisions of chance, entrust their lives, their hopes, their panic fears to them, but they

never think of investigating their labyrinthine laws, or the revolving spheres that reveal them. Nevertheless the official pronouncement that I have noted aroused many discussions of a judicio-mathematical character, one of which produced the following proposition: if the lottery represents an intensification of chance, an occasional infusion of chaos into the cosmos, would it not be proper for chance to operate at every stage of the draw, and not at one alone? Is it not absurd that chance should decree a man's death, and that the circumstances of that death—confiscation of property, publicity, delay of an hour or a century—should not be subject to chance? These very reasonable misgivings finally produced a considerable reform, the complexities of which (intensified by centuries of usage) are only understood by a few specialists. I will nevertheless attempt to give a brief account of them if only in symbolical form.

Let us imagine a first draw, which decrees that a man shall die. To complete this, a second draw takes place, which decides among (let us say) nine possible corollaries. Of these corollaries four may lead to a third draw which will decide the name of the executioner, two may substitute for the fatal decree a happy one (the discovery of a treasure, let us say), another may aggravate the penalty (that is to say, make the death a disgraceful one or embellish it with tortures), and others may forbid its fulfilment. . . . This the symbolic scheme. In reality *the numbers of draws is infinite*. No decision is final, all lead on to a number of others. The ignorant suppose that infinite draws require infinite time; in reality all that is necessary is that time shall be infinitely divisible, as we learn from the famous parable of the race with the Tortoise. This infinity is surprisingly congruous with the numerical convolutions of chance and with the Celestial Archetype of the Lottery, worshipped by the Platonists. Some distorted echo of our rites seems to have reached the Tiber. Aelius Lampridius, in his life of Antoninus Heliogabalus, mentions that this emperor used to write on shells the luck he reserved for his guests, so that

one would receive ten golden pounds, and another ten flies, ten dormice or ten bears. It is worth recalling that Heliogabalus was educated in Asia Minor, among the priests of the god whose name he bore.

There are also impersonal lots, of indefinite application: one ordains that a Taprobana sapphire shall be thrown into the Euphrates; another that a bird shall be released from the roof of a tower; another that every century an ounce of sand shall be subtracted from (or added to) the innumerable quantity on the beach. The consequences are at times terrible.

THANKS to the beneficent influence of the Company, our customs are permeated by chance. The buyer of a dozen jars of Damascus wine will not be surprised if one of them contains a charm or a viper; the scribe who draws up a document seldom fails to introduce some faulty detail; I myself, in this hurried statement have falsified a splendour here and a horror there. Perhaps also, some mysterious ennui. . . . Our historians, who are the most clear-sighted in the world, have invented a method of rectifying chance; the working of this method is well-known to be (generally) trustworthy, though, of course, it cannot be divulged without some measure of falsehood. In any case, there is nothing so contaminated by fiction as the history of the Company. . . . A palaeographic document, dug up in a temple, may be the product of

yesterday's draw, or of one centuries ago. No book is published without some difference between every copy. The scribes swear a secret oath always to omit, interpolate or vary something. The indirect lie is also practised.

The Company, with divine modesty, avoids all publicity. Its agents, as is natural, are secret; the orders it is continually (perhaps incessantly) giving do not differ from those promulgated by impostors. Moreover, who can boast that he is a true impostor? The drunkard who invents a ridiculous order, the dreamer who suddenly wakes and throttles the wife who is sleeping beside him, are they not perhaps carrying out a secret decision of the Company? Its silent functioning, comparable to that of God, arouses all kinds of conjectures. One abominable suggestion is that for centuries the Company has not existed, and that the sacred confusion in our lives is purely hereditary and traditional; another says that it is eternal and will endure till the last night, when the last god obliterates the world; another proclaims that the Company is omnipotent, but that it is only influential in tiny things, like a bird's cry, or the colour of rust or dust, or half-dreams at dawn. Another, speaking with the mouth of the masked hieresiarchs, says *that it has never existed and never will exist*. Another, just as base, argues that it does not matter whether you assert or deny the existence of this shadowy corporation, for Babylonia is nothing but an infinite game of chance.