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Editor's Essay

Borges's *Library of Babel*: Consciousness Assaults the Universe

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The story of the alphabet, the story of the written word, is the story of civilisation itself. It is the story of a contrivance with which humanity has ceaselessly attempted to saturate its environment with meaning. Its invention accelerated the progress of knowledge in a manner that was inconceivable before its appearance; it made the repository of ideas exponentially summative, as it was now able to occupy a space that is infinitely broader than the limited landscapes of individual memory. We owe the development and methodisation of practically all our abstract concepts to the collective storehouse of ideas enabled by the alphabet.

This newly found capacity for abstraction altered our intellectual perspectives, redirecting their dominant focus from what had been local and tangible to what was now universal and ideational. The unstructured influx of raw data with which we tried to make sense of the world could now be subjected to a new method for managing and storing; as a consequence, our basic thought patterns began migrating from the rudimentary pursuit of subsistence and time-bound interests to the structured consideration of communal and transcendental affairs. It is in this context that Walter J. Ong writes that “[m]ore than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness”. Notably, he adds that written language can be called “context free” or “autonomous”, as it cannot be “directly questioned or contested as oral speech can because written discourse has been detached from its author” (2002, p. 77).

Evidently, no one can directly contradict a written text, for “[a]fter absolutely total and devastating refutation, it says exactly the same thing as before. This is one reason why ‘the book says’ is tantamount to ‘it is true’” (Ong 2002, p. 78). This is an eloquent statement regarding the prescriptive power of the written word. Moreover, the concept of “holy book” is a vivid testament to the enduring vitality inherent in those symbols we call letters, to the normative power of the words they form and to the abstractions they bring into being. The alphabet allowed us to enhance our power to memorialise and standardise our assumptions about reality and to develop and enrich our capacity to conceive meaning and purpose in the universe.

The immense normative power of these abstractions is eloquently shown in an incident that took place in the highlands of Perú on November 16, 1532. As the chronicler Guamán Poma de Ayala tells it (Inca chronicler Tito Cusi Yupanqui and Spanish chronicler Francisco de Jerez have slightly different versions), Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro arrived at a meeting with the Inca god-king Atahualpa and sent his chaplain, father Valverde, ahead to speak with him. The priest told Atahualpa that his gods were false gods, to what the emperor replied, “who told you that?” The Dominican friar explained that it was in the Bible, and that the Bible told him. The curious Atahualpa asked to see this “Bible”, to listen to this for himself. Handed the Bible, the emperor put it to his ear, and not hearing anything, disdainfully threw it on the ground. A furious Pizarro, seeing the Holy Book thus mishandled, ordered an immediate attack on the infidels, which ended with the devastation of the Inca army and the capture and imprisonment of the god-king (Dei 2003, p. 7). The violent Spanish reaction to the disrespect shown to written words, essentially ink markings on paper, clearly portrays the way in which those markings can create a subjective cosmos whose “reality” can be more convincing than the objective world captured by the senses. Plainly, and as Ong puts it, “writing transformed human consciousness.”

The Inca god-king resided in the world. He was a flesh and blood, speaking individual whose words were clearly heard and obeyed by his subjects. The Spanish god was in an abstract “beyond” defined through written signs on collated and bound pages, and as written discourse is “detached from its author”, that god’s existence – His “reality” – was confirmed through

symbols that allowed Him to speak while residing in an inaccessible “beyond”; He was a notional entity, moreover, whose pronouncements, captured in the written word, were not open to debate. On that fateful November day, abstractions methodised by the written symbol proved mightier, more entangled with “reality” than the somatic, oral mode of understanding that was familiar to the Inca.

In Jorge Luis Borges’s 1941 short story “The Library of Babel”, the narrator portrays the universe as a vast, ergonomic, perhaps infinite library made up of recurring identical hexagonal rooms, galleries and spiral staircases. The galleries contain twenty bookshelves, five to each side of the hexagon, and their height is that of a normal librarian. There are sleeping compartments and bathrooms. The Library’s inhabitants are explorers of sorts, always looking inside the books to find an elusive one that actually conveys meaning.

“The Library of Babel” is one of many stories in which the Argentine writer has explored humanity’s variegated conjectures regarding the essential structure of reality. These range from the mystical (“El Aleph”; “The Circular Ruins”) to the cumulative and geometric (“Funes the Memorious”; “Death and the Compass”). The consistent presumption underlying Borges’s thought process in this regard is based on a simple truism: humanity can only typify these multiform conjectures through language. As such, the human mind gives structure and meaning to reality and the universe through the use of language; consequently, as seen in his Library, the universe will be endowed with an anthropocentric grammar that is alien to it, a logical structure expressed through language that only serves the needs of human consciousness. But this generates a connatural link between language and reality that allows our consciousness, aided by the logical organisation of language, to permeate our notions of reality with a conventional structure. In short, the object that language offers us as “the universe” is a frame within which, as Borges implies, we can only detect language.

Nevertheless, such a connatural link is formidable and compelling: it certainly explains the Spaniards’ reaction to the Inca god-king’s naive disdain for the Bible, as Pizarro and company assumed that written language expressed a profound reality because it allowed mere mortals to apprehend the propositional contents of God’s thoughts. Such an image of “reality” was incomprehensible to the Inca. For this Amerindian culture, the Spaniards somehow expected the Bible to “say” what could only be “shown” or articulated orally, and this piece of processed tree bark and its amusing ink marks could only get between consciousness and its perception of the real world.

Borges incorporates ideas such as these into the fabric of his remarkable Library of Babel. The notion that with the written word humanity will somehow assemble the true image of reality—while proving at the same time that there is an underlying purpose to the universe—is thoroughly discredited by the contents of this library, the author’s expressed proxy for the universe. The human being has assembled an intellection of the universe with the only tool available to it, language, so its only obtainable image is an artifact that is systematically described through language and manifested in written form. *Our* universe is, in short, a library.

Consequently, the author is committed to the notion that language is a mechanism intended to provide *meaning*, and meaning rests on human conceptualisations of reality and plays no fundamental role in how the universe works. Language is learned and is, hence, arbitrary and autonomous: it merely expresses concepts that originate in human subjectivity while creating sophistic circles that, like the author’s celebrated short story “The Circular Ruins”, lack a functional exit. With language we create *our own* universe; with it we do not capture the

world, we only describe it using language's own internal logic, a logic based on religion, mathematics, natural philosophy and such concepts as are based on human constructs. This explains the distinctly human rationalisations regarding the universe's particular arrangement:

Idealists argue that the hexagonal rooms are a necessary shape of absolute space, or at least of our *awareness* of space. They consider that a triangular or pentagonal chamber is inconceivable. (Mystics claim that their ecstasies reveal to them a circular chamber containing an enormous circular book with a continuous spine that goes completely around the walls. But their testimony is suspect, their words obscure. That cyclical book is God). (Borges 2017, p. 58)¹

What we can assume from these rationalisations is that they are the subjective acts of consciousness, that is to say, inadequate internal representations of external context. There is a mark of genius in the conception of reality/the universe as a library in which we, all of us, search for the meaning of existence, for a catalogue of its essential traits, only to encounter the inadequacy of language. "Like all men of the Library, I've travelled in my youth, journeying in quest of a book, perhaps the catalogue of catalogues" (Borges 2017, p. 58). And as we see in the gibberish contained in the Library's books, language is insufficient, as it breaks down when tasked with articulating the constitutive meaning of anything that is alien to the exigencies of consciousness. What we call reality can only be an object of the senses, a description.

There is another level at which our need to make sense of the universe is thwarted. That we can even "explain" reality is due to the fact that we can articulate that which our senses capture through that superb contrivance called language. When we search for meaning in the universe, that meaning can only be negotiated through the medium of language. But language is based on interactions between interlocutors, and as the contents of the Library's books prove, the insensible universe cannot speak to the Library's inhabitants. Borges's idea of universe-as-library then becomes an apt metaphor for humanity's chimerical concoction, that of a universe abounding in meaning. The Library's inhabitants enact the quixotic pursuit of interlocution with the universe; Borges articulates them as protagonists of an eternal quest story with an impossible *dénouement*.

At this point I'd like to ask a question that perhaps has been adequately answered in the previous paragraphs: Why a library as analogue for the universe? But there is an added level of complexity to the analogical function of the collection of data we call a library: A library is a systematised social space dedicated to the eradication of meaninglessness. In a way, a library endows the random circumstance of being conscious with some purpose; it is a repository for meaning-structures that help us define our ambient backdrop; the library is made with "us" in mind, a space in which deductive certainties are extant and seem largely unassailable. As such, the library is an eminently *social* space, and Borges's library metaphor is based on the idea that our perception of reality occurs within a social context. The idea is that we explore the universe with a parochial set of frames of reference, all of which are enabled by that consensual contrivance called the alphabet. As the writer explains, "[t]hat discovery (of the alphabet) enabled mankind, three hundred years ago, to formulate a general theory of the Library..." (Borges, 2017, p. 59). Accordingly, in his Library Borges displays humanity performing an age-old drama: we are constantly challenging the essential meaninglessness of the universe by reimagining and *socialising* its space through the contrivances of our consciousness. But the

¹ All translations are mine.

universe's impervious nature constantly obliterates our auspicious contrivances, so there can be no rational correspondence: a library is brimming with social substance; the universe is empty.

To decipher the universe we draw upon meaning-structures that systematise our *social* environment, structures that support the belief that “the universe, with its elegant appointments—its bookshelves, its enigmatic books, its indefatigable staircases for the traveller, and its latrines for the seated librarian—can only be the work of a god” (Borges 2017, p. 58).² This seems to be our only option, to resort to anthropocentric reasoning (which relies on the alphabet, on words) in the false hope of finding some fundamental purpose in our infinite environment. Discovering that letters are only one more meaningless set of objects in a senseless universe, we, the library's inhabitants, are confronted with the limitations of those anthropomorphic meaning-structures: “There are also letters on the front cover of each book; those letters neither disclose nor anticipate what the pages inside will say. I am aware that that lack of correspondence once struck men as mysterious” (Borges 2017, p. 58). In short, our explorations only confirm “the formless and chaotic nature of practically every book” (Borges 2017, p. 59).

The fruitless search for meaning feeds the basal anxiety of the perplexed librarians: “[m]an, the imperfect librarian, may be the product of happenstance...” (Borges 2017, p. 58). Yet we persist in exploring the contents of the Library's books in spite of the setbacks because, from time to time, we find chance combinations of letters that kindle tiny sparks of hope: “A book that my father once saw in a hexagon in circuit 15-95, consisted of the letters M C V perversely repeated from the first line to the last. Another (much consulted in this zone) is a mere labyrinth of letters whose penultimate page contains the phrase *O Time thy pyramids*” (Borges 2017, p. 59).

We persist in the search because consciousness compels human beings to infuse their environs with their own self, so the unadulterated understanding of anything outside human concerns is well-nigh inconceivable. As a result, consciousness cannot countenance existing within a vacant, meaningless environment. *Meaning*, then, is a creation of consciousness that has only one purpose: to satisfy the needs of consciousness.

Thus, an essential anxiety results from consciousness not being able to accept the haphazard purposelessness of its ambient substance (the Library). Moreover, because of this self-serving mechanism, the universe/library's inhabitants are hardwired to assume that there must be a path of communication between the universe and human consciousness. But this presumption requires that there be an autonomous something on the *outside*, a cosmic interlocutor that will respond – using words in the Library's books – to this basic need produced by consciousness. But there is no interlocutor to be found:

² This reminds one of Douglas Adams's “sentient puddle” badinage in *The Salmon of Doubt*: “This is rather as if you imagine a puddle waking up one morning and thinking, This is an interesting world I find myself in—an interesting hole I find myself in — fits me rather neatly, doesn't it? In fact it fits me staggeringly well, must have been made to have me in it!” This is such a powerful idea that as the sun rises in the sky and the air heats up and as, gradually, the puddle gets smaller and smaller, frantically hanging on to the notion that everything's going to be alright, because this world was meant to have him in it, was built to have him in it; so the moment he disappears catches him rather by surprise. I think this may be something we need to be on the watch out for.” (Walters 2010, p. 61)

It is recognised that for every coherent line or straightforward statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency. (I know of an untamed region whose librarians repudiate the “vain and superstitious habit” of trying to discover any meaning in the books, equating such a quest with the attempt to find meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines on the palm of the hand... They will admit that the inventors of writing imitated the twenty-five natural symbols, but contend that that adoption was fortuitous, coincidental, and that books in themselves have no meaning. That argument, as we shall see, is not entirely fallacious.) (Borges 2017, p. 59)

It is likely that the pre-literate Inca peoples subjugated by Pizarro did not experience consternation and bewilderment in the way that peoples with alphabets certainly do. Their universe rested upon non-empirical foundations and yet was very much an immediate presence with which they could dialogue and conduct negotiation. They heard the voice of the universe through their god-king and their high priests, from whom they could request guidance and to whom they could direct questions. The universe had meaning, in the Bakhtinian sense that meaning is produced by dialogue.³ The god-king’s ill treatment of the Bible – ostensibly because the Holy Book was unable to speak with him – anticipates Borges’s implied injunction against relying on human social conventions like the alphabet (e.g. books, holy or not) in the attempt to communicate with the universe. Modern individuals can only dialogue with each other; for us, the universe is silent and our quest for its meaning is absurd.

Borges suggests that it is not feasible for human beings to capture reality’s autonomous essence, as we can only have a conscious experience of the universe. This means that, as external stimuli are experienced, they enter a mental space that is saturated by our consciousness’ meaning requirements. In Borges this is allegorised through the inhabitants’ investigation: subjected to the meaning designs of their consciousness, the books are incompatible and can only spew nonsensical and random combinations of letters. Borges’s Library/universe cannot provide the meaning we require. Because language – especially in its written form – is the way in which we rationalise (e.g. infuse anthropocentric significance) to the data captured by our senses, the universe as library is an image of *perpetua humana stultitia*, the folly of believing that in the search for the meaning of the universe we can do anything other than hold up a mirror to the demands of human consciousness. It is significant that featuring prominently in the Library’s vestibules is a mirror:

In the vestibule there is a mirror that faithfully duplicates appearances. Men often infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite—if it were, what need would there be for that illusory replication? I prefer to dream that the burnished surfaces represent and are a promise of infinitude. (Borges 2017, p. 57)

In short, the Library of Babel represents the anthropocentric language-frame inside of which we locate a universe that, by virtue of being utterly insensate and antithetical to consciousness, is unable to provide meaning.

³ “In a global sense, there is nothing but dialogue—or rather, nothing that means which can exist apart from dialogue. Because human existence is inseparable from the desire to make meaning, and because meaning is only made in and through dialogue with others, Bakhtin is able to make the claim that ‘where consciousness began, there dialogue began,’ (DI 40) tagged by a corollary assertion: ‘when dialogue ends, everything ends’ (DI 252).” (Farmer 2020, n.p.).

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