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Borges and Humanity's Pathetic Attempts to Organize Its Thoughts

> *"Many have suggested that the complete works of Shakespeare could be written by 'a half-dozen monkeys in a few eternities.' But few claim so boldly as I that this is how they were actually produced."* – Borges, but not really.

A frequent task of both writers and scientists is to collect and connect observations about the world, and to mold these observations into a more concise and beautiful form. Conclusive texts are written up, published, submitted to journals, added to databases, organized in libraries, debated and reorganized, discussed, used, and forgotten. Sometimes the best ideas are lost in obscurity while the worst enjoy success. Critics try to impose order on this chaos by guiding the uninformed on what to spend their limited time consuming, but the guiding texts critics produce also grow the catalog of thoughts which must be organized and criticized. Borges' short stories "The Secret Miracle" and "The Library of Babel" demonstrate personal, practical, and theoretical limits that prevent individuals and societies from ever ideally organizing their works. The stories even suggest that an ideal organization—dense in information but easily searchable, understandable and appealing but not lacking in complexity—is impossible.

Through the protagonist Jaromir Hladík's intense self-criticism, "The Secret Miracle" establishes the importance of literature as a means of packaging one's best and most refined ideas into a product that is both personally fulfilling and beneficial to society. Hladík's assignment of external power to his own purely internal ideas is established early in the text, as he plans to enumerate and preconceive all possible versions of his upcoming execution under the "perverse logic" that "to foresee a circumstantial detail is to prevent its happening" ("The Secret Miracle" 145). This logic is perverse because, although it is generally true that one cannot predict the future, that is a consequence of there being effectively infinite futures and is not due to a casual relationship between predictions and reality. Seeing an absurd value in ideas, it makes sense that

Hladík's distress about his upcoming execution shifts from worrying about the physical event to worrying that his legacy is lame. Namely, Hladík is "anxious to redeem himself" after his expressionist poems which were "to the discomfiture of the author… included in an anthology in 1924; and there was no anthology of later date which did not inherit them" (146). Hladík's self-criticism here[1] shows that it is much easier to acknowledge flaws than to fix them. Hladík's disappointing poems being passed along from anthology to anthology is either evidence that others are as bad at filtering his work as he is, or, of the deeper problem that there is no universal measure of literary quality[2]. And yet, tinkering with the plot of *The Enemies* gives Hladík private enjoyment. The play overtakes his thoughts the night before his execution, culminating in a partly sarcastic prayer, asking God, "…*if I am not one of Your repetitions and errata, I exist as the author of* The Enemies" (147). This prayer mixes pompousness and selflessness, highlighting Hladík's desire to produce for the benefit of others as well as his fatal flaw preventing him from producing a great play. Fleshing out and organizing ideas in a play may benefit society if those ideas are new or elegantly expanded upon; pride and lack of objectivity, however, thwart any human attempt to write perfectly. Hladík is given the only thing that could help him "perfect" his play—time—and the process of finishing *The Enemies* gives him fulfillment in the seconds (and year) before his execution.

Despite Hladík dying "[loving] the courtyard, the barracks" and with *The Enemies* concluded, the story contrasts his (possibly naïve) satisfaction with his internal struggle to successfully contribute interesting, new, or particularly good ideas to the world (150). Hladík's thoughts about *The Enemies* are presented behind multiple levels of irony, with the narrator noting

[1] And again, later, in his unfinished play *The Enemies*.
[2] Lack of a universal metric for assessing the value of literature is a theme we will see again throughout "The Library of Babel."

that "Hladík had never asked himself whether this tragicomedy of errors was preposterous or admirable, deliberate or casual," which suggests without his extra year, *The Enemies* would exist, even to its creator, inadequate and incomplete (147). The play's incompleteness—and Hladík's frustration with it—is emphasized by *The Enemies* central gimmick: it ends by returning to its beginning, cycling in time, mirroring how Hladík himself is stuck in his own cyclic thoughts while writing the play. Even with divine intervention, only Hladík and God see the final product. And still, not every author reaches this level of completion[3]. Hladík's great luck where, in a dream, he flips randomly to a page in an atlas and instantly finds God is opposite the Librarian's experience, who tells Hladík that, "*God is in one of the letters…My fathers and the fathers of my fathers have sought after that letter. I've gone blind looking for it*" (147). The time imagery throughout the story—from fear of "the clangor of the terrible clocks" in Hladík's opening dream to his extension allowing him to "[weave] his lofty invisible labyrinth in time"—emphasizes how restrictive time usually is, perpetually preventing writers from writing their best (143, 149). Moreover, Hladík's tendency to "[measure] the virtues of other writers by their performance and [ask] that they measure him by what he conjectured or planned" exhibits how authors put more into their work than can be successfully extracted by readers (145). While "The Secret Miracle" establishes the importance of refining thoughts into publishable literature (and sometimes, though not here, *published* literature), the story also demonstrates the forces—simple human imperfections, the passage of time, war and death—that disrupt creation, refinement, and sharing of valuable thought.

Borges' short story "The Library of Babel" expands upon the futility of humanity's endeavor towards organizing knowledge, acknowledging the appeal while criticizing attempts. The story juxtaposes theoretical and practical struggles—humans are as likely to die of disease or

[3] War and familial obligations can, for example, prevent would-be authors from finishing their works.

become distracted by petty squabbles as they are to have a fundamental problem with the philosophic reasoning underlying their search methodology. There are three important categories of limitation that make man "the imperfect librarian:" 1) man's mortality 2) society's tendency to develop cultural habits and superstitions and 3) that the structure of the Library itself prevents there from even being a perfect librarian ("The Library of Babel" 52).

The clearest reason humans do not benefit from the Library is because humans are bounded by their finite mortality whereas the Library is effectively infinite. The narrator reminds the reader of man's mortality early into the story by interrupting an elegant description of the Library's geometry with a reference to man's bodily necessities: "…there are two very small closets. In the first, one may sleep standing up; in the other, satisfy one's fecal necessities" (51). Once the narrator finishes his description, his minds shifts to bodily decay, commenting on his loss of eyesight and projecting that "my grave will be the fathomless air; my body will sink endlessly and decay and dissolve in the wind generated by the fall, which is infinite," contrasting the unbounded vastness of the Library and the fragile materials that make man (52). Even lamp light is too finite for the Library, being "insufficient, incessant" (51). The Library is perfect and regular, a place where "any reduction of human origin is infinitesimal" (56). Given its grandeur, it makes sense that The Library is presented divinely, "with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatical volumes…[it] can only be the work of a god" (52). It is worshiped and studied religiously; its title capitalized akin to how "He" and "Him" refer to God. Although there is uncertainty about whether or not the Library is truly infinite (the narrator believes it is finite, but cyclic and inescapable), that there even exists debate about its size indicates that the Library is effectively infinite relative not only to the lifespan of a human but to the lifespan of humanity. Any attempt to enumerate through the the Library is flawed in the same way as Hladík's hope to escape death by preconceiving of

every specific instance of it. Humans are too small and too inconsequential to comprehend or use the Library.

Another impediment preventing humans from finding value in the Library is that their attempts at conjecture and self-organization lead to habits, superstition, and conflict that detract from finding a way to use the Library. It is paradoxical that various parties would "usually infer," "argue," "reason," and "conjecture" about the Library, a space often described as infinite, based on finite information (51, 52, 52, 54). The narrator makes statements about the infinite they could not possibly know, such as: "One of the free slides leads to a narrow hallway which opens onto another gallery, identical to the first and to all the rest" (51). The narrator has faith that the apparent regularity of the library extends beyond his own experience with it. Opinions based in conjecture allow philosophies and theories about the Library to be developed and shared. This leads those with the same philosophies to collectively organize, and soon after to attack those of opposing philosophies, as happens between the "official searchers" and the "blasphemous sect" (55) [4]. The religious imagery that once highlighted the divinity of the Library also reflects how its worshipers fall victim to logical fallacies not uncommonly found in organized religion. Similarly, human flaws such as hypocrisy, pride, and fanaticism prevent any unified search (or universal rejection of search). For example, when it is theorized that there exist books in the Library that describes the future, "Thousands of greedy abandoned their sweet native hexagons and rushed up the stairways…These pilgrims disputed in the narrow corridors…strangled each other on the divine stairways" (55). While condemning the hypocrisy, irrationality, and hasty reasoning of others, the narrator partakes in it himself. He lusts too, for the "catalogue of catalogs," to which he lost his

[4] The "official searchers" are even given their own shorthand, "*inquisitors*," imparting on the reader that the narrator's vocabulary has developed (or been developed for him by propaganda) to support particular theories about the Library over others (55). The idea of unintended linguistic meaning is critical later, too, showing yet again that there is no universal way to "read" a given text.

youth searching for (52). Additionally, in the beginning of the story, the narrator notes that, "Men usually infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it were, why the illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite…" (51). Men make inferences based on the notion that the Library was designed with purpose—that the mirror exists, somehow, deceitfully. Though the narrator disagrees with this general opinion, his reasoning is equality arbitrary, an appeal to the beauty of the infinite[5]. Despite their attempts to find value in the Library, organizations built on common theories and supposed insights lead to further chaos and confusion.

Mortality and other human deficiencies prevent man from being the perfect librarian; the nature of the Library—its chaos, its exhaustiveness, its lack of a definite language—assures that no perfect librarian can exist. The intense structure of the Library merely gives the illusion that the Library contains usable knowledge. The narrator often describes the regularity of the Library in numeric accounts—"Twenty shelves, five long shelves per side" and in each shelf "thirty-five books of uniform format" (51, 52). Such precision promotes the illusion of organization, but this apparent organization is of no use because the Library contains every possible book of a length 410 pages, 40 lines per page, and 80 letters per line, all unordered[6]. This illusion causes some to maintain that "nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception" (57). The problem is that there is no universal language or decoding system[7]. While the string of repeated MCV's in the book found by the narrator's father could be a beautiful novel in one language, be repeated instances of the number

[5] A beauty that is reflected and represented by the appearance of unbounded ellipsis in the text.
[6] At least, as it has so far appeared.
[7] A fate that the Tower of Babel story suggests was done purposefully, by God, to confuse humans (Genesis 11:1-9). Potentially to allow humans to gain purpose and meaning from struggle. Or potentially because He felt threatened.

1105 in another, and utter nonsense in many more, there is no way of determining what language the book should be read in. Thus, while the narrator's claim that the Library contains "not a single example of absolute nonsense," arguing that there will always be some language or decoding scheme for which the book makes sense, it is impossible to determine the language. The theory that there exists some book, the catalog of catalogs, which contains the key to understanding the entire Library is—if not a physical impossibility due to needing more than 410 times 40 times 80 characters—then a possibility unfindable by any mortal. The narrator acknowledges this problem near the end of the story when he addresses the reader directly: "You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?" (58). Evading the natural presentation of this sentence, "Are you sure you understand my language?," the slight grammatical slip, a slip inconsistent with the rest of the text, places doubt in the mind of the reader that they are reading even "The Library of Babel" under the right decoding. This unnerving ambiguity is then amplified, again, with the realization that "The Library of Babel" is a translation of "La Biblioteca de Babel" and itself may be an imperfect decoding.

Borges' short stories "The Secret Miracle" and "The Library of Babel" examine the difficulties inherent in organizing knowledge effectively—from the finite lifespans and intelligence of humans to the inherent complexity of the task. The restrictions that hinder Jaromir Hladík's initial artistic success with *The Enemies*—his pride, ambition, mortality—are the same as those that prevent searchers from finding meaning in the Library. While Borges' stories offer no simple prescription to the problems they present, it is clear from his information-dense, allusion-heavy stories that there is a common message: babel masquerading is insight is dangerous.

> *"Znal unir fhttrfgrq gung gur paycyrfr ibexf bs Tunxrgcrner pbjyq ar jevppra ol 'n unys-rdnsa zbaxrlf va n erj fefeavgvfr.' Hhg srj aofer tw kfieae nm Q hlpg uaow tt qefe fhgf loby quieoalg ioeozcxx."*– Obetrf, ohg abg ernyyl.

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