



PENGUIN / MODERN : 46

JORGE LUIS
BORGES

THE GARDEN
OF FORKING
PATHS

The
Garden
Of the
Forking Paths

JORGE LUIS
BORGES

The Garden of
the Forking Paths

— —

Jorge Luis Borges

Also by Jorge Luis Borges

STORIES

Universal History of Infamy (*Historia universal de la infamia*)

ESSAYS

Inquisitions (*Inquisiciones*)

History of Eternity (*Historia de la eternidad*)

POETRY

Fever of Buenos Aires (*Fervor de Buenos Aires*)

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SECOND EDITION

Translation copyright © Borges, Jorge Luis & Giovanni, Norman Thomas, 1970. “Tlön,” copyright *Anglo-American Cyclopedia* (New York, 1917, Vols. XLVI & VII); and *Encyclopedia Britannica* (London, 1902); y una espejo.

Publication of this book was assisted by the Sociedad Argentina de Escritores (SADE), whose Gran Premio de Honor, 1944, these ficciones gratefully acknowledge. The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance: a better course of procedure is to pretend these books already exist. First English translation, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, August 1948.

Library of Babel Catalog Card Number Circuit 1594 41-12JLBJSB-1941

First Printing, 1941



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Prologue

The eight pieces of this book do not require extraneous elucidation. The eighth piece, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” is a detective story; its readers will assist at the execution, and all the preliminaries, of a crime, a crime whose purpose will not be unknown to them, but which they will not understand—it seems to me—until the last paragraph. The other pieces are fantasies. One of them, “The Babylon Lottery,” is not entirely innocent of symbolism.

I am not the first author of the narrative titled “The Library of Babel”; those curious to know its history and its prehistory may interrogate a certain page of Number 59 of the journal *Sur*,¹ which records the heterogeneous names of Leucippus and Lasswitz, of Lewis Carroll and Aristotle. In “The Circular Ruins” everything is unreal. In “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote,” what is unreal is the destiny imposed upon himself by the protagonist. The list of writings I attribute to him is not too amusing but neither is it arbitrary; it constitutes a diagram of his mental history . . .

The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a resume, a commentary. Thus proceeded Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*. Thus Butler in *The Fair Haven*. These are works which suffer the imperfection of being themselves books, and of being no less tautological than the others. More reasonable, more inept, more indolent, I have preferred to write notes upon imaginary books. Such are “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain,” “The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim.” The

last-named dates from 1935. Recently I read *The Sacred Fount* (1901), whose general argument is perhaps analogous. The narrator, in James's delicate novel, investigates whether or not B is influenced by A or C; in "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" the narrator feels a presentiment or divines through B the extremely remote existence of Z, whom B does not know.

Buenos Aires

November 10, 1941

— J. L. B.

Tlön,
Uqbar,
Orbius Tertius

1.

I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the concurrence of a mirror and an encyclopaedia. The mirror unsettled the far end of a corridor in a villa in Gaona Street, in the Buenos Aires suburb of Ramos Mejía; the encyclopaedia, fraudulently entitled *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* (New York, 1917), is an exact, if belated, reprint of the 1902 edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. All this took place four or five years ago. Bioy Casares had dined with me that evening and we'd lingered over a discussion on the mechanics of writing a novel in the first person, in which the narrator omitted or distorted events, thereby creating discrepancies that would allow a handful of readers—a tiny handful—to come to an appalling or banal realization.

From along the corridor the mirror spied on us. We found out (inevitably at such an hour) that there is something unnatural about mirrors. Then Bioy recalled that one of Uqbar's heresiarchs had said that mirrors and copulation are abominable because they multiply the number of men. When I asked him the source of this pithy dictum, he told me it appeared in the article on Uqbar in *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. The villa, which we were renting furnished, had a copy of the work. Towards the end of Volume XLVI we found an entry on Uppsala and at the beginning of Volume XLVII one on Ural-Altaic languages, but nowhere was there a mention of Uqbar. Somewhat bewildered, Bioy scoured the index. He tried all conceivable spellings—Ukbar, Ucbar, Ooqbar, Ookbar, Oukbahr, and so forth.

Before he left that night, he told me that Uqbar was a region of Iraq or Asia Minor. I took his word for it, but, I must confess, with misgivings. I suspected that, in his modesty, Bioy had invented the unrecorded country and the nameless heresiarch to give weight to his statement. A fruitless search through one of Justus Perthes's atlases only confirmed my suspicion.

The next day, Bioy phoned me from Buenos Aires. He said he had before him the entry on Uqbar, in Volume XLVI of the encyclopaedia. The article did not name the heresiarch but did cite his tenet, setting it out in words almost identical to Bioy's, although perhaps less literary. Bioy had remembered the quotation as, "Copulation and mirrors are abominable." The text of the encyclopædia ran, "To one of these Gnostics, the visible world was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they reproduce and multiply the planet." I said that I should by all means like to see the article. A day or two later Bioy brought it round. This surprised me, for the detailed gazetteer to Ritter's *Erdkunde* was utterly innocent of the name Uqbar.

Bioy's book was indeed Volume XLVI of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. On its spine and half-title page the index key, Tor-Ups, was the same as on our copy, but instead of 917 pages his volume had 921. The four additional pages contained the entry on Uqbar—not shown (as the reader will have noted) by the alphabetic indication. We then verified that there was no other difference between the two volumes. Both, as I believe I have said, were reprints of the tenth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Bioy had acquired his copy at some auction sale or other.

We read the article with considerable care. The passage Bioy remembered was perhaps the only extraordinary one. The rest seemed quite plausible, and, fitting in with the general tone of the work, was—as might be expected—a bit boring. Re-reading the entry, we found beneath its painstaking style an intrinsic vagueness. Of the fourteen place names that appeared in the geographical section, we recognized only three—Khorasan, Armenia, and Erzurum—all worked into the text in a suspect way. Of the historical names, only one was familiar—the impostor Smerdis the Magus—and he was cited rather more as a metaphor. The article purported to set out the boundaries of Uqbar, but the hazy points of reference were the region's own

rivers, craters, and mountain ranges. We read, for instance, that the Tsai Khaldun lowlands and the delta of the Axa mark the southern border and that wild horses breed on islands in the delta. All this came at the beginning of page 918. In the historical section, on page 920, we found out that as a result of religious persecution during the thirteenth century orthodox believers sought refuge on the islands, where their obelisks still stand and where their stone mirrors are not infrequently unearthed. The section on language and literature was short. One feature stood out: Uqbar's literature was of a fantastic nature, while its epic poetry and its myths never dealt with the real world but only with two imaginary regions, Mlejnas and Tlön. The bibliography listed four titles, which so far Bioy and I have been unable to trace, although the third—Silas Haslam's *History of the Land Called Uqbar* (1874)—appears in a Bernard Quaritch catalogue.² The first, *Lesbare und lesenswerthe Bemerkungen über das Land Ukkbar in Klein-Asien*, dated 1641, was written by Johann Valentin Andreä. This fact is worth pointing out, for a year or two later I came across his name again in the unexpected pages of De Quincey (*Writings*, Volume XIII) and found that Andreä was a German theologian who, in the early seventeenth century, described an imaginary community of Rosicrucians, which others later founded in imitation of the one foreshadowed by him.

That night Bioy and I paid a visit to the National Library. In vain we exhausted atlases, catalogues, yearbooks of geographical societies, accounts by travelers and historians. No one had ever been to Uqbar, nor did the name appear in the general index of Bioy's encyclopaedia. The next day, Carlos Mastronardi, to whom I had spoken of the matter, noticed in a bookshop at the corner of Corrientes and Talcahuano the black-and-gold spines of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. He went in and asked to see Volume XLVI. Naturally, he did not find in it the slightest mention of Uqbar.

A dim and dwindling memory of Herbert Ashe, an engineer on the Southern Railways, lingers amid the overpowering jasmine and in the illusory depths of the mirrors in the Hotel Adrogué. In his lifetime, Ashe—like so many Englishmen—seemed not altogether real; in death, he is not even the ghost he was then. A tall, phlegmatic man, whose tired, square-cut beard had once been red, he was, I believe, a childless widower. Every few years he went back to England to visit—judging from the snapshots he showed us—a sundial and some oak trees. With him, my father had cemented (the verb is extreme) one of those English friendships that begin by eschewing confidences and very soon dispense with conversation. The two men used to engage in an exchange of books and magazines and, with scarcely a word, would duel at chess.

I remember Ashe in the hotel corridor, holding a book on mathematics and from time to time gazing at the irretrievable colours of the sky. One evening, we discussed the duodecimal system, in which the number twelve is equivalent to ten. Ashe said that he was just then transposing duodecimal into sexagesimal tables, in which sixty is equivalent to ten. He added that while in Rio Grande do Sul he had been commissioned to do this work by a Norwegian. My father and I had known Ashe for eight years, but he had never before mentioned having been in that place. We talked about cattle breeding and ranch foremen, about the Brazilian root of the word “gaucho,” which certain elderly Uruguayans still pronounce *gaúcho*, and he said nothing further—thank God—about duodecimal functions.

In September, 1937 (we were not then at the hotel), Herbert Ashe died of a ruptured aneurysm. A few days earlier, he had received a sealed, registered package from Brazil. It was a book in royal octavo. Ashe left it in the bar, where, months later, I found it. Leafing through the volume, I felt a strange lightheadedness that I shall not enlarge on, for this is not the story of my feelings but of Uqbar, Tlön, and Orbis Tertius. On a particular Islamic night called the Night of Nights, the secret gates of heaven are thrown open and the water in jugs tastes much sweeter. Had these gates opened just then, I would not have felt what I felt that evening. The book, which was written in English, contained 1,001 pages. On its yellow leather spine I read the following strange words, which also appeared on the half-title page: *A First Encyclopædia of Tlön. Volume XI. Hlaer to Jangr*. No date or place of

publication was given. On the opening page and on a sheet of tissue paper that guarded one of the coloured plates, a printed blue oval bore the words *Orbis Tertius*. Two years before, in a volume of a certain pirated encyclopaedia, I had come across a cursory description of a bogus country; now chance was offering me something more precious and more demanding. What I held in my hands was an enormous, systematically presented fragment of the complete history of an unknown planet, embracing its architecture and its playing cards, its terrifying mythologies and the sound of its languages, its emperors and its seas, its minerals, birds, and fishes, its algebra and fire, its theological and metaphysical controversies—all coherently set out, without any apparent dogmatic viewpoint or hint of parody.

In the Volume XI just mentioned are references to both prior and subsequent volumes. Néstor Ibarra, in a now classic article in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, denies that such accompanying tomes exist; Ezequiel Martínez Estrada and Drieu La Rochelle have—perhaps successfully—refuted Ibarra’s doubts. The fact is that until today the most diligent searches have proved fruitless. To no avail, we have ransacked the libraries of both Americas and of Europe. Alfonso Reyes, weary of this laborious and petty sleuthing, suggests that all of us should together undertake to reconstruct *ex ungue leonem* the several missing bulky volumes. He calculates, not entirely in jest, that one generation of Tlön specialists should be enough. This figure out of a hat takes us back to the basic problem of who the people were who invented Tlön. The plural is unavoidable, for the idea of a single inventor—an eternal Leibniz labouring away in darkness and humility—has been unanimously rejected. One speculation is that this “brave new world” is the work of a secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebraists, moralists, painters, and geometricians—all led by an obscure genius. There are plenty of men outstanding in these various disciplines but none who is capable of such sublime invention, much less of subordinating his creativity to a minutely detailed plan. The plan is so vast that each writer’s contribution would have been infinitesimal. At first, it was thought that Tlön was nothing but a chaos, an irresponsible excess of the imagination; it is now known that Tlön is a harmonious universe and that the secret laws governing it were in fact framed, albeit in a makeshift way. I need only point out that the logic displayed in Volume XI is so

lucid and perfect that the tome's apparent contradictions are the very crux of the proof that other volumes exist. Popular magazines, with pardonable extravagance, have spread the news of Tlön's zoology and geography. In my opinion, however, the planet's transparent tigers and towers of blood are perhaps not worthy of the perpetual attention of all mankind. May I be permitted a few moments to explain Tlön's view of the world.

Hume noted for all time that Berkeley's arguments neither allowed for the least rebuttal nor produced the slightest conviction. Applied to our earth, such a finding is completely true; in the case of Tlön, it is completely false. The nations of that planet are congenitally idealist. Its language and those things derived from language—religion, literature, metaphysics—are predicated on idealism. To the inhabitants of Tlön, the world is not an assemblage of objects in space but a diverse series of separate acts. The world is sequential, rooted in time rather than space. In Tlön's putative *Ursprache*, from which its "modern" languages and dialects stem, there are no nouns but only impersonal verbs, modified by monosyllabic suffixes or prefixes that function as adverbs. For example, there is nothing equivalent to our word "moon," but there is a verb that for us would be "to moonrise" or "to moon." "The moon rose over the river" would be "*Hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö*" or, literally, "Upward behind the lasting-flow it moonrose." (Xul Solar translates this more succinctly as "Upward, behind the on-streaming, it mooned.")

The above applies to the languages of Tlön's southern hemisphere. In northern hemisphere languages, about whose *Ursprache* Volume XI gives little information, the basic unit is not the verb but the monosyllabic adjective. Nouns are formed by an accumulation of adjectives. One does not say "moon" but rather "air-bright on round-dark" or "pale-gold of-the-sky" or other combinations. In this particular example, the mass of adjectives denotes an actual object; the fact is pure chance. The literature of this hemisphere—as with the real world of Meinong—abounds in ideal objects, joined together or separated at will, according to poetic necessity. Sometimes, mere simultaneity dictates what these objects are. They can be made up of two terms, one visual and the other aural—the colour of the sunrise and the distant cry of a bird. Others are made up of several terms—the sun and the water against a swimmer's breast; the flickering pink blur you see when your eyes are

closed; the feeling of letting yourself drift down a river or into sleep. These second-degree objects can be combined with others, a process which—with the aid of certain contractions—becomes virtually endless. There are famous poems that consist of one enormous word. Such a word is a “poetic object” created by the author. Paradoxically, the fact that nobody believes nouns to be real objects makes their number countless. The languages of Tlön’s northern hemisphere boast all the nouns of Indo-European languages and many others as well.

It is no exaggeration to say that Tlön’s classical culture comprises a single discipline—psychology. All other disciplines are held to be inferior to this one. I have mentioned that the men of this planet conceive the universe as a series of mental processes that unfold not in space but serially in time. Spinoza attributes to his inexhaustible deity the faculties of omnipresence and of thought; nobody in Tlön would understand the juxtaposition of the former, which is characteristic only of certain states of being, with the latter, which is a perfect synonym for the cosmos. In other words, they cannot conceive that space can exist in time. The sight of a puff of smoke on the horizon and then of a burning field and then of a half-stubbed-out cigar that produced the blaze is deemed an example of the association of ideas.

This monism, or total idealism, invalidates science. To explain or assess a fact is to link it to another. In Tlön, this linkage is a later state of the fact, which cannot affect or illuminate its earlier state. Every mental state is irreducible and the mere fact of naming it—that is, of classifying it—implies a falsification. From this it could be inferred that there are no sciences on Tlön—or even reasoning. The paradoxical truth is that there are, and in almost numberless number. The same happens with philosophies as happens in the northern hemisphere with nouns. The fact that every philosophy is first of all a dialectic game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has contributed to their proliferation. Improbable systems abound on Tlön, but they are all pleasing in structure or else of a sensational type. The planet’s metaphysicians seek neither truth nor the appearance of truth; rather, they seek to astonish. Metaphysics they deem to be a branch of imaginative literature. They know that any system is but the subordination of all aspects of the world to one in particular. Even the words “all aspects” are inapt, since they infer the impossible addition of time present and all time past. Nor is the plural, “times past,” legitimate,

in that it infers another impossible process. One of Tlön's schools manages to refute time, reasoning that the present is indeterminate, that the future has no reality except as present hope, and that the past has no reality except as present memory.³ Another school claims that all time has already passed and that our lives are barely the memory or dim reflection, doubtless falsified and distorted, of an irrecoverable process. Another, that the history of the world—and in it our lives and every least detail of our lives—is the scripture produced by a lesser god to communicate with a demon. Another, that the world is comparable to those codes in which some symbols have no meaning and the only truth is what takes place every three hundred nights. Yet another, that while we are asleep here we are awake somewhere else and that consequently each man is two men.

Among the doctrines of Tlön, none is so deserving of opprobrium as that of materialism. Certain thinkers have presented this particular belief with more enthusiasm than clarity, as if they were advancing a paradox. To aid understanding of the preposterous thesis, an eleventh-century⁴ heresiarch dreamed up the sophism of the nine copper coins, whose notoriety on Tlön vies with that of the Eleatic aporias among us. There are many versions of the heresiarch's specious reasoning, each of which varies the number of coins and the number of finds. The following is the best known:

On Tuesday, X crosses a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds in the road four coins that are slightly tarnished by Wednesday's rain. On Friday, Z discovers three coins in the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the passageway of his house.

The heresiarch tried to deduce from this story the truth—that is, the continuity—of the nine recovered coins. “It is absurd,” he claimed, “to imagine that four of the coins did not exist between the Tuesday and the Thursday, three between the Tuesday and the Friday afternoon, two between the Tuesday and early on the Friday. It is logical to assume that the coins existed—if only in some secret way whose

understanding is hidden from men—during each moment of these three periods of time.”

Since this paradox could not be expressed in the language of Tlön, most people did not understand it. Upholders of common sense at first limited themselves to denying the truth of the anecdote. They insisted it was a verbal fallacy, based on a rash application of two neologisms unauthorized by usage and contrary to all rigorous thought. The verbs “find” and “lose” begged the question, for they presupposed the existence of the nine original coins and all the later ones. These upholders recalled that every noun (man, coin, Thursday, Wednesday, rain) has only metaphorical value. They branded as insidious the circumstantial detail that the coins were “slightly tarnished by Wednesday’s rain,” since this presupposed what was yet to be proved—the continuous existence of the four coins between the Thursday and the Tuesday. Explaining that “equivalence” is one thing and “existence” another, they formulated a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, or a hypothetical case of nine men who on nine successive nights suffer acute pain. Would it not be ridiculous, they asked, to pretend that this pain was one and the same.⁵ They said that the heresiarch was moved only by the blasphemous aim of attributing the divine quality of being to a few mere coins and that sometimes he denied plurality and sometimes not. They argued that if equivalence allowed for existence, by the same token it would have to be admitted that the nine coins were a single coin.

Strange to say, these refutations were not the end of the story. A hundred years after the problem was first posed, one thinker, no less brilliant than the heresiarch but of orthodox persuasion, came up with a bold hypothesis. His felicitous theory affirmed that there is but one person, that this indivisible person is each being in the world and that these beings are the organs and the masks of the godhead. X is Y and is Z. Z discovers three coins, because he remembers that X lost them; X finds two in the passageway, because he remembers that the rest have been recovered. Volume XI of the Tlön encyclopaedia gives us to understand that there were three main reasons why this idealist pantheism triumphed. One, solipsism was repudiated; two, the psychological basis of the sciences was preserved; three, the worship of the gods

could continue. Schopenhauer—passionate, lucid Schopenhauer—comes up with a similar idea in the first volume of his *Parerga und Paralipomena*.

Tlön's geometry is made up of two somewhat different disciplines—one visual, the other tactile. The latter, which is equivalent to our geometry, is held to be subordinate to the former. The basis of visual geometry is the surface, not the point. This geometry has no idea of parallel lines and holds that a moving man modifies the forms that surround him. The basis of Tlön's arithmetic is the notion of indefinite numbers. Emphasis is placed on the importance of the concepts of greater and lesser, for which our mathematicians use the symbols $>$ and $<$. On Tlön, it is affirmed that the act of counting modifies quantities and changes them from indefinite to definite. The fact that several individuals, counting the same quantity, reach the same result is to a psychologist an example either of the association of ideas or of a well-functioning memory. We now know that on Tlön the subject of knowledge is one and eternal.

In literary usage too the idea of a single subject is all-powerful. Authorship is seldom credited, and the notion of plagiarism does not exist. It has been established that all works are the work of a single author, who is both timeless and anonymous. Authors are usually invented by the critics. They choose two dissimilar works—the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Arabian Nights*, let us say—attribute them to the same writer, and then with probity construct the psychology of their remarkable man of letters.

The books are different too. Fictional works embrace a single plot, with all conceivable permutations. Works of a philosophical nature invariably contain both a thesis and an antithesis, the strict pros and cons of a theory. A book that does not encompass its counter-book is considered incomplete.

Centuries and centuries of idealism have continued to influence reality. In the oldest parts of Tlön, lost objects are frequently duplicated. Two people look for a pencil; the first finds it but says nothing; the second finds another pencil, just as real but closer to his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hrönir* and, while they look unattractive, they are slightly longer. Until recently *hrönir* were the chance offspring of inattention and forgetfulness. It's hard to believe that they have been deliberately fabricated for fewer than a hundred years, but so Volume XI tells us. The earliest efforts were unsuccessful. The process, nonetheless, deserves to be

recorded. The governor of one of the state prisons informed the inmates that in the ancient bed of a river there were a number of burial sites, and he promised freedom to anyone who made an important find. During the months preceding the excavation, the convicts were shown photographs of what they were likely to discover. The first attempt proved that hope and greed can be a hindrance; the only *hrön* unearthed by a week's work with pick and shovel was a rusty wheel of later date than the start of the excavation. This was kept secret, and shortly afterwards the experiment was repeated in four schools. Three managed to find next to nothing; in the fourth, whose head died in an accident at the outset, the pupils dug up—or produced—a gold mask, an archaic sword, two or three clay amphorae, and the greenish, legless trunk of a king whose breast bore an inscription that has never been deciphered. The unreliability of witnesses who know the experimental nature of a search was thus proven. Group excavations come up with contradictory objects; nowadays individual, virtually impromptu, labour is preferred. The systematic manufacture of *hrönir*, according to Volume XI, has given great scope to archeologists, allowing them to question and even change the past, which is now as pliant and manageable as the future. Curiously, *hrönir* of the second and third degree —*hrönir* derived from another *hrön*, *hrönir* derived from the *hrön* of a *hrön*—magnify the flaws of those of the first degree; fifth-degree *hrönir* are almost identical; those of the ninth can be confused with those of the second; those of the eleventh show a purity of line that the originals do not possess. The progression is regular, and a twelfth-degree *hrön* is already in a state of deterioration. Often stranger and purer than a *hrön* is the *ur*, a thing produced by suggestion, an object elicited by hope. The great gold mask that I have mentioned is a famous example.

Things are duplicated on Tlön; also, as people forget them, objects tend to fade and lose detail. A classic example is that of the doorstep that lasted as long as a certain beggar huddled there but was lost from sight upon his death. On occasion, a few birds or a horse have saved the ruins of an amphitheatre.

Postscript, 1941—I have copied the above article just as it appeared in the *Anthology of Imaginative Literature* (1940), leaving out but a handful of