Tar for Mortar: "The Library of Babel" and the Dream of Totality

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In Which It Is Argued, Despite Popular Opinion to the Contrary, That Borges Did Not Invent the Internet

Our theme has not been the digital realization of an author’s fantasy but the deferral of presence across several virtualities. So I’ll conclude with a consideration of a trend in the recent criticism of Borges that I find in its most extreme forms highly suspect: the effort to cast him as a prophet of the internet and related digital technologies. Though these critics may intend to pay homage to a visionary author, there is just as much in their work that suggests an ideology of technological progress, which obscures essential aspects of both Borges’s text and contemporary culture.

These authors have diverse ways of framing and justifying their studies. Borges “anticipates hypertext and the internet” (Sassón-Henry, “Borges and Moulthrop” 11), he is a “forerunner of the technology of the new millenium” (Sassón-Henry, Futures iii), his stories are “metaphors for cyberspace and the internet” (Acuña-Zumbado 642, my translation), and “embody some characteristics of hypertext and the World Wide Web” (Sassón, Borges 2.0 11). While the language of anticipation, the forerunner, and the proto-trace speaks to a perceived anachronism in Borges’s work, the language of embodiment and metaphor
suggests his role as artist—not to create literal technology but merely to prefigure and herald it. How is it that Borges performs this literary act of foreshadowing? These writers do their best to identify the relevant traits in his work, claiming to see a break with linear temporality, the creation of multiple levels of meaning (at one point, Sassón-Henry counts three), intertextuality, and the necessity of the active participation of the reader. At this point, the careful reader might be justified to protest that these are qualities of every text as text, regardless of its status as hyper- or proto-hyper-. It suffices to recall what the narrator-librarian taught us about the nonfinite possibilities of cryptographical and allegorical meaning, and the multifaceted, non-linear text necessarily resulting from them, to remind ourselves that no act of reading can ever be passive. We then need to question the status of prophet or literary prefiguration, by asking what if anything hypertext has introduced that would represent a rupture? For some time now we have been considering the unverifiability of novelty, which is only possible as impossible. There are certainly differences in our encounter with what goes by the name of hypertext, but these differences are abyssal, without any concept to secure their certainty, and never constitute something recognizable as an essence. The words of any printed text can be placed online and made accessible with a hyperlink. Does the work thereby become hypertextual? Was it already? If we can introduce in a textual body the referentiality of a hyperlink, allowing one text to burrow into another, it is only because this intertextuality was implicit in every text as such. Since no rigorous criterion separates hypertext from plaintext (and never mind distinguishing proto-hyper-text), we can no more claim that Borges is our predecessor or prophet than we can claim to have advanced beyond his textual moment. We are all contemporaries in being anachronistic with ourselves.1

1 J. Andrew Brown, in “Retasking Borges: Technology and the Desire for a Borgesian Present,” his review of several of the works we will consider in this chapter, offers a more generous reading. He draws from Borges’s “Kafka and his Precursors” to invert the order of causality, to suggest that we, immersed in hypertext, create its predecessors by the act of looking for them.
Beyond the experience or form of the text, these same critics point to the content of certain stories (“The Library of Babel” and “The Garden of Forking Paths,” typically) as similarly prescient. These interpretations are marked by both their excesses and their deficiencies: “In ‘The Library of Babel,’ Borges’s [sic] portrays man’s inability to find the infinite and perfect book. Thus, Borges seems to prophesy the predicament of those in the twenty-first century who attempt to find the answers to their problems in the internet” (Sassón-Henry, *Borges 2.0* 53). It is correct to recognize the absence of absolute knowledge as a continuity between internet users and book readers of all times, though our dual question remains—what has changed for us that merits the search for its precursors, and what is different about Borges that merits his election as such?

Martin S. Watson exhibits this same mystification—a misreading of Borges and a misreading of the contemporary moment. The infinity of the library is repeatedly asserted in his text (“the infinite archive” [151]), and the same mistake is made with respect to Ramón Llull’s thinking machine. Of this simple and limited permutation, it is claimed, “The machine contains infinity because of the endless possibilities for combination and recombination” (154). This is more than just bad math. We must recognize, with some dismay, that if “The Library of Babel” has been misread in accordance with the ideology of its narrator, it is thought of as an appropriate comparison because of an identical misinterpretation about what Watson calls “today’s digital world” (154). He imagines that we have infinite knowledge: “‘The Library of Babel’ is an apt metaphor for the posthuman experience of the archive because it captures the enormous realms of information that are currently available” (159). This comparison demonstrates as much a misapprehension of the past, seeing Borges’s work as different from its time in resembling ours, as a misapprehension of the present, seeing us as novel enough to merit comparison with the Borges who never was.

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Placing in question the novelty or even the auto-contemporaneity of our “own” present further destabilizes the order of causality.
The conceptual framework Sassón-Henry uses to set Borges apart from other writers demonstrates that the belief in the essential novelty of our technology is in truth an affirmation of the ideals of humanism. This is most apparent in the logocentrism underlying her comparison of our “postprint” present to a “preprint” past taking place before the letter. She celebrates oral literacy for the immediate presence of speaker and recipient, then claims that hypertext restores what print loses by allowing users to comment on writing and by reconstituting the processes of thought (“hypertext imitates the mental process of association” [Borges 2.0 15]). It shouldn’t be necessary to point out that these distinctions deconstruct themselves, as speaker and recipient never have immediate presence to each other or even presence-to-self, but we can at least witness the bad faith of the gesture by which Borges escapes his fate as a print author: “Borges, who through his superb use of language manages to exceed the limits of print” (Sassón-Henry, Borges 2.0 16). How certain, then, can we be that these were limits, or that they were limits of print alone? This claim depends on the aforementioned idea that the reader takes an active part only in stories written by Borges (Cortázar is one of the only other authors allowed a comparison in her study). She concludes with a strange invocation of literary theory:

By undermining the role of the author, Borges presents to the literary world two ideas that supplement each other: (1) the author vanishes from the literary act and (2) the reader moves into the text through the space left open by the author. These tenets relate to the ideas expressed by Roland Barthes in his essay “The Death of the Author.” (Borges 2.0 19)

While we should question why this vanishing of the author is now a virtue just a few pages after her paean to orality, we also need to point out that the death of the author is not a contingent feature of this or that text, whether pre-, post-, or hyper-, but of everything expressed in language and subject to iterability. Attributing it to the sovereign decision of a writer’s “superb use of
language” attempts to shore up dissemination within the subject present to itself, another celebration of logocentrism.²

Our study has attempted to show the continuity of something like an essence underlying the various forms of the universal library, as a philosopher’s thought experiment, a fictional narrative, or a technological “invention.” We may be tempted to invoke the τέχνη of the Greeks in classifying this shared nature of art and technology, though what these have in common is not the security of an identical essence but the rupture of a ceaseless differing-from-self. The iterability that allows language to be wrested from the context of a speaker’s intention and appear as a purely combinatoric, mechanical process is also what prevents this project from ever completing itself by saturating the

² In a work that predates these by a generation, Borges y la Intelegencia Artificial, Ema Lapidot considers the relationship of Borges’s writing to thinking machines. Her study shares several common topoi with the more recent work on the subject; for example, Borges’s stories are described as “metaphors for the essential components of modern thinking machines” (61, my translation), the creative role of the reader is foregrounded, and the permutations of Llull’s thinking machine are counted as infinite. However, she reads Borges as refuting any comparison between human faculties and those of machines.

Lapidot sees “The Library of Babel” as demonstrating a mechanistic creative process that is unable to imitate the poetic, emotive inspiration of human beings. She claims that Borges, “does not take seriously the mechanization of literature” (26, my translation), and identifies his work with an inimical humanism: “We can accept without difficulty the mechanization of logical thoughts, but we detest the idea of mechanizing what is specifically human: our special mode of perceiving the universe and our extraordinary ability to express it” (153, my translation).

Lapidot thus avoids the error of exaggerating the prowess of technology (as well as the twin error of reading that absolutization back into Borges). However, she makes the opposite mistake of absolutizing human intelligence to rescue it from technicity. “The Library of Babel” shows us that both our most logical and our most poetic or mystical creations are reproducible and iterable in this machinic fashion. If we would like to believe in our own creativity or freedom, the challenge is to think it together with the machine. It would not be possible to reconcile her position with a line she quotes from an intriguing interview Borges gave on the subject in 1967, where he says of poetry: “There’s always a little of “The Library of Babel’ there! There’s a little of the machine…” (qtd. in Lapidot 24, my translation).
field of possible expression or meaning. We find our suspicion confirmed on every page that these authors imagine our digital technologies to have totalized the possibilities of expression and communication, and they misread Borges as envisioning the possibility of that totalization. Instead, he succeeds in predicting our contemporary moment because he expresses the lack of totality, the finitude and uncertainty that plague even the grandest projects of any cognition shuttling between uniqueness and iterability. We can also glimpse, behind the shroud of ironic distance, the corner of the smile that recognizes in this finitude the possibility of all play.