CHAPTER 3

READING THE SHORT STORIES: THE BORGESIAN

As with any great writer, it is tempting to try to say what makes Borges who he is. Why is he worth reading? What particular set of qualities does he bring to literature? How does he relate to other authors? Accordingly, in the vast literature on Borges, there have been many attempts to identify the distinguishing characteristics of Borges. Critics have sought, on the stylistic level, to analyse his peculiar vocabulary and mode of expression. They have complied lists of those 'nine or ten' words that accord with his soul: infinite, circular, universe, the colour red. They have spoken of his habit of choosing unexpected and etymologically precise adjectives: 'unanimous' to qualify 'night' (*CF*, 96); 'interminable' to qualify a 'brick wall' (*CF*, 256). Critics have sought to speak more generally of Borges' style, which is notable for bringing an English concision to the grandiosity of literary Spanish. Borges' most recent translator notes Borges' frequent use of the semi-colon to replace the 'ands', 'buts' and 'thens' that usually link sentences.[1] The Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes speaks of Borges' 'dazzling prose, so cold it burns one's lips'.[2] On a still more general level, critics have sought to elaborate Borges' particular narrative strategies and preferences. These range from Borges beginning a story as though it were a review of a book to treating his own text as though it were an entry in an encyclopaedia. Critics speak as well of a certain 'thinness' to Borges' style, in which only selected moments from the events in question are given and everything is directed towards the final narrative revelation, with none of that excess of detail that produces the effect of the 'real' in fiction.[3]

On a still larger scale, critics have attempted to identify the broader ideas that animate Borges' fiction. These are, in part, that series of words we find throughout Borges' texts; but they are also the more abstract, amorphous concepts that do not

always directly feature there: time, heroism, the reversal of fate, the unreality of the world. It is the interplay of these concepts that can be understood to form the 'cardinal points' of Borges' universe and to give his work its underlying force. There is then the wider culture that Borges' work both comes out of and is a response to. This is that staggeringly diverse group of writers and thinkers whose work Borges is said to have been influenced by or to have otherwise encountered at some point in his career. This would include not only those writers with whom Borges bears some affinity (Chesterton, Shaw, Wells, Stevenson), but also those who exert a pressure on his work in their difference from it (Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, James). This series would also include particular philosophers, scientists and mathematicians whose works Borges read, or at least read about, and frequently made the basis for his stories: Zeno, Berkeley, Hume, Cantor. And, alongside all of this, the focus of much of the last twenty or thirty years of Borges scholarship is the question of Borges' general cultural situation. This is before all else to ask how everything spoken of above is mediated through Borges being Argentine. How did the fact that Borges comes from a faraway, provincial culture affect how he responded to the various cultural influences he came into contact with? How is his work to be seen not as an imitation of the European canon, but as an active response to it? In what ways does Borges speak of location in his work, beyond any obvious geographical reference?

All of these efforts to analyse Borges stylistically and thematically, to identify his literary and philosophical sources, to situate him and his work within wider social and historical forces, are absolutely essential to any consideration of him. We could not imagine a proper response to Borges that did not attempt to say what his particular contribution to literature was, what he managed to achieve that no one else had previously. To look at the various attempts by critics to undertake this is important at least in understanding the history of the reception of Borges, the way he has successively been taken up over time. And yet, as we outline in Chapter 1, there is a *limit* to these approaches, insofar as Borges' work constitutes a questioning of the assumptions behind them. Not only Borges' literary criticism, but also his stories ask how we can speak of what is unique or distinctive about a particular author. What is the connection between an

author and what they write? What is the relationship between an author and the cultural and geographical context in which they work? In other words, Borges is not only *subject to* the methods of literary criticism, but also *subjects* these methods to critical interrogation. He blurs the boundaries between fiction and criticism not only in introducing the methods of criticism into fiction but also in 'fictionalizing' criticism. And this is to say that he does not so much parody or satirize it as show that the logical assumptions underlying it are 'fictional', cannot entirely be demonstrated. However, if Borges makes it difficult to speak about him in challenging most of the usual ways of speaking about an author, it is *Borges* himself who does this. It is this challenge to or inversion of the conventional categories of criticism that *is* perhaps the 'Borgesian' in literature. It is this category of the Borgesian that we seek to take up here through a reading of three of Borges' texts: 'Kafka and His Precursors', 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*' and 'The Library of Babel'.

'THE LIBRARY OF BABEL'

'The Library of Babel' is another of Borges' signature stories, endlessly quoted and referred to, a veritable emblem of our time. Originally published in *The Garden of Forking Paths*, it was one of the two Borges stories translated into French by Néstor Ibarra for the wartime *Les Lettres françaises* that began the slow process of making Borges' reputation overseas. Said to have been inspired by Borges' time as a shelver of books at the Miguel Cané Municipal Library, the story was written during a difficult period of Borges' life. Many years later in an interview with Georges Charbonnier, Borges was to describe it as arising out of 'a feeling of loneliness, of anguish, of uselessness, of the mysterious nature of the universe, of time, and, what is most important, ourselves'.[11] And this diagnosis has been echoed by the story's interpreters, who have largely over the years seen the story as either about the futility of searching for meaning in an indifferent universe or a metaphor for the decline or exhaustion of Western culture.[12] Today, however, its vision of the possibility of the total availability of all knowledge is viewed in a more optimistic mode, thanks to the advent of the computer and the internet, and there is now a whole literature devoted to the connections between Borges' story and contemporary information technologies.[13] There are as well a number of recent publications exploring the relationship between 'The Library of Babel' and mathematics, particularly post-Cantorian set theory.[14] But, as so often with Borges, interpreters often leap to analogies or seek to make comparisons to other fields of knowledge without first reading the story closely. To understand properly what Borges has added to the questions of the search for human meaning, the exhaustion of literature and the new information technologies,

it is first necessary to understand what the story is saying in its own terms.

'The Library of Babel' begins with an extraordinary *visual* image, a superb and justly celebrated description of a Library that stretches away before our eyes towards a far distant horizon. It is a description that was perhaps influenced by a picture of a labyrinth Borges saw as a young boy, a depiction of a lonely Minotaur trapped inside a maze by the nineteenth-century English painter George Watts, and the prison etchings of Piranesi, as described by Thomas De Quincey. It is a description that might remind more contemporary readers of the strange topologies of M. C. Escher and the computer-generated spectacles of such films as *The Matrix*. Borges' description – and this is what is so effective about it – is at once sublime in its scale and domestic in its details, a vision of seemingly infinitely replicated galleries and connecting staircases hanging mysteriously in mid-air and of the unbearably cloistered and confined spaces of the Librarians who inhabit this world. Borges writes:

> The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries. In the centre of each gallery is a ventilation shaft, bounded by a low railing. From any hexagon one can see the floors above and below – one after another, endlessly. The arrangement of the galleries is always the same. Twenty bookshelves, five to each side, line four of the hexagon's six sides; the height of the bookshelves, floor to ceiling, is hardly greater than the height of a normal librarian. One of the hexagon's free sides opens onto a narrow sort of vestibule, which in turn opens onto another gallery, identical to the first – identical in fact to all. To the left and right of the vestibule are two tiny compartments. One is for sleeping, upright; the other, for satisfying one's physical necessities. Through this space, too, there passes a spiral staircase, which winds upward and downward to the remotest distance. In the vestibule there is a mirror, which faithfully duplicates appearances. Men often infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite – if it were, what need would there be for that illusory replication? I prefer to dream that the burnished surfaces are a figuration and promise of the infinite . . . (*CF*, 112)

What is this 'perhaps infinite' [*tal vez infinito*] Library made up of? It is here that we see one of Borges' long-running fascinations, already given ironic expression in the list of Menard's 'visible' productions. It is the idea of the systematic permutation of a limited number of symbols, whether alphabetic or otherwise, to produce a potentially unlimited number of outcomes. This possibility can be seen, for example, in Borges' essay on Raymón Llull's 'thinking machine', which by the different arrangements of a series of discs on which various symbols are printed produces an enormous number of prophesies and predictions (*TL*, 155–159). Or it can be seen in Borges' important essay 'The Doctrine of Cycles', in which he considers the notion that all things in the universe will eventually repeat themselves because the number of possible combinations of atoms will one day run out (*TL*, 115–122). Indeed, in August 1939, just a few months before he wrote 'The Library of Babel', Borges published the essay 'The Total Library' in *Sur*, in which he sketched the history of the imagining of a total library that would contain all possible books through the endless variation of all the letters in the alphabet (*TL*, 214–216). In 'The Library of Babel' itself, it is stated that its books are made up of every possible combination of the twenty-five orthographical symbols – twenty-two letters, the comma, the full stop and the space – within the format of books of 410 pages, with 40 lines per page, approximately 80 letters per line and a title on its cover. These permutations continue endlessly, so that, as a 'librarian of genius' (*CF*, 114) once noted, there are no two identical books in all of the Library. As the narrator goes on to elaborate:

> The Library is 'total' – perfect, complete and whole – and its bookshelves contain all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographical symbols (a number which, though unimaginably vast, is not infinite) – that is, all that is able to be expressed, in every language. *All* – the detailed history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the proof of the falsity of those false catalogues, a proof of the falsity of the *true* catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary upon that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your

> death, the translation of every book into every language, the interpolations of every book into all books. (*CF*, 115)

It is this that leads to the consideration of the great question that exercises the librarians of the Library of Babel. After concluding that the books within the Library are made up of all the possible combinations of the twenty-five orthographical symbols and that no two books are identical, they are then faced with the problem of how the Library can be 'infinite', as it is said to be. For they realize that, expressed in these terms, the Library is *not* actually infinite. Mathematicians have calculated that, using the parameters Borges sets out, the number of books in the Library would be $25^{1,312,000}$, more than the number of atoms in the universe, but still not infinite. Nevertheless, despite this, the narrator is still able to assert that the Library is infinite. How is this so? He provides his answer in the final words of the story, in terms that might remind us of the philosopher Immanuel Kant's cosmological antinomy in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he rejects the possibility both that the world does come to an end and that it does not come to an end:

> I have just written the word 'infinite'. I have not included that adjective out of mere rhetorical habit; I hereby state that it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who believe it to have limits hypothesize that in some remote place or places the corridors and staircases and hexagons may, inconceivably, end – which is absurd. And yet those who picture the world as unlimited forget that the number of books is *not*. I will be bold enough to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: *The Library is unlimited but periodic*. If an eternal traveller should journey in any direction, he would find after untold centuries that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder – which, repeated, becomes order: the Order. (*CF*, 118)

So how is it that the Library can be infinite if it is not in fact infinite? Or, better, how to think the Library as *both* finite and infinite? And how, finally, might all this relate to that logic of the labyrinth we have previously seen in other of Borges' stories? How, in other words, might we find the 'Borgesian' in

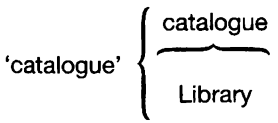
'The Library of Babel', which as we have argued is not a matter of any particular writerly style or narrative theme, but more a matter of *logic*? We might begin here with a moment from the previous passage we cited, in which the narrator speaks of the way that, given that the Library contains 'all that is able to be expressed', within the Library there is not only the faithful catalogue of the Library and thousands and thousands of false catalogues, but also the proof of the falsity of those false catalogues and even the proof of the falsity of the true catalogue. Of course, when we read this, what is raised is the very truth of *this* statement itself, insofar as it would be subject to the rule of possible refutation it enunciates. In other words, as many commentators have pointed out, there is no simple objective statement possible about the Library because this statement would itself be subject to the rule of the Library. And yet, equally, this could not be said, even this would not be true, unless there *were* something of this statement outside of the Library, not subject to its rule. In a sense, that is, the fact that there is nothing outside of the Library, that everything is subject to its rule, would be possible only because there *is* something outside of the Library – but the effect of this is to make this outside appear inside the Library and subject once more to its rule of refutation. No truth about the Library is ever simply true, but only stands in for its opposite and refutation, is, as it were, a refutation of its refutation.

We might put all of this another way. The narrator elsewhere speaks of the 'superstition' that there must exist somewhere in the Library a true catalogue of the rest of the Library, 'a book that is the cipher and perfect compendium *of all other books*' (*CF*, 116). The librarian who has read this catalogue, it is reasoned, must in some way be analogous to a God. But then the question is asked: how to find this catalogue? At first a method proceeding via regression is proposed. As the narrator describes it: 'To first locate book A, first consult book B, which tells us where book A can be found; to locate book B, first consult book C, and so on, to infinity . . .' (*CF*, 117) What is being hinted at here, what produces this infinite regress, is the fact that this catalogue, despite being the catalogue of 'all other books', is itself inside the Library. There is necessarily implied, therefore, *another* catalogue that would catalogue both this catalogue *and* the Library it catalogues. And this catalogue would in turn

require another to catalogue *it*, and so on. It is this that produces that infinite regress, in which we move from catalogue A to catalogue B to catalogue C. Indeed, within one of the almost infinitely many languages of the Library, *every* book could be this catalogue, every book in the Library attempts to speak about the Library, about 'all other books' in the Library. And, of course, it is for just this reason that *no* book can be the definitive catalogue of the Library, for it could no sooner be nominated as such than there would be required *another* that catalogues it. In this sense, the catalogue would be not so much some actual book as at once all books and no books. The idea of the catalogue *doubles* the Library, not so much imposing an order as repeating its disorder.

And, in fact, when we look at 'The Library of Babel', any number of objects play the role of this catalogue. To begin with, the story itself that we read is a kind of 'catalogue' of the Library, at once an attempt to clarify, abstract, state from the outside its rules and only a potentially meaningless series of orthographical symbols, subject to its rule. In a similar position too are the librarians, who likewise are outside of the Library, rationally attempting to formulate its rules, and inside the Library, subject to the normal human dogmas and superstitions, incapable of more than guessing at the Library's true principles. But perhaps the most revealing analogue to or translation of the catalogue are those mirrors in the Library's vestibules, which as the narrator says are a 'figuration and promise' of the infinite. For, of course, a mirror is a 'catalogue' of the Library, an attempt to capture it, reflect it, reflect upon it from somewhere else. But if we can draw out what is implied here a little more, how would it be possible to represent or reflect upon a literally infinite object? What distance would a mirror have to be from it in order to capture it on its surface? If we think of something like a telescope, an infinite distance – or, to put it another way, it would be *impossible* to reflect like a mirror a literally infinite object. Nevertheless, we would also say that it is only reflected in a mirror that the Library would be infinite. Its infinity would not exist until it had been represented in some way. What is this ultimately to suggest? If the Library necessarily includes its catalogue because it contains 'all that is able to be expressed', but contains 'all that is able to be expressed' only because of its catalogue,

where is infinity to be found here? As we have seen in all of the Borges stories we have looked at so far, it exists in the very *relationship between* the Library and its catalogue. Every attempt to speak of the Library from the outside is revealed to be inside the Library, but this in turn only because of another position outside of the Library. We might attempt to represent this diagrammatically:



All of this might be expressed in still another way, for we might ask how is it that the Library is infinite and able to express 'all that is able to be expressed' when we know that the actual number of books comes to an end? The clue lies in that passage where the narrator speak of the way that 'some have suggested that each letter influences the next, and that the value of MCV on page 71, line 3, is not the value of the same series of letters on another line of another page' (*CF*, 114), for this is to remind us of 'Pierre Menard', in which the repetition of the same letter in different circumstances produces a different meaning. It is ultimately to speak of the way that we can permute not merely letters but also books, read the books in the Library not in any single, linear order, but in a kind of wandering in which we encounter them in any order. In this sense, there would be as many Libraries as there are paths through the Library, with each different route allowing us to read its books differently. We can even imagine us moving not merely between different books but different *parts* of books, thus increasing exponentially again the number of possible Libraries. But, nevertheless, so long as we move through the Library in a single unbroken line, reading each book or part of a book just once, the Library will always come to an end. What is truly required for an infinite Library is the possibility of *repeating* oneself, of reading the same book *twice*. And this itself repeatedly. In other words, between any two points of the Library it must be possible to insert the rest of the Library, and within this Library insert the rest of the Library, and so on.

We would never actually have infinity, but the coming to the end of the Library can be indefinitely deferred. And yet – this again is our point about infinity existing only within limits – all of this only because we can repeat; this indefinite deferral is only a kind of counting back from the end. We have not an actual infinity, but rather endless 'interpolations' [*las interpolaciones*: crucially plural] between two, an infinity of *always one more*.

To conclude here: what exactly *is* the Library of Babel? It is – and this is why the last of those twenty-five orthographical symbols is the most important – the *space between* things. We see this, to begin, with the notion of refutation in the Library. As we have seen, not only does the fact that something is in the Library render it liable to be refuted, but this refutation itself is always able to be refuted. The process of refutation never stops or is never able to be grasped as such, but permanently divides things from themselves, meaning that something exists only as the negation of its negation, as standing in for its possible absence or opposition. And we see the same thing with the idea of a catalogue to the Library. Again, the catalogue is not so much some actual book as a process or hypothesis that permanently divides the Library from itself. Now even the same book in the Library is both the catalogue of 'all other books' and merely one of 'all other books'. Finally, as we saw with the reading of the books within the Library, the Library must be understood as what comes between any two points of the Library, and this itself indefinitely. It is both the infinite space that opens up within the same letter or book and what attempts to stand in for that space. In each case here, the Library is total, but only because of a certain space outside of it. It is precisely for this reason that it is never a matter, insofar as the Library is a labyrinth, of only one labyrinth but always two, a labyrinth inside a labyrinth: the labyrinth of Ts'ui Pen inside the labyrinth of Albert's garden; the labyrinth of the City of Immortals inside the labyrinth of underground passages; the labyrinth of the catalogue inside the labyrinth of the Library. It is to suggest that the labyrinth is always split between an inside and an outside; that it can only ever be infinite insofar as it has an outside, but that this outside in turn can only ever be understood as being inside. The split between the labyrinth and the world is also always a choice

between two paths in the labyrinth. There is only the labyrinth, but only insofar as we cannot be sure whether we are inside of it or not, whether indeed it exists or not.