Tar for Mortar: "The Library of Babel" and the Dream of Totality
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The narrator of “The Library of Babel,” a librarian living within its stacks, relentlessly asserts its totality and infinity. It contains all possible permutations of its character set, all possible meaning; it has existed always, will continue forever, and extends infinitely in space as well. Of course, none of these propositions could ever be verified by a creature conditioned by finitude, limited in space and time. Our narrator takes them on faith. There are several indications that Borges takes these claims ironically, not in order to denigrate the library (as though it could house all possible expression but falls short), but to show that totalizing expression is an impossible ideal. This irony mirrors a recurring gesture from his “non-fiction,” where Borges frequently asserts a principle with a romantic or mystical appeal, one of unity or transcendence, while affirming elsewhere the premises of a deconstruction of that same assertion.

Despite the immense amount of literature about Borges, it is rare to find critics who question the veracity of his narrators. Much more frequently, the totalizing conceptions of his narrators are taken as expressions of Borges’s own mystical inclinations. Whether among specialists, theorists who cite Borges as part of broader philosophical projects, or among more popular literature, one finds authors from Barrenechea to Foucault to Bloch committing this same oversight and incorporating into
their texts the ideological illusions of Borges’s narrator. A more careful reading can identify an ironic narrative position in every story from *The Garden of Forking Paths*. The Borges who emerges from this web of textual self-contradictions is not the exuberant celebrant of mystical union but one who dances over the no less mysterious abyss that complicates the passage from finitude to infinity.

**Architecture and Anarchitecture**

The story opens with a vast vision of what may be an endless structure, a blueprint for an architecture that could, like the library’s texts, iterate indefinitely, perhaps infinitely. This framework, of hexagonal rooms with four or five walls of bookshelves, with one or two passages to adjacent hexagons, with a vast pit either within or between them, is developed in one of the most textually complex sections of the story. Every one of the revisions and ambiguities of this paragraph, which seems to introduce us to the spatiality of the library, renders uncertain the form and consistency of its structure. Borges creates a text whose most intimate identity is a difference or conflict with itself — the readers who attempt with greatest dedication to be true to his design inevitably imagine structures that either contain gaps in themselves or create gaps in his story.

The textual uncertainties begin in the first sentence, which describes hexagonal galleries “*con vastos pozos de ventilación en el medio.*” The four English translators of this story are divided on how to interpret this phrase — either as “with vast airshafts

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1 See, for example, Barrenechea’s *Borges: the Labyrinth Maker*, Foucault’s “*Language to Infinity,*” or Bloch’s *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges’ Library of Babel*. From all the criticism I reviewed in the course of this study, the only explicit doubt of the narrator of “The Library of Babel” comes from Kane X. Faucher’s “The Effect of the Atomist Clinamen in the Constitution of Borges’s ‘Library of Babel’” and Neil Badmington’s “Babelation.” The most insightful interpretation I have come across of ironic narrative position in Borges’s stories, focusing on “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” and “The Garden of Forking Paths,” is Efraín Kristal’s *UCLA 118th Faculty Research Lecture*. 
between,” according to James E. Irby, in other words, between some number of hexagonal galleries is an empty external space, or “each with a vast central ventilation shaft” (di Giovanni)\(^2\) and “In the center of each gallery is a ventilation shaft” (Hurley). While there is no literal textual basis for the appearance of the word “each” in both of these translations, the phrase “en el medio” admits either interpretation. Though these three translators opt to disambiguate the opening sentence, the only one who maintains the uncertainty of Borges’s phrase is Kerrigan: “hexagonal galleries, with enormous ventilation shafts in the middle.” Here we see, in its very first sentence, an abyss opening on the infinite or what exceeds our capacities to the point of

\(^2\) Though Norman Thomas di Giovanni’s translation of this story has never appeared in print, I consider it an important facet of the English-language reception of Borges. The majority of the English translations of Borges’s work published in the author’s lifetime were collaborations with di Giovanni. The pair worked together on much of Borges’s poetry and his later prose works, but were unable to publish translations of some of his most important fiction, including stories from *El Aleph* and *Ficciones*, because the translation rights were still held by the publishers of an earlier English edition.

Borges’s collaborations with di Giovanni are strange, loose translations that demonstrate more about the pair’s theory of translation than they do about the original work. Borges was notorious, when translating other authors, for his creative infidelity, and was no more faithful to his own writing (on this theme, see Efraín Kristal’s *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation*). Still, they clearly represented Borges’s wishes, and it is unfortunate that after Borges’s death, his widow and executor of his literary estate María Kodoma, in collaboration with Viking-Penguin, let the di Giovanni translations go out of print and commissioned the Hurley translations in order to circumvent di Giovanni’s contracts (di Giovanni, “The Borges Papers”). Their likely goal was securing more profits for themselves from the English versions of the work by bypassing the 50/50 agreement Borges had made with his friend.

Di Giovanni has been barred from disseminating his (that is to say, also Borges’s) translations, even being forced to remove them from his website. I stumbled across his otherwise unpublished translation of “The Library of Babel” on the internet’s Wayback Machine; at the time of publication, it was accessible at https://web.archive.org/web/20130212202907/http://www.digiovanni.co.uk/borges/the-garden-of-branching-paths/the-library-of babel.htm. I have salvaged whatever I could and made it available on my website, along with his out-of-print translations, at https://libraryofbabel.info/Borges/BorgesDiGiovanniTranslations.zip.
Fig. 1 — A node of the Library of Babel if only one of each hexagon’s faces opened on an adjacent hexagon, as drawn by Cristina Grau in Borges y La Arquitectura (66).
suggesting infinity (the sublime), shifting across the border or shifting the border itself of the internal and external.

What follows is no easier to interpret or translate. The first edition of the story, published in *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* in 1941 or 1942, read as follows: “Veinticinco anaqueles, a cinco largos anaqueles por lado, cubren todos los lados menos uno […]. La cara libre da a un angosto zaguán, que desemboca en otra galería, idéntica a la primera y a todas.” Though there are other passages from Borges’s 1956 revision that di Giovanni incorporates, here he relies on the first edition: “Twenty-five long shelves, five on each side, fill all the sides but one […]. From the unshelved side, a narrow passageway leads off to another gallery, which is identical to the first and to all the others.” Borges recognized an error in this text whose exact nature we will have to consider further, and made three changes, the substance of which was to free another of the hexagon’s sides for passage to other galleries: “Veinticinco” became “Veinte,” “menos uno” became “menos dos,” and, somewhat strangely, “la cara libre” became “Una de las caras libres”—much of the controversy will rest on what became of this second shelfless wall. The other translators follow the revised edition, as Irby has it: “Twenty shelves, five long shelves per side, cover all the sides except two […]. One of the free sides leads to a narrow hallway” (51). Resolving the uncertainties of this revision involves us necessarily in the physical uncertainty of the position of the ventilation pit, and the ontological uncertainty of the infinite and the finite.

Christina Grau, in her work *Borges y la Arquitectura*, explains the problem his revision was addressing and offers one possible interpretation of the envisioned structure (66). Though

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3 The first printing of what is perhaps Borges’s most influential collection is dated 1941 according to its colophon, but 1942 according to its copyright. The end of 1941 was the cut-off date for a national prize that Borges and his publisher hoped to win; the printing was either hurried to meet the deadline, or the date was falsified. Regardless, Borges’s innovative work was passed over in favor of more recognizably Argentinian prose (see Jarkowski, “Cuando Borges Perdió Por Mayoría De Votos”). My thanks to Fernando Sdrigotti for his help in finding this explanation.
Fig. 2 — A floor-plan of the Library of Babel with two openings in each hexagon, as drawn by Cristina Grau in *Borges y La Arquitectura* (68).
the story frequently summons endless, labyrinthine expanses traveled by lonely librarians, a structure of hexagons with only a single opening would necessarily terminate at its first juncture (see Fig. 1). Such a structure is not capable of any expansion in the horizontal dimension, though it could repeat as endless, self-contained vertical shafts. If lateral movement were barred, it would be impossible to understand the first half of the narrator’s melancholy recollections of traveling “for many nights through corridors and along polished stairways” (*Labyrinths* 54). Clearly, Borges meant to correct this design flaw when he revised his story in 1956. But the addition of a second passageway does not by any means resolve the textual problems in his opening paragraph. Grau still allows, in her diagram of the revised edition (68), for the problematic central square chamber (see Fig. 2). It seems, based on the circles in her diagram, that she opts for the interpretation that the air shafts will be inside each hexagon, and thus the central square chamber is an addition without a basis in Borges’s text. Not only that, but “the idealists” among the librarians “argue that the hexagonal rooms are a necessary form of absolute space or, at least, of our intuition of space” (*Labyrinths* 52). While this seems to preclude the addition of a square room, it is at least not as explicitly forbidden as a room with one side more, or one fewer: “They reason that a triangular or pentagonal room is inconceivable” (52). If this square antechamber is meant to be the aforementioned narrow passage, we need to note that there are two for every hexagon and return to the third of Borges’s revisions.

Antonio Toca Fernández, who responds to Grau’s model in “La biblioteca de babel: Una modesta propuesta,” suggests that Borges’s revision is incomplete. Why remove the books from one wall of each hexagon, only to leave that wall closed off as a passage? He devises a minimal correction: what was *La cara libre* (the free side) in the first edition, and became *Una de las caras libres* (one of the free sides) in the second, should have been *Cada una de las caras libres* — each one of the free sides. This emendation justifies the dual openings in Grau’s model, but her quadrilateral *zaguanes* still bother him. He recognizes that
Fig. 3 — A floor-plan of the Library of Babel with two openings in each hexagon and a separate hexagon for each spiral staircase, as drawn by Antonio Toca Fernández in “La biblioteca de babel: una modesta propuesta” (79).
Borges wanted a structure that could saturate space with geometric uniformity and expands Grau’s squares into hexagons (see Fig. 3). This model still contradicts several parts of Borges’s text. The narrow passageways described by Borges open onto “another gallery, identical to the first and to all the rest.” That is, they should provide communication between two hexagons, not six as in Fernandez’ model, or four as in Grau’s. And there’s nothing narrow (angosto) about this passageway that seems to be swelling from one architect to the next, accreting new openings and disrupting the symmetry of the identical galleries.

A visitor to libraryofbabel.info, who identified himself as WillH, offered a clever solution that resolves some of these spatial and textual quandaries. It reinterprets the ventilation shaft “in the middle” of the hexagon(s), in order to evade the need to re-revise Borges’s second edition. A single circular pit absorbs one wall of six hexagons, thus requiring only a single passageway per hexagon, and remaining true to Borges’s “One of the free sides” (See Fig. 4). His vision almost reconciles the textual conundrums, with one very significant gap. In an interview with Christina Grau in Borges y la Arquitectura, Borges explained his motivation for comprising his library of hexagons:

I thought in the beginning of a series of circles, because the circle produces the sensation of the lack of orientation […] but the circles leave spaces between them that disturbed me. Later I decided on hexagons because they fit together with each other without needing other figures. (73, my translation)

The elegant star created by WillH, though it is the only design that accepts all of Borges’s emendations, and is the only one to read “en el medio” with Irby, leaves six spaces, each in the form of an empty or inaccessible hexagon, if we compress the passageways or thicken the walls.

Should we accept only the evidence of the second edition, and claim that Borges’s interview is extrinsic? But if he is being deceptive or dishonest, we should still reckon with his propen-
Fig. 4 — A floor-plan of the Library of Babel with one opening in each hexagon and the ventilation pit between a cluster of hexagons, as drawn by libraryofbabel.info user WillH.
sity for creating inextricable textual webs, labyrinths of revision and commentary that, like birdlime, trap the most careful readers the more we struggle for a coherent interpretation. I thought at one time that I could balance these tensions by accepting Fernandez’s addition of a second passageway, and condensing the passageways into thicker walls (see Fig. 5).

But I no longer long for a solution — I’d much rather marvel at a text that manages, seemingly with as much intention as accident, to allow for so many elegant solutions while always leaving a remainder of irreconcilability. My ultimate disagreement would be with Fernandez’s claim that:

Borges’ story is not a murky [desdibujado — sketchy, adumbrated] dream; on the contrary, his lucid nightmare describes the library with the precision of an expert… of an architect. […]. What surprises and disquiets with respect to Borges is that, in his blindness, he imagined a universe that could be built. (79, my translation)

It’s rather the opposite — Borges has an imagination that surpasses lucidity to its dark hinter-side, the mind of what I would prefer to call an anarchitect, whose great vision was an ability to lead us into blindness. We will run up against this limit continually, for example, when we come to Borges’s irony; the creation of a text in conflict with itself disrupts or deconstructs the task of criticism understood as the selection from among possible meanings, to open us to the possibility of the impossibility of meaning or decision.

 Led astray by my desire to reconcile the text’s difficulties, I altered the text according to Fernandez’ emendation and unthinkingly ignored the demand that the hexagonal galleries be “identical.” Varying the position of the entrance and exit passageways clearly violates this symmetry. This image was created by my sister, Sarah Basile, according to my specifications; I give her full credit for its elegance, and take full responsibility for its errors.
Fig. 5 — A floor-plan of the Library of Babel I imagined in a deluded attempt to reconcile the textual contradictions of Borges’s revisions.
Dreams of Infinity

The story’s opening paragraph, which grants entrance to this impossible architecture, closes by re-marking the impossibility of totality. After the repeating architecture is described, the story’s librarian-narrator tells us:

In the hallway there is a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances. Men usually infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it really were, why this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite.... (Borges, Labyrinths 51)

We just received a blueprint that demanded we be unfaithful either to Euclidean space or to the text itself, and that mentioned an abyssal pit shifting in and out of the center of the sanctuary. The mirror depicts another form of the infinite, capable of moving from the furthest reaches to the innermost heart of experience. The usual or vulgar interpretation of this entity is based on an infinity of extension, denied by the “men” who assume the mirror must be compensating for a lack in reality. The mirror image is more relevant to an infinity of intension; by allowing for an illusory, imaginary, false, or otherwise unreal gap, the mirror reveals the progression toward the infinitesimal that ceaselessly divides any hexagon, node, or point in this unstable field, and opens the lack of self-identity of any entity within the immediacy of experience.5 Ironically though, the narrator shifts

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5 Ana María Barrenechea’s taxonomic approach to the Borgesian corpus appears problematic when viewed in this mirror. She attempts to create a stable set of categories or themes and to dissect Borges’s works to fit individual scenes and symbols into her schema. With an analytic fervor reminiscent of John Wilkins’s (see p. 63 below), she categorizes this mirror under The Infinite — The Infinite Multiplications — The facing mirrors, and places it among “the many symbols suggesting the infinity of the cosmos” that she claims to find in “The Library of Babel” (Barrenechea 39). Which cosmos, and which infinity? We have already found every word of this story to be doubled by the irony of a narrator with an impossible assurance about the endlessness of the cosmos, and by an infinity that slips effortlessly from the
this infinity off to distant, inaccessible reaches in an attempt to preserve his own dream of totality. Everywhere that infinity or saturation is invoked by the narrator, including the all-important claim of the combinatorial completeness of the library, he reveals only his vain struggle against the interdependence of structure and deconstruction, as well as the cunning irony of Borges.

The librarian decides dogmatically every one of the conflicts Kant attributes to an antinomy of pure reason. Kant uncovers the origin of certain traditional philosophical debates in a conflict of reason with itself, necessary to any finite rational intelligence. These antinomies include the finitude or infinity of space and time (quantity), whether there is a simple substance or whether matter is infinitesimally divisible (quality), whether there is intelligible causality, such as free will, or exclusively material causality (relation), and whether there is a necessary being or not (modality). Kant’s argument is that none of these disputes can be decided either by logic or by experience, but that reason, as a faculty that seeks the grounds or principle of everything, necessarily uncovers these polemical pairs, without being able to resolve their opposition. Nevertheless, our narrator does what one should not, choosing the axiom that corresponds to his beliefs and groundlessly rejecting the other in each instance.

We are told repeatedly of the infinity of the library in both time and space. The narrator pretends to derive this idea from the purposiveness he sees in reality, though we know from Kant’s Critique of Judgment the impossibility of determining whether such teleology is the work of natural or supernatural agency:

First: The Library exists ab aeterno. This truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world, cannot be placed in doubt by any reasonable mind [prime example of his dogmatism] […] the universe, with its elegant endow-

outermost reaches to the inner heart of things. Eliding Borges’s irony and ambiguity, as so many critics do, produces a one-sided reading of his unstable, undecidable texts.
ment of shelves, of enigmatical volumes, of inexhaustible stairways for the traveler and latrines for the seated librarian, can only be the work of a god. (*Labyrinths* 52)

We can clearly see here the arbitrariness of our narrator’s reasoning. He thinks neither in terms of logic nor empiricism, but rather embraces any idea that celebrates the power of his preconceived notion of God (the necessary being). The attributes of his divinity are order, repetition, and the immaterial. We can see how this last attribute motivates his thinking in another of his reverent assumptions: “Once I am dead, there will be no lack of pious hands to throw me over the railing; 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. I say that the Library is unending” (52). Though other traditions aver the finitude of space and time to make room for the divine beyond this realm, the infinity of the universe in all four dimensions is a way for our narrator of folding the immaterial into this world. His dream of infinite space allows him the possibility of transcending his body — not being left to rot within the confines of finitude and spatiality, but dissolving into an air that can almost be mistaken for the ether. The dream of bodilessness here also relates to a traditionally masculine fantasy of transcending gender, which we will return to when considering the all-male universe inhabited by the librarians. An explicit reference to Kant immediately follows this dogmatic assertion: “I say [*afirmo*] that the library is unending. The idealists argue that the hexagonal rooms are a necessary form of absolute space or, at least, of our intuition of space” (52). A classic dogmatic error is made in deriving the infinity of the universe from the necessity of space as a form of intuition — according to Kant, this guarantees only that a limit can never appear, and thus that empiricism is powerless to address the question.

The antinomy of quality stands out as the only one concerned with the infinitesimal dimension. These conflicting principles are no less necessary to the coherence of rational thought — the existence of a simple substance, one that would not be further
divisible, is necessary to conceive of the stability or identity of any of the macroscopic structures composed of divisible elements. Nevertheless, infinitely divisible time and space are necessary forms of our intuition, so nothing indivisible could ever present itself to us. We will need to return, in the next chapter, to the atomist tradition that grappled with this question and which underlies much of Borges’s story. For now, we can notice simply that the dream of totality, of a total library containing all possibilities of expression, is dependent on the existence of a basic set of atoms whose indivisibility is guaranteed. The second axiom set down by our narrator, “The orthographical symbols are twenty-five in number” (53) is a dogmatic assertion of the simplicity of the basic substance, element, or atom of this textual universe, which is the letter. The conclusion that their universal library exhausts expression is dependent on this assumption as well. The “thinker” who first surmised this thesis derived it from the existence of twenty-five symbols, and from a second premise, “In the vast library there are no two identical books” (54). This assertion is equally dogmatic, as it would be impossible for any finite creature to verify it. Furthermore, a fallacious logical deduction follows these unsound premises: “From these two incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd [veintitantos] orthographical symbols” (54). Of course, the missing premise is the other equally foundationless assumption our narrator has accepted: the infinity of the universe. We can best understand the reason for Borges’s ironic distance from an ideologically deluded narrator if we focus on what is perhaps the most fundamental of these misconceptions — that of the twenty-two letters.

There are reasons of both essence and accident for the insufficiency of the library’s character set, all of which are re-marked by Borges. The accidental inadequacies are already enough to undermine the facile equation made between “all possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols” and “all that it is given to express, in all languages” (54). Can twenty-two letters and three marks of punctuation express all the possibili-
ties of all languages? If so, which ones? The number twenty-two must have suggested itself to Borges because of his interest in the Cabbalistic treatment of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, in his essay “On the Cult of Books,” Borges attributes the following sentence, which could be mistaken for an affirmation from our narrator, to the Cabbalistic creation story of the Sepher Yetzirah: “Twenty-two letters: God drew them, engraved them, combined them, weighed them, permutated them, and with them produced everything that is and everything that will be” (360–61). A divine creation consisting of the permutation of twenty-two letters has an obvious resonance with our story; nevertheless, the alphabet used in the library is clearly Roman.

Borges offers one account of a set of twenty-two letters capable of reproducing all possible text in his essay “The Total Library.” Presumably starting from the 30-letter Spanish alphabet, Borges removes the duplicative double letters (ch, ll, rr) as well as the less unnecessary ñ. Removing k and w, letters appearing only in loan words, leaves us with twenty-four letters. Borges’s account seems to pick up here: “The alphabet could relinquish the q (which is completely superfluous), the x (which is an abbreviation), and all capital letters” (215). In his introduction to El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan, Borges cited this essay as an account of the true authors of “The Library of Babel.” Here he attributes both the idea and the dimensions of a twenty-two-letter essential character set to Lasswitz: “By means of similar simplifications, Lasswitz arrives at twenty-five symbols [símbolos suficientes] (twenty-two letters, the space, the period, the comma),

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6 It is never a given in Borges’s “non-fiction,” but it does in fact appear that this citation is legitimate. See chapter 2, stanza 2 of the Sefer Yetzirah (100).

7 Kane X. Faucher, in “A Few Ruminations on Borges’ Notions of Library and Metaphor,” suggests that the library’s character set must be the Hebrew alphabet. This assumption not only elides the questions raised by the implied transliteration of the manuscript of “The Library of Babel,” but also ignores the complex textual history traced in “The Total Library” of authors attempting to reduce the Roman alphabet to these proportions — authors including Borges himself.
whose recombinations and repetitions encompass everything possible to express in all languages” (216).

As is typical of Borges’s writing, the textual web of this essay, his short story, and what we might incautiously call the true history is inextricably complex. At the very least, we can with some certainty refute John Sturrock, who assumes that Kurd Lasswitz must have been one of Borges’s inventions, given that his name roughly translates to “weary wits” (100). He existed, was a German proto-science fiction author, and wrote “The Universal Library,” a short story Borges rightly cites as an influence, though perhaps for the wrong reasons. The characters of Lasswitz’s story share with Borges’s narrator an interest in a subset of the library’s contents: for example, the lost works of Tacitus or the true and false catalogues of the library. While Lasswitz’s internal author says, “your readers will conclude that this is an excerpt from one of the superfluous volumes of the Universal Library” (243), Borges’s narrator observes that “this wordy and useless epistle already exists in one of the […] innumerable hexagons” (Labyrinths 57). One thing Borges’s library contains, though, that is definitely lacking from that of Lasswitz, is a 25-character orthographical system. Lasswitz allows for lower- and uppercase letters, ample punctuation and scientific notation, and ultimately settles on 100 symbols. Again, the temptation to tweak Borges’s text ever so slightly presents itself, when we realize that Theodor Wolff, also mentioned in the essay, actually did propose reducing the character set to 25 in his 1929 Der Wettlauf mit der Schildkröte. After all, Borges first writes, “Lasswitz’s basic idea is the same as Carroll’s, but the elements of his game are the universal orthographic symbols, not the words of a language. The number of such elements […] is reduced and can be reduced even further” (“Total Library” 215), which seems to acknowledge that Lasswitz accounted for more symbols. Later

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8 Both the “símbolos suficientes” and the wording and colon of the last phrase “todo lo que es dable expresar: en todas las lenguas” recall exact phrases from the “The Library of Babel.” Interestingly, both phrases educe the aversion of translators, here and in most translations of the short story.
in the same paragraph, though, this is contradicted by the “Lass-witz arrives at twenty-five symbols” (215). Could he have meant to cite Wolff here? The situation is further complicated when we recognize that Wolff proposes a different 25 characters. Like Borges, he eliminates majuscules, numbers, and the despised q, but proposes restoring the classical union of i and j, replacing w with uu (corresponding to its name) or vv (corresponding to its shape), and declares z an abbreviation of sc or cs (Ley 246). No matter how we attempt to reconfigure Borges’s text, we have to acknowledge some perfidy or betrayal in his attempts to disclaim authorship and give credit to his predecessors.

The situation becomes even more complex when we turn to the text of the short story. Before we reach its first sentence, the title confronts us with capital letters, and the epigraph not only contains numbers but speaks of another character set altogether. “By this art you may contemplate the variation of the 23 letters” refers to the classical Latin alphabet. The story goes on to use several of the excluded capital letters, digits, punctuation marks, and diacritics. A note from the “editor” offers little help:

The original manuscript does not contain digits or capital letters. The punctuation has been limited to the comma and the period. These two signs, the space, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet are the twenty-five symbols considered sufficient by this unknown author [son los veinticinco símbolos suficientes que enumera el desconocido]. (Labyrinths 53).

Uncertainties abound. Who is this editor? How are we to distinguish their interpolations from the original text? How should we attribute the other three footnotes, two of which appear in the first edition without reference to the editor, but indicated by the number one in parentheses, and the last of which is added to the second edition and references Letizia Álvarez de Toledo (a contemporary of Borges)? How has the editor come by this manuscript if they are outside the world of the library, or how have they gotten it to us if they are within? Their mention of the “twenty-two letters of the alphabet” and of the “símbolos
“suficientes” suggests that they are within its world and its ideology (but then, how do they even know of majuscules and digits?). Notice that Irby has taken the potentially unfaithful step of attributing the idea of sufficiency to the narrator. Di Giovanni does the same (“found to be sufficient by the unknown author”), Hurley is closer to the original (“sufficient symbols that our unknown author is referring to”), and Kerrigan is as usual the only one bold or timid enough for a literal translation (“sufficient symbols enumerated by the unknown author”). The irony inherent in this story, which claims 22 symbols should be enough to represent all possible language while simultaneously proving they are insufficient to express even this brief fiction, refutes any attribution of this idea of sufficiency to Borges. It rather seems that he has, as is customary, multiplied the layers and masks, creating a liminal figure who seems to bring Borges one step closer to the story’s inside, while in truth shifting him yet one layer further away. And what to make of the “Borges” who signed a work of non-fiction two years earlier claiming the same idea that this fiction refutes or gently ironizes? Fictionalizing a seemingly non-fictional discourse while developing the truth in fiction is precisely the sort of deconstruction definitive of Borges’s style.

The forbidden letters that appear within the library’s texts, or at least on their spines (dorso — not, as Hurley would have it, their front covers), leave us with the most to ponder. It’s easy to dismiss the editor’s addition of capital letters in Trueno peinado and El calambre de yeso by mentally inserting the lower case letter, but what to make of Axaxaxas mlö? Should this be acsacsacas, or ashashashas, or ajajajas? x is perhaps the most ironic letter for Borges to choose as irrelevant (as an “abbreviation”), given its regional and historical vicissitudes in Spanish pronunciation. At the very least, this reminds us that every sign and every letter is determined by a context to which it itself contributes — none can be removed or substituted losslessly. And it’s easy enough to remove the umlaut, but why was it put there in the first place? We know that the phrase comes from an imagined language in Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,”
and means something like “onstreaming it mooned,” but how does the editor know? Has that story been discovered inside the realm of the narrative (where Borges’s “The Total Library” has clearly surfaced as well), and if so, is it read there as fiction or as encyclopedic? I’ll hazard a few provisional indications of the endless paths a thorough interpretation of this intertextuality would have to follow: it adds yet another layer of complexity to the intricate fabric of Borges’s work, as the phrase comes from a story where fiction and ideology continually intrude into the “real” world of the narrative (a transgression Gerard Genette would refer to as narrative metalepsis), and now intrudes on the world of another fiction. Furthermore, the idealism of Tlön exemplified by this phrase draws into question even the most basic assertion of identity, which is fundamental to the atomist claims of our narrator. Perhaps the two points of this umlaut (as well as its function) represent the very splitting of these atomic letters.

This insufficiency of the library’s character set—that there will always be some characters left out of even the most capacious set, and that one or more characters can never substitute for others without some loss or gain—is what I referred to before as its accidental limitations. The essential insufficiency resides in the nature of a sign. Only if language has an atomic structure, if its letters and marks are indivisible, can the narrator’s second axiom (“The orthographical symbols are twenty-five in number”) be upheld. But the narrative itself draws into question the self-identity of these symbols, in the sentence immediately preceding:

To perceive the distance between the divine and the human, it is enough to compare these crude wavering symbols which my fallible hand scrawls on the cover of a book, with the organic letters inside: punctual, delicate, perfectly black [ne-grísimas], inimitably symmetrical. (Labyrinths 52–53)

In order for divine and human writing to be distinguishable, the “twenty-five” symbols have to each be more or less than one in never being at one with themselves. Each is capable of separat-
ing from itself and being recognized as both the same and different, despite the narrator’s dream of inimitability. A letter’s lack of self-identity is the typographical version of the infinite divisibility of the atom, and it haunts even our narrator’s attempt to secure and stabilize a structure of consistent signs (simple substances). Without this self-identity, the saturation of meaning is an essential impossibility, and the narrator’s dream of totality is dependent on the symbols that subvert it.

**Autobiography of Fiction**

The irony by which the narrator’s story undermines his own claims about the library’s completeness leads us to the question of Borges’s position in the text. Though this irony should forbid an identification of Borges with the narrator, we find several instances of autobiographical similarity between them. We must consider why and how Borges identifies himself with an ignorance that he necessarily transcends—a splitting that cannot surprise us too much from the author of “Borges and I.”

To understand the autobiographical implications of a librarian hidden in the stacks scrawling a story he himself can barely read, we must consider Borges’s life at the time of the story’s composition. He recounts in “An Autobiographical Essay,” which he dictated to Norman Thomas di Giovanni in English (*Autobiografía* 12), that in 1937, approaching age 40, he obtained his first full-time job at the Miguel Cané branch of the Municipal Library in Buenos Aires. He was assigned to work on a catalogue of the books, which no one seemed to need and was never to be completed. On his first day Borges indexed some four hundred books and was chastised by his coworkers. Their jobs depended on the incompletion of the catalogue, so they did as little work as possible—something Borges’s diligence would expose. They instructed him to never index more than one hundred books, but to vary the amount from day to day to avoid suspicion. He spent the nine years he worked there doing an hour of cataloguing in the mornings, then passing the rest of the day hidden in the stacks reading and writing. One day he
grazed his head on an open window casement and developed septicemia. He was expected to die, and when that did not come to pass his doctors predicted he would never regain his mental faculties. He was nervous to return to the writing of criticism or poetry, since he had a reputation in these fields and was just as worried to learn himself if he had lost his gift. It was sitting in this library (or, in warm weather, on the roof) and fearing for his capacities, that he wrote the stories of *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, including “The Library of Babel.”

It was also in his thirties that Borges began to lose his sight, so we can recognize his portrait in the librarian-narrator who writes, “now that my eyes can hardly decipher what I write, I am preparing to die just a few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born” (*Labyrinths* 52). It’s likely that this shared blindness is intended as an emblem of the irony that leads us to identify Borges with this narrator, though this metaphor is certainly ableist. There are several other traces of Borges’s life in this story. For example, here is his account of the minutely specific dimensions of the books:

> My Kafkian story “The Library of Babel” was meant as a nightmare version or magnification of that municipal library, and certain details in the text have no particular meaning. The numbers of books and shelves that I recorded in the story were literally what I had at my elbow. Clever critics have worried over those ciphers, and generously endowed them with mystic significance. (“Autobiographical Essay” 171).

It seems somewhat hard to believe, given the uniformity of the numbers in his short story:

> Each wall but one of each hexagon has five shelves; each shelf holds thirty-two books of a uniform size. Each book contains four hundred and ten pages; each page, forty lines; each line, eighty characters in black letter. (*Branching Paths* 76)
At the very least, we can recognize an emphasis on the number forty, biblical signifier of the endurance of long trials, and the temptation to interpret further remains. What is eschewed is precisely the effort toward realism and irregularity that counting lines and pages would produce — the only uncertainty acknowledged is in the number of characters per line: “unas ochenta letras,” or “some eighty letters.” As is typical for Borges, the only realism occurs in the numbers we know to be false, those he varied with regularity to appease his coworkers at Miguel Cané.

There are also architectural details from his autobiographical essay that tie Borges’s life to “The Library of Babel.” He endows each of the hexagonal chambers of the story with a zaguán or narrow passage, which we learn was part of the architecture of the home in which he was born: “Like most of the houses of that day, it had a flat roof; a long, arched entranceway, called a zaguán” (“Autobiographical Essay” 135). It is this same home to which Borges traces an important recollection: “If I were asked to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father’s library. In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library” (140). If the present essay has an aim, it is to universalize this condition Borges traces to the accidents of his childhood and his bookish nature. That his life repeated certain scenes, that he went from this childhood library to Miguel Cané, which became in his imagination the inescapable Library of Babel, and that he went on to become the third blind head librarian of the National Library of Buenos Aires, makes him a fitting prophet of generalized textuality, though the latter does not depend on such a life story.

What Borges attributes to his biography in his non-fiction, we can find universalized in his fiction. In his autobiographical essay, he writes: “This endless distance, I found out, was called the pampa, and when I learned that the farmhands were gauchos, like the characters in Eduardo Gutiérrez, that gave them a certain glamor. I have always come to things after coming to books” (“Autobiographical Essay” 143). That language or textuality precedes experience is implicit in the narrative of “The Library of Babel.” Our narrator expresses as much when he
says that “to speak is to fall into tautology” (Labyrinths 57). So, though Borges and his more careful readers can take an ironic distance from the narrator’s claims of the self-identity of the letter and the infinity of his universe, we should recognize that it is not as easy as uttering a negation to take leave of these theses. The act of recognition that precedes our consciousness of every sign and thing (and undermines any supposed difference between language and reality) creates a unity even as it divides a thing from itself.9 For this reason Borges places himself on both sides of the narrative he creates, as its pompous and deluded narrator as much as its presumably demystified author. We can account for his public persona in this way as well; his relentless humility and self-deprecation is perhaps an expression of feeling both less vain than and inadequate next to — Borges.

The last autobiographical moment appears in the story’s final footnote, which records an observation attributed to Letizia Álvarez de Toledo. Given that the note only appeared in the second edition, and that Toledo was an Argentine author and part of Borges’s social circle, it’s entirely possible that the note records a comment of hers made in response to Borges’s story. Her observation is as follows: “this vast library is useless. Rigorously speaking, a single volume would be sufficient, a volume of ordinary format, printed in nine or ten point type, containing an infinite number of infinitely thin leaves” (Borges, Labyrinths 58). Twenty years later, Borges returned to the idea of this footnote when he composed “The Book of Sand,” a first-person narrative whose narrator admits to working in the Argentine National Library before retirement, and who begins his account by promising, “To claim that it is true is nowadays the convention of every made-up story. Mine, however, is true.” (87). This narrator purchases a book with never-ending pages from a traveling salesman who heard it called the book of sand because, “nei-
ther the book nor the sand has any beginning or end” (89).10 We should recall, from “The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths,” that endless sand is recognized by Borges as one form the labyrinth may take, as it is in its own way inescapable. It is precisely this quicksand that our narrator finds himself sinking deeper within, and which I would surmise he shares in common with Borges the author. His poignant recollection that, “in the meagre intervals my insomnia granted, I dreamed of the book” (“Book of Sand” 91), recalls a nightmare in which Borges the labyrinth-maker found himself trapped, trapped in his dream and in its repetitions:

I have the nightmare every other night. The pattern is always the same. I find myself, let’s say, always on a street corner in Buenos Aires, or in a room, quite an ordinary room, and then I attempt another street corner and another room and they are the same. That goes on and on. Then I say to myself, well, this is the nightmare of the labyrinth. I merely have to wait, and I wake up in due time. But sometimes I dream I wake up and find myself on the same street corner, in the same room, or in the same marshland, ringed in by the same fog or looking into the same mirror — and then I know that I am not really awake. I go on dreaming until I wake, but the nightmare feeling lasts for two minutes, perhaps, until I feel that I am going mad. Then suddenly all that vanishes. I can go back to sleep. (Borges at 80 n.p.)

I sense Borges lost in a textual labyrinth, partly of his own creation, though partly preceding him and universally inescapable, when I read the weary narrator of this later story. When he returns to the National Library to “hide a leaf […] in a forest,” leaving the book of sand on a shelf while attempting not to notice which one, he is trying, feebly, to exorcise this old ghost (Borges,

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10 While we can recognize its continuities with the book of Borges’s footnote, the book of sand also contains illustrations and varying scripts, either promising or eluding totality in any number of dimensions.
“Book of Sand” 91). But this “I” has no power over the Borges who precedes him and his creations, even if they are identical.

The Cult of Books

In “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” Borges imagined a world where common sense aligned with idealist philosophy, a perfect inversion of the materialism that underlies our average experience. “The Library of Babel” is another example of his skill to perfectly invert a fundamental binary, in this case the distinction between invention and discovery. We are used to thinking of ourselves as free subjects, and our thoughts, speech, and actions as expressions of our spontaneity, thus as original acts or inventions. It is manifest for the librarians that their use of language can only repeat permutations existing within the library, and thus they think of their own creations as inferior to the divinely authored texts they imitate. While we celebrate originality and have a legal system established to recognize invention, they place greater value on the discovery or finding of preexisting text. From the deconstruction of invention and discovery, and the universal library that conditions it, follow the instability of all the most fundamental binary oppositions shaping thought.

In “On the Cult of Books,” Borges traces the elevation of writing to sacred status, the culmination of which he finds in the Christian tradition of the two scriptures. God created two books, according to this way of thought, the Bible and nature. Both must be studied to learn God’s will. In “The Library of Babel,” we witness an almost parodistic literalization of this metaphor — nature is, if not a book, at least a library. Indeed, our narrator seeks out just as much meaning in its dotación (endowment) of shelves, hexagons, and latrines as in its pages. Still, an inversion takes place that allows what we think of as cultural ar-

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11 In the chapter that follows, we will see how the derivative or repetitive status of language is not a product of the existence of a universal library (as we have seen already, even in Borges’s story, the library is never purely universal), but rather a principle belonging to the essence of language.
tifact to attain a natural status, and thus proximity to the divine will (for the religiously inclined). The problems that face a finite mind attempting to grasp the infinite merely shift as a result. For example, “Those who judge it [the world] to be limited postulate that in remote places the corridors and stairways and hexagons can [in]conceivably come to an end — which is absurd” (Borges, *Labyrinths* 58). We know that this question plagued ancient philosophers and continues to cause controversy among contemporary physicists. A problem that plays itself out for us in terms of relativistic space-time or the multiverse runs up against the same non-limit for the librarian in terms of the basic structural units of his universe. Furthermore, as we know from the traditions in our world that consider certain texts divinely inspired or created, this provenance makes their interpretation no more certain or secure. The vast realm of allegorical and cryptographic possibilities that offer themselves to the librarians searching for the truth of the divine word have their closest parallel in the Cabbalistic tradition that fascinated Borges as well.

Because our narrator thinks of all text as already created and originating from God, the tasks of authorship and reading are transformed. Recalling the difficulty of finding intelligibility among the library’s volumes, our narrator writes, “A blasphemous sect suggested that all searches be given up and that men everywhere shuffle letters and symbols until they succeeded in composing, by means of an improbable stroke of luck, the canonical books” (*Ficciones* 84). What he refers to as “shuffling letters” we call writing, and this inversion, like all those carried out by Borges’s fiction, reveals something fundamental that applies equally to our own existence. We too are dependent on the preexistence of language, both letters and words, and by necessity our every composition is a sort of found text. Every writer knows that her product never quite corresponds to its idea or ideal, and that the process of writing is just as likely to produce a surplus of meaning as a loss. The Truth, on the other hand, is more impossible than improbable.

The task of reading undergoes a related transformation. Our narrator describes a “regressive” method for locating a desired
book: “To locate book A, consult first a book B which indicates A’s position; to locate book B, consult first a book C, and so on to infinity…” (Labyrinths 56). We scholars may immediately sense the parody and absurdity of the task of criticism implicit in these lines — whether our search for meaning in a text progresses “re-gressively” through its history of interpretation and an author’s influences, or progressively through the writing of ideas that are our “own” (of course this designation is insufficient), we know that our task does not end when the truth is reached, but when exhaustion sets in. There is always a lost, hidden, forgotten, or yet to be written link to be added to this chain, though never a final seal.

Many readers and critics associate these inverted worlds with fantasy writing and/or with the philosophical systems implicitly motivating them. Some draw the unjustified conclusion that Borges therefore was not concerned with more mundane and local realities, such as Argentine politics. The worst abuses of logic come from those who assume that because Borges wrote what they consider science fiction or fantasy, or because he read philosophy and spent time in libraries, or because he had an imagination or life of the mind at all, he therefore was denigrating the public person and reality. Take for example this comment from Clive James, reaffirming a statement of Borges’s contemporary Ernesto Sábato: “Borges did fear the bitterness of reality, and he did take refuge in an invented world” (“Bad Politics”).12

Jaime Alazraki also posits that literature, philosophy, and metafiction represent an escape from “the world” — “Borges has made a similar choice: confronted with the chaos of the world, he has chosen the order of the library, the safety of a decipherable labyrinth […]. He wrote fiction based on theologies and philosophies, literature founded in literature. He knew that the hard face of reality lurks in every corner of life, but he renounced the world, because, he said, of its impenetrable nature. Instead he anchored his writings in the order of the intellect, in the chartable waters of the library” (182–83). It is remarkable for a lifelong reader of Borges to come away from his work with the feeling that it is a simple matter to divide world from text, or that either the intellect or the library are orderly or “chartable.”

In no way are Borges’s creations safer or more decipherable than “reality” — nor are they less so. One does not take leave of the world by writing
I take issue not with criticism of Borges’s indefensible politics, but with the notion that a capacity for abstraction was somehow to blame. Gina Apostol has offered one of the most nuanced and intriguing readings of Borges I have encountered, the matrix of an indefinite number of possible interpretations of the political and postcolonial themes in Borges’s work. In response to critics’ tendency to read Borges as apolitical because of his penchant for fiction and metafiction, she develops an elegant theory of the condition of postcolonial life as living within another’s fantasy. Consider the protagonist of “The Circular Ruins,” who tries to dream a man into existence, only to learn he is a dream himself, or the narrator of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” who learns

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literature or even literature about literature. Reality is a metafiction. Who could possibly take a serious look at politics today (so to speak) and come away with the conclusion that its primary impetus is reality? Living inside the fantasy of a madman is the condition of Borges’s characters—and it is our condition as well. Far from fleeing it, one’s only hope of confronting this situation, learning how our world is put together and how to take it apart or build it differently comes from the construction and analysis of metafiction.

Borges also showed us the double-edged nature of this political imaginary. One can weave the veil of reality (behind which are only other veils, or nothing at all) for the sake of the best—or the worst. And the condemnation Alazraki and others offer of literature and philosophy is ultimately a defense of Borges’s worst political commitments. He did not flee political commitment by writing but became a token man of letters on the side of his nation’s autocrats. Borges’s supposed European or cosmopolitan sympathies must be understood in light of the following (which is, again, double-edged—both the effacement and apotheosis of nationalism): “Gibbon observes that in the Arab book par excellence, the Koran, there are no camels; I believe that if there were ever any doubt as to the authenticity of the Koran, this lack of camels would suffice to prove that it is Arab. It was written by Mohammed, and Mohammed, as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were particularly Arab; they were, for him, a part of reality, and he had no reason to single them out, while the first thing a forger, a tourist, or an Arab nationalist would do is bring on the camels, whole caravans of camels on every page; but Mohammed, as an Arab, was unconcerned; he knew he could be Arab without camels. I believe that we Argentines can be like Mohammed; we can believe in the possibility of being Argentine without abounding in local color” (“Argentine Writer” 424).

13 In Out of Context, Daniel Balderston also traces the intricate interweaving of history and politics in Borges’s stories.
that the ideology that ultimately overtakes his society is “a hoax underwritten by some crass American millionaire” (Apostol). Following Apostol’s lead, we can indicate the trailhead of a post-colonial reading of “The Library of Babel,” where a species of men finds itself in an inescapable textual universe and attempts to create its own culture and religion out of the elements it has inherited. Again, we see that the inversion of nature and culture in Borges’s work does not separate it from our reality but opens a perspective distorted by the classical interpretation or dominant discourse. We should add to our reading of the narrator’s blind spots how a certain locality or finitude always disrupts the universalizing aspiration, and should re-read all of Borges’s complex and self-contradictory statements on cosmopolitanism in light of this persistent irony.

Our consideration of the inversion of binaries could not be complete without touching on the genus or genre of gender. Though it is never said outright, this race of librarians seems exclusively male — referenced either with masculine terms (“Like all men of the Library” [Labyrinths 52], “All men felt themselves to be the masters” [55]) or abstract terms such as “the human species” (58). It seems necessary to relate this gender approaching genderlessness with the general lack of the bodily in this universe, where there are generations without any mention of reproduction, and “faecal necessities” without any evidence of food (Branching Paths 73). Our narrator’s dream of dissolving in the infinite air seems to be another dream of bodilessness. This

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14 The only exception is the name of Letizia Álvarez de Toledo, which appears at a liminal point where the narrative crosses into another dimension, and where it describes the invaginated structure of a book always containing another internal fold.

15 The narrator’s fear of extinction, lament of a fallen humanity, expresses itself in an interestingly ambiguous phrase. While “La especia humana — la única,” becomes “the human species — the unique species” for Irby, “the human species — the only species” for Hurley, and “the human race — the only race” for di Giovanni, Kerrigan is an outlier, shifting the application of the adjective unique: “the human species — the unique human species” (87). In other words, Kerrigan offers the possible reading that humanity is different from other species, rather than the only one. His interpretation seems
uniformity is inevitably double-edged. On the one hand, it plays into a tradition of the scholar, philosopher, and man of reason just as much as the religious mystic or fantastic journeyer who transcends the limits of the individual as an exclusively male role. On the other hand, it must be read in the context of a narrative where every dream of unity and universality is disrupted by its narrator’s oversights and errors, as a reminder that humanity as a fulcrum of life and spirit is impossible without the difference-from-self of gender.

Branching Libraries

Let us return to the library of Borges’s childhood, the one he claimed never to have left. One has the sense, reading through his impressively erudite non-fiction, that the world he inhabits is in fact made up of that library, and likely a few others as well, and that he guides us through his world by flipping its pages. We find, in “The Library of Babel,” references to many of the figures who dominate his non-fiction. Each of these references leads us to another gap, aporia, or representation of what cannot be represented in language.

Most of these references come in the enumerations from both “The Total Library” and “The Library of Babel,” which list a small and curious subset meant to give an impression of the breadth of the full collection. In the former, it reads as follows:

Everything would be in its blind volumes. Everything: the detailed history of the future, Aeschylus’ The Egyptians, the exact number of times that the waters of the Ganges have reflected the flight of a falcon, the secret and true name of Rome, the encyclopedia Novalis would have constructed, less defensible than the one chosen by the other three, and perhaps more of a protest or self-defense in the face of the organic absurdity of the story. It is more in keeping with the narrative to see humanity, and possibly men, as the only living things in this library without bookworms, which we could read as an expression of both phallogocentrism and carnophallogocentrism, while always harboring their potential deconstruction.
my dreams and half-dreams at dawn on August 14, 1934, the proof of Pierre Fermat’s theorem, the unwritten chapters of *Edwin Drood*, those same chapters translated into the language spoken by the Garamantes, the paradoxes Berkeley invented concerning Time but didn’t publish, Urizen’s books of iron, the premature epiphanies of Stephen Dedalus, which would be meaningless before a cycle of a thousand years, the Gnostic Gospel of Basilides, the song the sirens sang, the complete catalog of the Library, the proof of the inaccuracy of that catalog. (216)

“The Library of Babel” alters this list somewhat:

[I]ts bookshelves contain all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic 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 catalog of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogs, the proof of the falsity of those false catalogs, a proof of the falsity of the *true* catalog, 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, the treatise Bede could have written (but did not) on the mythology of the Saxon people, the lost books of Tacitus. (*Complete Fictions* 115)

Several forms of impossibility are implicit in these lists. For example, while “the proof of Pierre Fermat’s theorem” could have been checked if it were found (even in 1939, before a proof existed — in a limited sense of existence), unwritten works of literature (“the missing chapters of *Edwin Drood*”), philosophy (“the paradoxes Berkeley invented concerning time but didn’t publish”), and history (“the treatise Bede could have written (but did not) on the mythology of the Saxon people”) would be unidentifiable — though each presents quite different possibilities.
for expert verification. The works have wildly differing ontologi-
cal statuses, from works written and lost, to works unwritten
but imagined by once living people, to works imagined to be-
long to fictional characters (“the premature epiphanies of Ste-
phen Dedalus, which would be meaningless before a cycle of a
thousand years”). While “the complete catalog of the Library” is
impossible, “the proof of the inaccuracy of that catalog” would
not be. “The song the sirens sang” could seduce any one of its
listeners — would each of us find it in a different book, or could
we find a single book with this Protean property? As Ana María
Barrenechea says of a similar enumeration in “The Aleph” (Bar-
renechea 86), this list combines the universal (“a minute his-
tory of the future”) and the particular (“the true story of your
death”). Impossibilities abound within each of the referenced
texts as well.

“The archangels’ autobiographies,” mentioned in “The Li-
brary of Babel” (Labyrinths 54), “the secret and true name of
Rome,” mentioned in “The Total Library” (216), and “the Gnos-
tic Gospel of Basilides,” mentioned in both, all are referenced in
Borges’s non-fiction, and each has resonances of the unrepres-
sentable divine name. “A History of Angels” lists the properties
ascribed to angels by a theological tradition that attempted to
make them greater than man but less than God. Each attribute
approaches immateriality and eternity, and the most interesting
for our purposes is “the power of conversing among themselves
instantaneously without [sin apelar a] words or signs” (17). Once
we are forced to recognize, as we have been by “The Library of
Babel,” that the sign or word is an ineluctable part of our expe-
rience, how could this autobiography be communicated to us,
other than by paradox and apophasis, like the phrase “conversa-
tion without signs”? “A Defense of Basilides the False” describes
a vision that would not have been out of place in “Kafka and his
Precursors,” a God who created 365 mutually subordinate heav-
ens, before arriving at the divinity we know from the scriptures
as creator of heaven and earth. We pass through all realms to the
highest heaven only by knowing the secret names of these divin-
ities. “A History of the Echoes of a Name” discusses the name of
God as well and recounts “that the true name of Rome was also secret.” This essay describes God’s revelation or dissimulation of his name to Moses, “I AM THAT I AM,” as the perfect cipher or name of names. While the speculative philosophers would say that this named the unity of existence and essence, it was just as true when Swift, having lost his mind, was heard repeating, “I am that I am, I am that I am…” (407). The name that is true, the absolute and final Word about any existing thing, cannot be revealed to finite ears for essential reasons — thus it remains secret or hidden. Nor will they appear among the universal library’s pages — again, for essential reasons.

Most curiously, Borges chooses to cite himself in the story, and to let himself be thoroughly ridiculed. The unattributed quotation that prompts some of our narrator’s most eloquent defenses of the library is nearly matched by the final words of “The Total Library.” Their appearance in “The Library of Babel” reads as follows:

The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception. They speak (I know) of the “feverish Library whose chance volumes are constantly in danger of changing into others and affirm, negate, and confuse everything like a delirious divinity.” These words, which not only denounce the disorder but exemplify it as well, notoriously prove their authors’ [su] abominable taste and desperate ignorance.16 (Labyrinths 57)

One is reminded of Borges’s confession that “I have even secretly longed to write, under a pen name, a merciless tirade against myself” (“Autobiographical Essay” 185). Uncertainties abound. First, I have never been able to tell if Borges meant his words in “The Total Library” to refer to the universal library he was describing, or to a separate nightmare structure whose books

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16 It is only by ignoring several layers of irony that some critics manage placidly to cite this passage as an example of “chaos” in Borges’s work.
would literally have letters that shifted and changed before a reader's eyes. If he speaks of the universal library, the "danger of changing into others" must refer to something like the necessity of interpretation. Furthermore, we are again in a situation (as with the character set) where Borges's non-fiction is being drawn into question by his fiction, but here it is our often fallible narrator who questions it. Do these two negations produce an affirmation? Our narrator specifies his objection: "In truth, the Library includes all verbal structures [...] but not a single example of absolute nonsense" (Labyrinths 57). But the passage cited makes no mention of nonsense. In order to "affirm, negate," or even "confuse," they must make some form of sense. It seems to me that the ultimate point of contention comes down to the narrator's desire to celebrate his universe. If one writer (Borges) speaks of the monstrous indifference and superfluity of its contents, another writer (Borges?) will celebrate its copious potential.

Should the library be celebrated or reviled? Perhaps another of its texts can help us to understand the relation of this valorization to repetition, novelty, and temporality. The narrator recounts a book of pure gibberish, except for the phrase "Oh tiempo tus pirámides" on its second-to-last page. Irby and Hurley translate this as "Oh time, thy pyramids," using the elevated pronoun presumably because they recognize the reference to Shakespeare's Sonnet 123. In the precursor poem, time's pyramids refer to everything that comes to be and passes away in time, belying the profound permanence underneath:

No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change:  
Thy pyramids built up with newer might  
To me are nothing novel, nothing strange;  
They are but dressings of a former sight.

In this sonnet, the persona's concluding disavowal of time's purported novelty, in order to "be true" to the underlying permanence, represents a faith in God beyond this world of apparitions. Borges, when he borrows this figure, allows it to trans-
form, despite any seeming repetition in his gesture. In addition to its appearance in “The Library of Babel,” time’s pyramids arise in a later poem, “Of Heaven and Hell.” While this poem also posits something divine underlying temporality and its contents, the divine is by no means unitary:

In the clear glass of a dream, I have glimpsed the Heaven and Hell that lie in wait for us [prometidos]: when Judgement Day sounds in the last trumpets and planet and millennium [el planeta milenario] both disintegrate, and all at once, O Time, all your ephemeral pyramids cease to be, the colors and the lines that trace the past will in the semi-darkness form a face, a sleeping face, faithful, still, unchangeable (the face of the loved one, or, perhaps, your own) and the sheer contemplation of that face — never-changing, whole, beyond corruption — will be, for the rejected, an Inferno, and, for the elected, Paradise. (Poems of the Night 51)

Borges borrows this idea from Swedenborg, that there is only one final destination, but it is an unbearable hell for corrupted souls, and a paradise for the elect. Now, the “Borges” who wrote “The Total Library,” who may or may not be the same author that ironized the opinions he expressed there in his short story and several later essays, compares the universal library to Hell:

One of the habits of the mind is the invention of horrible imaginings. The mind has invented Hell, it has invented predestination to Hell, it has imagined […] masks, mirrors, operas, the teratological Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the unresolvable Ghost, articulated into a single organism…. I have tried to rescue from oblivion a subaltern horror: the vast, contradictory Library. (216)
Of course, as we just saw, the narrator of “The Library of Babel” ridicules this opinion and celebrates the vastness of the creation he inhabits. The narrator has the more Shakespearean view of a divine mind and will underlying the seeming chaos of the library, ultimately guaranteeing its meaning and purpose. But perhaps there is another destiny or destination, within this same structure, one that does not depend on totalization in order to redeem what appears fallen or finite. Rather than lamenting or cursing the dissemination of meaning in so many unstable texts, could this not be the source of liberation and play, for a reader unencumbered by truth and falsehood? Perhaps the change in register, from Shakespeare’s rejection (No! Time…) to Borges’s more wistful “Oh time…,” represents this reconciliation to its ephemeral creations. As though to say, “Oh time, I know you’re nothing, but your pyramids….”

While we could continue endlessly, finding the traces of any predecessor or epigone in this library that contains all textuality, even those still to come, we will finish with a reference to the whole. In one of his many passages affirming the infinity of the library, our narrator writes, “Let it suffice now for me to repeat the classic dictum: The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible” (Labyrinths 52). In his essay “Pascal’s Sphere,” Borges finds an almost identical phrase in a series of authors nearly coterminous with the textual record. Said alternately of God, the universe, or nature, under Pascal’s pen it became “Nature is an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere” (“Sphere” 353). Noting that a medieval tradition used this formula to celebrate God’s immanence and transcendence and that an early modern tradition used it to celebrate the perfectibility of human knowledge, he finds a marked shift in Pascal who hesitated when calling it “frightful.” Pascal, we know, reacted against the scientism of Descartes and the application of a geometrical method to philosophy — the mathesis universalis. This method, which pretended to be an unshakeable ground (fundamentum inconcussum) for absolute knowledge of the absolute, was criticized by the nonetheless faithful Pascal, who felt
the longing and uncertainty of the finitude of knowledge. Not knowing how it began or how it would end, this center ignorant of its extremities expressed itself with the model of the infinite sphere. Representing the library from the viewpoint of finite experience is what separates Borges from his predecessors like Lasswitz, who merely imagined its extent. The desire for infinity, vindication, and justification that obsesses our narrator is just this desire for an absolute ground, an access to the infinite that could anchor and secure all finite judgments. When he prays to an unknown God that some librarian encounter a total book—a complete catalog of the library—he is longing at least for the possibility of this ground: “Let me be outraged and annihilated [i.e., finite], but for one instant, in one being, let Your enormous Library be justified” (Labyrinths 57). The impossibility of this catalog is what we must consider in conclusion.

Babel

We may have traveled far enough now to gain a vantage point for a glance back, to try to ask a question about the title that both affirms by its presence the unity of its contents and draws the same into question by placing us in Babel. But how far back or forward must one step to glimpse totality? The question of Babel, both as tower and as library, is precisely one of totality or unity—is it possible for humanity to share a common language? Is it as simple as finding a unitary structure (which, as we have already seen, the library is not)? The story of Babel poses the question of whether human beings can ever give

17 Everything contained in these pages could be seen as a useless and wordy elaboration of Paul de Man’s “A Modern Master,” where the constant theme of villainy, revelation, and betrayal in Borges’s work is interpreted as a representation of the necessary perfidy of the artist, whose task is to supplement existence with the simulacrum of totality in the form of art. One is reminded of de Man’s statement about Nietzsche’s word: “‘Only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world forever justified:’ the famous quotation, twice repeated in The Birth of Tragedy, should not be taken too serenely, for it is an indictment of existence rather than a panegyric of art” (Allegories 93).
a name to themselves as a sovereign, autonomous, intentional act, or whether we must receive language from a more powerful source, and receive it as a burden, a punishment, and a debt. The title, “The Library of Babel,” presents the same problem: a name that never recurs within the text, and that appears in both its first and second printing in all majuscules, as though not a single letter belonged to the universe of the narration, it leaves us to wonder whether it came from inside the story’s world, or whether it was imposed from outside, as though by a jealous God.

In the Bible, the task of building the tower of Babel develops from a desire for unity: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11.4). Creating a name for themselves means many things: they will not be scattered — that is, their familiars and descendants will have a single home and retain their single name, and this unity will have its symbol in an edifice that is one and unites them all. An edifice that reaches to heaven. God prevents this not only by stopping their construction, but by giving them a name of his own:

And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Gen. 11.6–9).

Only the infinite, God, can give Himself a name, and a name that would be one. As we have seen, that name remains secret from his creatures. We must receive our names, and they can never be
univocal, as the example of Babel shows. As Derrida explains in “Des Tours de Babel,” the name received is both a proper name, a mark without a corresponding concept, thus untranslatable, and a common noun meaning confusion (109). Thus it both refuses translation (though the English homophones Babel/babble come very close to doing it justice), and demands translation, even within its source language. One has to explain, to put two or more words in place of one, in order to “translate” this “within” a language or between two languages. We can thus take it as an example of the impossibility of identifying a language as one, single, or unitary. It models and enacts the fate of humanity after Babel, for whom God “at the same time imposes and forbids translation” (Derrida, “Babel” 108). The Library of Babel presents the same condition, where translation or the crossing of borders — for example from the finite to the infinite — is both necessary and impossible.

The librarians of our story find themselves within a continuous (though, as we saw, never single) architecture whose spiral extends endlessly — are they then in a completed tower of Babel? But Borges shows us that the unity of language and genealogy thus implied is impossible for essential reasons, not merely on account of the whims of a jealous God. The sects and dialects that appear among the librarians and within their internally diverse texts attest to the impossibility of this unity. Our narrator informs us that linguistic difference has inflected the interpretation of the library’s texts, in a passage that gives echoes of another Babelian fiction, Kafka’s “The Great Wall of China:”

[T]he most ancient men, the first librarians, used a language quite different from the one we now speak; it is true that a few miles to the right the tongue is dialectical and that ninety floors farther up, it is incomprehensible. (Labyrinths 53)

These differences and this confusion can occur, as we know, between speakers of “the same” language or dialect, and thus every language has internal division or difference. In a parenthetical
aside added to the second edition, our narrator explores the impossibility of securing the unity of a language:

An $n$ number of possible languages use the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol *library* allows the correct definition a ubiquitous and lasting system of hexagonal galleries, but *library* is *bread* or *pyramid* or anything else, and these seven words\(^\text{18}\) which define it have another value. You who read me, are you sure of understanding my language? (57–58)

Of course, we note immediately that his definition of *library* differs from ours, and that his understanding of bread and pyramid remains uncertain, given the absence of food in his universe and the stated impossibility of the triangle. Even “the same” words, without a single mark to set them apart, can contain, admit, or enable a nonfinite number of languages. Our narrator’s only mistake is in attributing this to the library’s totality, in thinking that it could somehow contain “all” languages.

Religion unites the librarians no better than language. The Inquisitors, Purifiers, and those who seek the Man of the Book have disagreements about the proper use, interpretation, and respect of the library that are never merely doctrinal, as the story’s several references to violent death make clear. What each sect struggles against is the dispersion or dissemination of meaning. In place of the scattering of multiple books, “The mystics claim that their ecstasy reveals to them a circular chamber containing a great circular book, whose spine is continuous and which follows the complete circle of the walls [...]. This cyclical book is God” (52). A single, uninterrupted book in a single, complete room is the vision of the longed-for truth that contrasts with the one hidden among endless shelves and volumes. The Purifiers had the impossible hope of destroying books until they reached “the books in the Crimson Hexagon: books whose format is

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\(^{18}\) Seven in the original — Irby has used eight words to translate them, adding the initial article. He is also the dyscalculic translator who placed 35 books on each of the library’s shelves.
smaller than usual [que los naturales], all-powerful, illustrated and magical” (Borges, Labyrinths 56). A strange reference — this uniquely colored hexagon could refer to the process of miniating, and thus these “illustrated” manuscripts would also be “smaller than usual” — miniature. One might try to draw out a reference to some of Borges’s favorite literature — The Dream of the Red Chamber or “The Masque of the Red Death.” Regardless, we can recognize a desire analogous to that of the mystics, to discover a book or books that would be set apart, that one would see at a glance to be special and the force of whose truth would overwhelm us (“all-powerful,” “magical”) without recourse to lengthy interpretation.

The most problematic and revealing of these sects is the one seeking the Man of the Book, the librarian who would have found and read the library’s master catalogue, and thus would be omniscient. We should consider, in refuting this belief, not its improbability but its impossibility. What would constitute a master catalogue? What would it look like, and how would one know one had found it? As our narrator has taught us, one can never dismiss a book as meaningless, and any text can be given any meaning allegorically or cryptographically. How, for example, would the librarian’s “wordy and useless epistle” be classified? As fiction or philosophy, fantasy or autobiography? Is its theme infinity or inescapable finitude? The same problem facing Barrenechea (see n. 5, above) in devising categories to contain mutable and undecidable symbols faces any librarian (in this story or outside it) trying to separate a true catalogue or predicate from a false one. Borges examined the same impossibility in his famous essay on “John Wilkins’ Analytical Language.” Wilkins dreamed of constructing a language where every letter would be motivated or have a meaning — for example — “a means animal; ab, mammalian; abo, carnivorous; aboj, feline; aboj, cat; abi, herbivorous; abiv, equine; etc.” (230). Such a language is only possible if our conceptual structure is absolute, and thus evades us in the here-below. For those of us still disseminating like the seed or shards of the scattered Babelians,
“there is no universe in the organic, unifying sense of that ambiguous word” (231).