

the Library is total

The world-wide Web is the Library of Babel: so enthusiasts of Borges are apt to say if they lead life online. “Digiterati” of their sort serve as daily examples, so one supposes, of the particular species of literary creature that the “digital humanities” will have engendered already: and I should record that this essay was prompted by an exchange with a colleague, at the Centre for Internet and Society, who consents to being described so, if less than willingly, and who reads the story just so.

But there’s little enough in the *cognomen*: which is no more than a convenience here, to bring onstage a caricatural reader, to whom may be imputed a certain way of taking in this most singular and singularly successful among the *ficciones* of Borges; and we shall as we go probe the *analogia entis* of the Web and the Library — so naively to pronounce, but an “analogy of being” so pregnant to mind, seemingly — upon which our digiterati proceed: who read Borges as they do presumably because *the Library is total*: total in that *its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-five orthographic symbols (a number not infinite, although vast) or would be all that it is possible to express: in all languages.*[†]

The Library of Babel was written in another age: into a world whose fact was not unnervingly close to the fiction the story projects. But that circumstance, that the *fiction* came into a lived word distant from their own, that will not abash the sophisticated among the digiterati: who may reply with Walter Benjamin that great works of art appear much before their time, and who, if they are bold, might go on to insist that the story was written toward them, really, no matter whom its author may have intended for readers, or first found. Borges seems to have possessed as catholic an understanding of literature¹ as Benjamin had: to whom the claim that a library of Babel must prefigure the world-wide Web may not have seemed anachronistic fancy only. But it is just such

† A note regarding typography: text taken from the story is set in italics: and sources are always given for anything else put so. The font is used for foreign words also: and for emphasis occasionally, only, and only where its use cannot be mis-taken else. The translations from the Spanish are all mine: and are as literal as possible: or so I shall risk claiming, naively enough.

1 So the late and valedictory *Biblioteca Personal* prompts us to say.

fancy I shall nonetheless insist: and I shall maintain that casting the Web as the Library diminishes the fiction, actually, how illuminating ever it might first seem to take the story so. One cannot argue such a claim very closely; or I am unable to, at least, I shall already concede; and I can only hope that, when I have taken my way through Borges' Babel, the reader who has stayed with me will be inclined to agree. But the determined digiteratus might be willing, even so, to scant the actual *fiction* for a compelling and encompassing analogy; and I shall at the very end essay an answering "deep reading" which is not too much constrained by the "surface reading" I shall first attempt.^a

The burden of surface reading is to receive a text within the context of its articulation: to try and read a literary work of art just as its contemporaries would have: fraught undertaking. The work of reading now, however, is not to reconstruct the mentality or psychology of those first readers: but, rather, to make one's way through the text somewhat as they might have: for which one needs very little more than those commonplaces of their lived world, actually, to which a text itself will usually point an alert reader. To sufficiently recover the discursive context of its original articulation, then, would be the first task for the surface reading of a literary text: or so it would seem. But I shall not be proceeding so correctly: and shall read our *fiction* out directly, from within a now remote context already shaped in my own understanding, however partially the constraint and opportunity of contexture there has been traced: the contours of which shaping should come clear as we go, and will underwrite itself at last, I trust, by accounting for the text well enough, how arbitrary ever a reading so essayed might first seem.

1

For one reasonable line or faithful report there are leagues of insensate cacophony, of verbose farragoes and incoherences: so the narrating librarian of Babel seems to acknowledge: as he cannot but, one thinks, for the Library does after all register all the possible combinations of the twenty-five

^a I should note that I distinguish these modes of reading very much as Arthur Danto had in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*: which a curious reader may want to consult.

orthographic symbols. That these combinations amount to *a number not infinite, although vast* is a circumstance we must consider in time: but in the mean I am more than willingly, certainly, to think that in their *cacophony and incoherence* the world-wide Web and the Library of Babel are entirely alike. Where they are entirely unlike though is that, while the litter on the Web may be the leavings of ignorant men, the Library is the handiwork of *the ignorant gods*: and of gods whose divine character is disclosed thus. *Man, the imperfect Librarian, could be the work of chance or of malevolent demiurges*: so our narrator concedes: but he is certain even so that *the universe, with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatic tomes, of indefatigable stairways for the traveller and latrines for the seated librarian* — such a universe, our narrator is sure, *could only be the work of a god* — and to perceive the distance there is between the divine and the human, it is enough, he immediately maintains, *to compare these rude and tremulous symbols that my fallible hand scribbles on the cover of a book with the organic letters of the interior: exact, delicate, most black, inimitably symmetrical*.

That *latrine, stairway and letter* should equally disclose the handiwork of the gods is not an inadvertence: the parity is reprised in a diegetic note — a note internal to the telling, that is to say — which assures us that *no book is a stairway*: and the material emphases of the passage will not seem peculiar, merely, to a reader who remembers, from the very beginning of the narrative, that in the perfectly *identical hexagons* of the Library *light comes from some spherical fruits that bear the name of lamps*. Of these monstrant shapes — lucent globings weirdly hard and soft at once to sensuous apprehension — of these we are immediately told that *there are two in each hexagon: transversal*. The term ‘transversal’ renders the detail just as definite to geometric conception as it is vague to our intuiting senses: shows at once particular and schematic as such: will serve, in that dual character, to seal into itself the lived world at once daily and alien, as near our own as far thence, that Borges has diagrammed with the deft successions of his first slant sentences: and telegraphs thus the form made matter without defect or residue, so I shall hazard now, that *the Library ab eterno* will prove.

The claim is sudden: will seem so even to readers of Kant who recall the pregnant assertion “intuition without concepts is blind, concepts without intuition are empty” that serves as axiom and ground,

in the first Critique, to the mutual grafting of sensation and idea, each upon each, which its Transcendental Analytic performs: and we shall presently see that our *fiction* improvises upon the special use to which the word ‘intuition’ is put there. But to cast “the lived world” of the story as I have is to receive in a very particular way the circumstance that *the universe (which others call The Library) is composed of an indefinite number, perhaps infinite, of hexagonal galleries: to do so is to take that indefinite monstrosity as brute fact, nonetheless, as immediately fact as the great shafts for ventilation in the middle which pass through them, enclosed by very low railings only, or the closets to the left and right of the passages that go between the galleries, one for sleeping, on foot, and the other for the satisfaction of fecal necessities.*

But brute and immediate fact is perfect *factum* here I must insist again: form made matter or matter made form, equally, without such defect or residue as both Plato and Aristotle posit when they endow *hyle* with the power to resist *eidos* and *entelechy* — master and disaffected pupil agreeing here as nowhere else thus much perhaps — and as such, as perfect *factum*, the *noumenon* of Kant become a *phainomenon* adequate to its entire mystery. Only toward the end of the telling, of course, would one come to take just so the obliquely evoked material fact of our fictive universe: if one does so at all: but to the reader who recalls them at the close the *spherical fruits* of the beginning will show themselves to have been some intimation, already, of the sempiternal Library: which *will endure illuminated, solitary, infinite and perfectly motionless* in the end, will endure thus *armed with precious books, useless, incorruptible* and entirely *secret*: will perdure even so while *the species Man – the only one – is to die out.*

Precisely why the Library that is all the universe must be supposed “perfect material *factum*” I cannot readily say: and I can only hope that I shall succeed in prompting a willing reader to take it so eventually.^b But that *the species Man* should be *the only one*, in the universe that is the Library, that is crucial here: and the slant conjuring of form made

^b I intend ‘*factum*’ as the Latin substantive: the past participle of ‘*facere* = do’ used as a common noun for *something done*. The term ‘*factum*’ happens to abbreviate ‘the statement of the case’ in the language of law: and that is a happy coincidence here, we shall see.

perfect matter, perfectly alien and *incorruptible*, that is formal ground to the singular and estranging movement of mind the *fiction* will conduce, at last, in readers who at all prize their particularly human nature. Such “conducted motion” will occur in recollection only: which is the proper mode of understanding *The Library of Babel* I shall now assert. I must defend these summary claims: and shall contrive to do so. But any such complementing motion of thought is foreclosed already, let me note, by the analogy of the Web and the Library: foreclosed because that *analogia entis* cannot accommodate any “matter made form or form made matter without residue or defect” whatever: no matter what parallels there may be, and those however close, between life lived online and the exiguous subsistence of the librarians who inhabit Babel.²

2

I squandered and consumed my years, so the narrating librarian recording his life in Babel confesses, in a futile search for the Man of the Book: the conjectural librarian who keeps the one book which would be the key and the perfect compendium of all the rest: and whose having examined that book suffices to make him analogous to a god. The Man of the Book was the superstition of another and more sanguine time, long since past now. But it does not appear incredible to me, our narrator avers, that on some shelf of the universe there should be a total book: and he will pray to the ignorant gods that one man – one only, and even if it be thousands of years hence! – should have examined and read that book, asking that if the honour and the wisdom and the felicity are not mine, let them be for others ... Let the sky exist, although my place be the inferno he prays: let me be humiliated and annihilated, but for some one being, for an instant, let Your enormous Library be justified.

As we are reading we may or may not pause, even upon such abnegating petition, to ask ourselves just what the gods of Babel may be ignorant of: even should we recall the hysteria and the frenzy produced, in the expectant age of the Man of the Book, by the *Vindications* upon which *avaricious thousands* of our narrator’s fellow librarians had so

² Such as “live online” do sleep on their feet, perhaps, if not always in closets: and “browse the Web” seated at stool as much as anywhere else maybe.

much hoped: those *books of apology and prophecy which vindicated forever the acts of every man in the universe and reserved to his future prodigious mysteries*. Should one recollect the petition at the close of the story, however, an answer will suggest itself: and what the gods of Babel are particularly ignorant of, I shall assert, is that the men who wander their Library seek justification most: that to so seek is their particular nature: and if these are the gods who have made them, and not *chance* or *malevolent demiurges*, then these men were not made in their image at all.

But the order of their world that the men of Babel are so made as to always and perhaps delusively seek — the saving knowledge, or so they suppose, that the Library is justified, in fevered expectation of which *the universe had once brusquely usurped the limitless dimensions of hope* — that so elusive justicing will even so show itself to have been prefigured and foreshadowed, at the close, by the grave theodicy of The Book of Job: in the image of whose jealous God the librarians of Babel had once supposed themselves created: and as such would be, were it granted them, a justifying neither consisting in nor comprehended by such individual justifications as Luther had proclaimed.³

The negations and oppositions so summarily declared are crucial to the fiction: but I have gone too far in front of myself now, and must turn back to secure my ground. How well or poorly I shall manage, to sophisticates among the digiterati particularly, would depend on just how they recall the superstitions, as it would seem to them, of the peoples of The Book: such confession and commandment as would have been immediately legible to Jew or Christian once, how well or poorly lettered ever, even were these uttered or observed only in their breach: and I must proceed in the hope that, when such now risible or negligible *data* are retrieved to their preternaturally mobile attention and rapidly processing nervure, from some “site” or other of the putatively universal repository that is their Web, our digiterati will nonetheless receive the discountenanced dictamina somewhat as the

3 The reference to Luther will seem too sudden: but the moral seems implicit, however, in chastening end of the search for the Vindications. The Library must keep these somewhere: its divinely crafted shelves bear *all that it is possible to express* after all: but *the seekers did not recollect*, our disabused narrator records, *that the possibility that a man would find his, and not some perfidious variation of his, is computable as zero*.

intended readers of *The Library of Babel* would have: whose coming of age would have been either bereaved or rejoiced, one must record now, by the proclaimed death of the One God of the Torah and the Bible.⁴

That Yahweh was anciently the God of Babel become Universe needs no argument more than the vocable 'Babel' itself perhaps; and should be evident anyway from the passage which descants on the one shape whose *perhaps infinite* doubling comprises the world of the librarians. *The idealists argue*, our narrator records, *that its hexagons are a form necessary to absolute space: or to our intuition, at least, of space. They reason that a triangular or pentagonal room is inconceivable. The mystics pretend*, his parenthesis adds, *that their ecstasies reveal a circular chamber with a great circular book of continuous binding, which meets the entire curve of the walls. But their testimony is suspect and their words obscure* he declares: for *that cyclic book is God: and against such lapsing it suffices me for now*, he says, *to repeat the ancient dictum: "The Library is a sphere whose precise centre is any hexagon: and whose circumference is inaccessible."*

The passage comes very early. I pause to note that the epithet 'absolute' and the wording 'to our intuition, at least, of space' would recall to readers at all familiar with Kant his radical premise that space and time are "intuitions" prior to all experience, and as such "forms" determining our knowledge of the world we bodily inhabit; and just why the use of the word here may be thought to improvise upon Kant's special usage, as I have ventured, may be gathered by asking oneself how the number six might be *necessary to our intuition, at least, of space*.⁵

The *ancient dictum* will bring to mind Nicholas of Cusa: in whose formula *God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere*: and the materializing misprision will prove telling when one remembers that Cusanus was intellectual ancestor to Giordano Bruno: who had first asserted, against the orthodoxy of the Church, the heretical thesis that the universe is materially infinite. So when the departing narrator — who had specially paused, before he would *repeat the ancient dictum*,

4 Nietzsche would have been a considerable presence, surely, to the particularly intended readers of the story: if only through his votary Ortega y Gasset.

5 The answer must be that, for the bodied creatures we humans are, there are six apperceived directions: up and down, left and right, front and back.

to affirm that the universe is interminable — when our narrating librarian asserts yet once more at the very end that it is not illogical to believe that the world is infinite, and ventures to insinuate, as his solution to the ancient problem of the extent of his universe, that the Library is unlimited and periodic, upon that an attentive reader will recall just how the ancient dictum of Babel has reworded Cusanus.⁶ We shall come back to the theologian momentarily; and we must consider in time the singular use of the word ‘insinuate’ here. Just how the *unlimited and periodic* character of the Library would be disclosed seems to bear emphasizing. *If an eternal traveller traverses it in any direction, he would discern at the end of centuries that the same volumes repeat themselves in the same disorder: the repeating of which disorder would be an order* a final parenthesis adds: *the Order*. The parenthesis inflects ‘insinuate’ in a particular way: which we shall have to consider. The repetition must be supposed periodic, properly, not a doubling: because it is a postulate of the librarians of Babel, set down early on, that even though the mysterious volumes given to their seeming keep do all show a *uniform format*, nonetheless *there are not, in the Library, two identical books*. So the word ‘same’ posits a strict identity: a circumstance we shall consider again very shortly.

Coming back to the epithet ‘unlimited and periodic’ then; the words apply to an object traversed; and there would be many geometric objects and paths along them that may be described so.^c But the elaborating of such an ideational correlative, so fancifully to term it, to an “unlimited and periodic sphere whose centre is each hexagon and circumference inaccessible,” that will undo itself at last: so we shall see: but should the literary reader want an “objective correlative,” even so,

6 Too much is being asked of “the attentive reader” it looks: but what was set down just now regarding Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno would have been *topoi* of conversation often enough one thinks — if not “commonplaces of their lived world” quite — in the close circle of the story’s intended readers: most of whom are named, I’ll hazard, in *Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*.

c The graphs of the basic periodic functions defined on the real number line, the *cosine* and the *sine*, provide the immediate and simplest instances. These functions repeat their values at intervals of 2π ; the graph of either, drawn in the plane, is an “unlimited and periodic” path; and an analogue thus of the traversed Library if we take its “eternal traveller” to be moving along the line and to provide, at each moment of his life, a distinct “argument” to the function, concomitantly taking for the corresponding “value” of the function the book he finds at that moment. We have to be more elaborate though: and we shall eventually seek — as Cusanus might have, even — to take the “direction” our eternal traveller traverses for a “great circle” on “a sphere of infinite radius” which may be thought to “bound the space of experience.”

he may imagine *the eternal traveller* as endlessly wasting Tithonos, faring the earth over along one great circle of its surface, trailed by disconsolate Dawn, toward whom, centuries after he has set out, the night sky proffers again the same cold profusion of star.

The very much more important consideration however, upon recollection certainly, is that the *species* Man is *the only one*: and when we find that men are *to die out*, at the end of the telling, the uniqueness of the books should recall the ontological thesis of Nominalism: which denies existence to abstract universals, such as a species “taken in itself” would be, and asserts that only concrete particulars exist: and should a nominalist maintain that no concrete particular could be enough “like” any other — boldly asserting some absolute and necessary difference converse to the Identity of Indiscernibles, say, and anticipating the self-subsistent monads of Leibniz thus— he could proceed then to deny the possibility, even, of empirical knowledge: for that requires the sorting of particulars into species and genera. Nicholas of Cusa had just so denied, in fact, being a thorough Nominalist.

That *the young* have begun, by the end of the story, to *prostrate themselves before the books and kiss them barbarously* — without knowing *how to decipher a single letter* — that becomes newly significant upon our taking just so the postulated uniqueness of the books. For the absolute identity with itself of the *unique exemplar* that each volume is, and its corollary and absolute difference from every other, that comes to be a monstrosity more “material” and “of the Letter” than “ideal” and “of the Spirit” now:^{7,8} so I shall hazard: which “concretion” together with the parity of *latrine, stairway and letter* emphasizes the oblique material fact of the Library newly, newly shows its *sphere whose precise centre is every hexagon and circumference inaccessible* for a factum perfect and alien — *illuminated, solitary, infinite, and perfectly motionless* in the end — and just there, from within such a gathering and pointing of material emphases, the Library’s “armament” of *precious books* discountenances forever the One God of the Torah and the Bible, so I shall assert now,

7 Note that even if *each book possesses hundreds upon thousands of almost perfect facsimiles* it is nonetheless a *unique exemplar* — odd as it is that an “exemplar” should be “unique”.

8 The opposition of ‘material’ to ‘ideal’ here seems to commit me to maintaining that “concrete particulars” are composed of such “matter” as the mechanics of Newton postulates: but one may substitute the adjective “sensed” for “material” if one is agnostic about that.

for by their *useless* and *incorruptible* and *secret* multiplying they divide away his once potent Name: even as much as what is *written* in them *annuls* or *phantasmizes* the now immemorially lapsed and dying-away progeny of his ancient votaries.

Methodical writing distracts me, our narrator confesses just before the end, *from the present condition of men*: which condition is *the certainty that all that is written annuls or phantasmizes us*. ‘La certidumbre de que todo está escrito nos anula o nos afantasma’ the original says: and ‘makes phantasmal’ will more idiomatically transcribe ‘afantasma’: but the nonce word ‘phantasmizes’ seems to recover the singular coinage of the original, which improvises a verb upon the substantive ‘fantasma’. Why one should render the text so should come clear as we proceed. But doing so emphasizes, importantly, that the “annulling” of men by *all that is written* consists in their being made phantoms: in a voiding of fleshly substance that is more than concomitant, merely, to a defeat of mind: which voidance becomes the creaturely obverse, thusly, to the perfect material factum of the *divine* Library.

But the God of Moses is “forever discountenanced” thus only to the reader of course: for he has long since become in Babel *the cyclic book* dreamed by its disavowed mystics. The prominence given to *the Gnostic gospel of Basilides* however, by *the commentary on that gospel* and *the commentary on the commentary on that gospel*, confirms a diegetic abjuring, within the fiction, of the One God; and *the autobiographies of the archangels* that the Library must contain discloses how finally and beyond recall Yahweh is reduced and contained. But if he is beyond recall to the librarians who now wander Babel, to their ancestors He must have shown for the malign Demiurge of Basilides’ imagining — the dread Urizen of Blake’s visions — and that their strange world was anciently the Babel wrought by Yahweh will come clear to us entirely, were it not evident always, upon our being summarily addressed thus: *you who are reading me, are you sure of understanding my language?*

The question to the reader is summary: but not entirely sudden nonetheless: for our narrator had said just before that *a number n of possible languages uses the same vocabulary* and maybe *the symbol ‘library’ receives the correct definition ‘ubiquitous and perdurable system of hexagonal*

galleries' in some of these tongues: but library is 'bread' or 'pyramid' or some other thing nonetheless, he had warned, and the seven words that define it have another value.^d

I do not know if there is in Spanish a difference of words cognate, with regard to connotation, to the distinction between “lexicon” and “vocabulary”. But the conflation of spoken and written letter suggested thus does not seem an inadvertence any more; and may be diegetic even; for we are addressed so toward the end, just before our narrating scribe, as he will decidedly seem now, confesses that methodical writing distracts him from the “annulling” he and his fellows have undergone; and when in parting valediction he writes that his *solitude is gladdened by elegant hope*, we wonder if they are become solitaries, all, for whom the distinction between speech and writing is of no moment.

The sacerdotal meaning of ‘scribe’ is crucial to the *fiction*: and we must take the librarians of Babel for remote descendants of scribes who were entrusted with the deciphering of sacred texts. The question of our scribe’s intelligibility to the reader comes within parentheses as well we must note: and that will prove a considerable circumstance upon its recollection actually: not least by making oblique the diegetic role of the eminently “written” marks that brackets are. To probe such makings we must, however, ask ourselves what we might know of the language in which the books of the Library are written: in what known alphabet, in the script of which language known or seemingly known to us at least, those initially *enigmatic* and finally *incomprehensible* volumes might be written. The question is crucial to the reading I am venturing: and a certain discrepancy in the text prompts its asking. But before doing so we should scout once more the *analogia entis* of the Library and the Web, which we have lost sight of quite.

3

Told that the the Web is the Library anyone who recalls the story will ask how the words ceaselessly massing there “annul” us. Tweeting and

^d Readers acquainted with mathematical logic may recall now that a “theory” articulated in a formal language such as “the first-order predicate calculus” may have very different “models”.

blogging and wikiing “netizens” will not think so certainly.¹⁰ Now it might well be that our “present condition” is correctly described just so: what is written may indeed annul us: and votaries of Borges endure the sombre pleasure, it may be, of finding forecast in his *useless, incorruptible* and *secret* Library their world gone multitudinous word. But to take the world-wide Web for the Library of Babel is illicit unless one can say how the fearful proliferation of the word around and upon our scribbling selves will “phantasmize” our bodies: only such bodily “annulling” will serve: without which the analogy actually diminishes the *fiction*, I had begun by asserting: and I pause now to try and make good that claim.

One should begin by asking how the Library is commodious: how it is particularly fitted to creaturely men: and the question must be asked upon recalling our scribe’s petition to the gods of Babel that their *enormous Library be justified*. The petition seems to concern the books most: but upon it the question of “commodity” cannot but recollect to us certain material details. We will recall the *indefatigable stairways for the traveller* and the *latrines for the seated librarian*, certainly, which had received particular mention as the handiwork of the gods; and the *closets for sleeping on foot* no less, surely, and upon that the height of the *perfectly identical hexagons*, which *scarcely exceeds that of an average librarian*; and the *very low railings around the great shafts for ventilation* thereupon, which will seem to have been particularly made so, now, in order that the *pious hands* of the librarians may easily *cast* their dead fellows over them.

We shall recall this singular collocation of the words “pious” and “cast” when we come to consider our scribe’s diction: but the pertinent circumstances just now are these. The *enigmatic tomes* given to their seeming keep are almost all *impenetrable*, so we find, to the librarians of Babel: but the Library that is all their universe has been made for them to go searching for books, nonetheless, for they sleep *on foot*, only, and sit only for *the satisfaction of fecal necessities*. That there is conspicuous allusion to defecation, and none to refecation, does not seem accidental. But with regard to our *analogia entis* the important consideration is that

¹⁰ One might propose now, if for comic relief only, that those who load the Wikipedia with elaborate pages on themselves seem to be producing parodies, unwittingly or no, of the individual *Vindications* that the librarians of Babel once sought: with *perfidious variations* being supplied by mischievous or malicious editors. But that seems a poor joke.

the “perfect material factum” of the Library is at all commodious to the bodies, only, of the dying-away and *only species* its clerkly men are: and not at all to such powers of understanding as they ever possessed.

Now what is particularly “commodious” about the world-wide Web, on the other hand, is not its material substrate: not the “physical layer” of servers and routers and signal-channels, certainly, the interlinking and coordination of which materially instantiates the Internet as an ensemble of communication protocols, primarily, for the finite automata that digital computers are. The graphical-user-interface to the digital computer, rather, is what sustains and spreads the world-wide Web: and what makes the interface commodious is the ready and seamless retrieval of “content” that seems to allow. So a man intent on pursuing the analogy of the Web and the Library will have to consider whether or not such ready and seamless retrieval does actually serve such powers of understanding as human beings possess. But even were we willing to grant that the Web is delusively commodious, only, to our powers of understanding, and annuls us just so, we must still ask ourselves how or in what way the graphical-user-interface makes our bodily existence phantasmal; and how we conceive that must reflect, moreover, the circumstance that the librarians of Babel are made phantoms precisely by *all that is written*.

The digiteratus cannot manage any adequate conceiving here: or so I shall risk asserting: not unless he glosses ‘all that is written’ in a radically other way than any practice of digital humanities really could: as we shall see when, *inter alia*, we have duly considered the alphabet of Babel: and that is why the analogy of the Web and the Library, as that is intended by the digiterati at least, will only diminish our *fiction*.

4

Yahweh is discountenanced to the reader even as much, it was asserted above, as the librarians of Babel are annulled by what is written: and in what follows I must attempt to make good the proposition: which seems to posit an illicit correspondence of readerly condition and diegetic circumstance. The reader I imagine now has read the story with care,

and found his bearings in the discursive world of its intended readers; and his sense of that reading context has not been contradicted, I must hope, by how I have sought to situate the *fiction* there.

To perceive the distance there is between the divine and the human it is enough to compare the rude and tremulous symbols that his fallible hand scribbles, on the cover of some book in his keeping, with the organic letters of the interior: which are exact, delicate, most black and inimitably symmetrical: so we had found our scribe setting down very soon after he began. The avowal had completed the articulation, we should note now, of the first of the two axioms of the librarians of Babel: which is that the Library exists ab eterno: and I shall record once again the parity of letter, latrine and stairway in the handiwork of the gods that the Library ab eterno is.

The second *axiom* proceeded to declare that *the number of orthographic symbols is twenty-five*; and the interpolation of an *Editor's Note* had explained that *the comma and the period together with the blank and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet, are the twenty-five sufficient symbols that enumerate the unknown*. We shall consider the word 'enumerate' presently: but *that comprobatión permitted*, we were immediately told by our scribe, *the formulation of a general theory of the Library and the satisfactory resolution of the problem which no conjecture had deciphered: the formless and chaotic nature of nearly all the books*.

I have transcribed with the archaic word "comprobatión" the "comprobación" of the original Spanish: and it will later come clear why we must do so if we are to properly construe the *resolution* of the problem here: which is never spelt out quite I note. But the pertinent consideration just now is that the 'twenty-two letters' of the "Editor's note" will recall the epigraph to the story taken from Burton's famous *Anatomy of Melancholy*: *by this art you may contemplate the variation of the 23 letters*. A careful reader will ponder the discrepancy surely, upon recollecting the *fiction* at least, and will think on the alphabet of Babel.

The Hebrew script would be a plausible guess now: and the "art" which "contemplates the variation of the 23 letters" could only be the Kabala then: especially if one knew already that the question of whether there are 23 or only 22 sacred letters had once agitated the orthodox Scribes and Pharisees who affirmed and asserted the Law of Yahweh

against the Grace preached by the heretic Christians: and for anyone who has seen them, as they are inscribed in a Torah especially, the markedly more “square” than “cursive” letters of Biblical Hebrew are indeed *exact, delicate, most black and inimitably symmetrical*.

The facts about Hebrew that were just retailed would have been commonplaces, one may safely guess, to the close circle of readers toward whom *The Library of Babel* seems most to have been written. But this much about the language may be gathered from the first few pages of any grammar. That the interpolating Editor writes ‘enumerate the unknown’ must allude to the fact that the letters served as numerals also —though not to just that maybe— and that the “comma” and the “period” he lists are actually a glottal apostrophe and a plosive punctum, that will prove a suggestive nuance when the narrating scribe describes them so as well. There is one esoteric commonplace more, if I am allowed the oxymoron, which Borges’ intended readers would have had in mind as they read: which is the Kabbalist doctrine of the secret Hebrew name of each finally real thing: and on a first reading the *fiction* could be taken to extravagantly invert that mystic proposition, simply, by contracting each “finally real thing” to its “proper name”.

That contracting inversion is immensely important actually: and in the end will prove the primary condition, even, to how the *fiction* is understood upon recollection. I must try to delineate that retrospective understanding now; some few of the enabling conditions of which have been sufficiently adumbrated, I must hope, by what has already got said.

Understanding a text as a work of art could not consist in stating over what it means: or means to convey: for such paraphrasing would render the text itself otiose. A work of literary art must mean *just* what it says: and is a work of art, so one might insist, only if *one cannot otherwise say* what its own words say. To understand a work of literary art *as such*, I shall maintain then, is to follow its distinctive *perlocution*: to follow what its words specially *do* by their being said just as they are.

Or through the words of *The Library of Babel* being “inscribed” just as they are one should more properly say: for the contrast between speech and inscription, which archaic Hebrew makes acutely present by the absence of written vowels, that definitive contrast will in retrospect

confirm and consolidate the forenoted condensing to something “more material and of the Letter than ideal and of the Spirit” — as it will seem now — of the “absolute identity with itself” enjoyed by the *unique exemplar* that each volume is in the Library that is all the universe.¹¹

We must pause over the marked parenthesizing to proceed; and enough has been said, I trust, to make the first sentence of our *fiction* seem more than a little curious now: which, recall, had closed within brackets the circumstance that our scribe’s universe *is called the Library* by *others* of his kind. Now we know by the end of the first paragraph, already, that we are reading the words of someone situated in the world of the story; and, as readers of a “first-person narrative” are apt to find themselves particularly addressed by the narrator, and made “listeners” in his fictive world thus, the bracketing that happens twice in that first paragraph itself will first of all inflect the relation of being diegetically addressed. That relation presumes a shared world ordinarily: or a fictive world whose lived circumstances are not entirely remote from the reader’s: which is what disposes us initially to take as “immediate fact” the weird material conformation of our narrator’s Babel, of course, and find ourselves in a lived world “at once daily and alien”.

The brackets seem to enclose asides to begin with — though the words are very often strangely pitched — and their function seems innocuous enough at first. But we are soon enough posed by what they come to enclose: as readers, certainly, if not so much as diegetic listeners: and when we find the words ‘men reasoned’ put in brackets just after an instance of our scribe’s own reasoning was itself parenthesized, and especially since ‘the Library is total’ is the bracketed premise, the parentheses become uncanny: upon recollection at least, if not just as one is reading: so much so that the question ‘*are you sure of understanding my language*’ put into brackets — the strangely probing query now, to *you who are reading me*, which the parenthesizing makes that question — that now no more innocuous querying seems to

11 What was only “noted” before will seem a “condensing” in retrospect, I mean to say. That the interpolated Editor’s Note should describe the silent apostrophe and the plosive punctum in a “familiar” way, as comma and period, will matter a good deal here: when that is recalled together with the circumstance of there being diegetic notes, as well, besides this interpolation. We shall momentarily see why.

suddenly join, to bring abruptly together, in some shared lack or defect of comprehension, the recollecting reader in “his own person” and the diegetic “listener to the narrating scribe” that he should have allowed his reading double to become.

Or will join just so a willing reader I shall assert: and such willed joining is in every way crucial, as formal preliminary and active concomitant, to that “movement of mind conduced in recollection” which I had asserted when I began: whose already postulated “singular and estranging” character is the particular doing-with-words our *fiction* achieves I shall maintain, the distinctive perlocution, or “per-scription” rather, which makes *The Library of Babel* a work of literary art.^{12,13}

5

To forestall the question a studied reader will inevitably ask, let me say that I use the word “formal” in an innocuous way: to point, only, at *how* a work of literary art might do what it specially does with its words.

The willed joining just asserted does not collapse, each into its close other, the reader “in his own person” and the “diegetic listener” to the narrating scribe; is more their sublation rather, I shall hazard, employing the word that translates Hegel’s ‘aufgehoben’ usually: so to record that both “the-reader-in-his-own-person” and his “listening-diegetic-double” remain thinking moments, as it were, however they are joined, to the singular movement of mind that recollection conduces; and I shall presently try and say how they remain so.¹⁴ That so weird a conjunction should be effected by just the question whose bracketing

12 It is the “willed joining” just asserted that is most served by the forenoted “familiar” transcribing, of apostrophe and punctum as comma and period, in the interpolated Editor’s Note: which taken together with the diegetic notes makes the Editor a presence more diegetic than he would otherwise have been: which then makes the transcription familiar as much to “the reader in his own person” as to “the distanced listener”.

13 The scribe’s intelligibility to the reader becomes a considerable circumstance not least by making oblique, so I had asserted first, the diegetic role of the “written” marks that parentheses are. How their inscriptive character comes into play should come clear soon: but in a way that does not prevent or undo, I must hope, how the connotative contrast between ‘query’ and ‘question’ forwards “the willing reader” into his diegetic double the “distanced listener”.

14 But I shall note already that their preservation as “thinking moments” within “mutual sublation” is what wordings like ‘pious hands will cast’ abet.

seals it as probing query —by our scribe’s asking *us*, we may properly say now, whether we are sure of understanding his words — that circumstance brings us squarely to the matter of his unusual diction: which has been advertised enough now: and which will have been what first and most struck attentive readers of the story.

An interpreter should begin with a consideration of the diction then, so the reader might object here; and not scrabble crab-wise toward so necessary and preparatory an exercise. But I have gone as I have because the claims I advance could not be inferences of any sort, whether inductive or “abductive” or deductive, from such evident “data” as the telling presents: and the hermeneutic circle I am seeking to close was best traversed in a direction counter to the movement from what is most given to what may be gathered or guessed at only: even if it is the strangeness of the diction —how certain words angle away, as it were, as we are reading, away *into the remoteness* of Babel as if — even if it is the recollection of that, precisely, which first induces, and thereafter most sustains, the singular and estranging movement of mind I have asserted: a conduced movement of mind that the considerations of locution that follow will themselves suffice to rehearse, so I must hope now, within the willing readers I have been imagining.^e

To begin with ‘comprobatión’ seems best. This now disused word seems to have been used much as ‘comprobación’ still is in Spanish: for *testimony proved by collective avowal*: but “proved” only as much as, in a court of law, the sworn testimony of several witnesses endows with sufficient probative force some one thing to which they all attest. The allusion to law, its slant invocation thus, is crucial actually: especially upon our recalling that our scribe had declared for objects of *lawless hope* those individual *Vindications* that his fellows had so frenziedly gone in search of once. The words ‘lawless hope’ will recall “the Grace of God without the Law” so much reprobated by the Pharisees and the Scribes and so much hoped upon by the Christians: which these heretics expected upon their charity to men and their faith in Christ:

^e I mean to use very casually only Pierce’s coinage ‘abductive’: which names for him some special quickening of mind, toward revealing articulation, alleged to happen in the sciences.

whose advent had sealed a new Covenant of Grace between all men and their fatherly Creator, so they maintained, and abrogated the Covenant of the Law anciently observed between partial Yahweh and his chosen.¹⁵

The impious affirm that absurdity is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even meek and pure coherence) is a perhaps miraculous exception: so we read immediately after the scribe's petition to his ignorant gods that their *enormous Library* be justified: and the passage ends by his asking us if we are sure of understanding his language. No reader but would have paused over 'meek and pure coherence' surely: could not but have paused: may have said the words over at the concluding question of the passage, even, before reading on. In retrospect the phrase will prompt a willing reader of the *fiction* thus. Coherence is the attribute of "validity" that even unsound reasoning may display: and *coherence* here might well be the mark of successful casuistry: but "the pure and the meek" know the truth of God, the Spirit of His Law, which is obscured by the casuists of the Letter: or so the heretic Christian had maintained against Pharisee and Scribe.¹⁶

That the coherence sought by the quondam custodians of the Law may itself be *pure and meek* is momentous therefore: is what most preserves the reader in his own person and his listening diegetic double as "thinking moments," actually, in the mutual sublation that the willed joining of reader and listener becomes. But such "coherence" as the librarians of Babel may exhibit is nowise redeemed, we readily see, by whatever "purity" and "meekness" they may possess; and *the commentary on the commentary on the Gnostic Gospel of Basilides* discloses how and how far away they have gone, from the jealous Yahweh of the Jews and the fatherly God of Christians equally, toward their own *ignorant gods*.

These are diegetic circumstances disclosed to the recollecting reader in his own person of course: but he will have been closed with his listening double by the parentheses now: and both why and how that should

15 The intended readers of the *fiction* must have received the words 'lawless hope' just so: and immediately: having come of age in the wake, I cannot help the pun, of the Death of God.

16 Upon the authority of the Book of the Psalms most of all one supposes: for *the law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul and the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple*, as the psalm numbered 19 asserts. Augustine's *Confessions* show how much and in how daily a way the Psalms directed and invigorated early Christian living.

conduce an estranging movement of mind, and by the agency of diction first and most, is best disclosed by transcribing the passage whole:

The impious affirm that absurdity is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even meek and pure coherence) is a perhaps miraculous exception. They speak (I know it) of “the febrile Library, whose hazardous volumes run the incessant risk of changing themselves into others, and affirm, negate and confound all like a god who raves.” Those words, which do not only denounce disorder but exemplify it as well, evidently prove their abominable taste and their desperate ignorance. Effectively, the Library includes all verbal structures, all the variations which the twenty-five orthographic symbols permit, but not a single absolute absurdity. It is futile to observe that the better volumes in the many hexagons I manage are titled *Thunder Coiffed* or *The Cramping of Plaster* or *Axaxaxas mlö*. Those propositions, at first sight incoherent, are doubtless capable of some cryptographic or allegorical justification; that justification is verbal and, *ex hypothesi*, already figures in the Library. It is not possible to so combine the characters *dhcmrlchtdj* that the Library has not foreseen it and in one of its secret tongues enclosed there a terrible meaning. No one can articulate a syllable that is not full of tenderness or dread; which would not be in some of those tongues the potent name of a god. To speak is to fall into tautologies. This futile and wordy letter already exists in one of the thirty volumes on the five shelves of one of the uncountable hexagons — and also its refutation. A number *n* of possible languages uses the same vocabulary; in some the symbol “library” receives the correct definition “ubiquitous and per-durable system of hexagonal galleries”, but library is “bread” or “pyramid” or some other thing, and the seven words that define it have another value. (You who are reading me, are you sure of understanding my language?)

One might have elaborated the *terrible meaning* thus: “each syllable is full of tenderness or dread, or on some tongue the potent name of a god.” But the drawn-out locution ‘no one can articulate a syllable’ is retrodictively underwritten, I shall risk saying, by the concluding and now so probing question: which recalls the collocation ‘*dhcmrlchtdj*’ and points there just that absence of vowel which preserves sacred Hebrew text as “divine writing, not human saying” — points thus to sealing effect because the question addresses the-reader-in-his-own-person joined to his listening-diegetic-double precisely — and that retroscribed absence, by just so invoking sacred inscription, that will seem now to have itself reduced to impotent tautology the speech of Babel.

Post hoc is not *propter hoc*, the careful reader will surely remark; and the dictionally evoked distinction between speech and writing is immediately contained, it is true, and revoked almost, by the circumstance that *this futile and wordy letter already exists*. But that each syllable shaped or mouthed by the scribes of Babel might well be *the potent name of a god*, even as they *fall into tautologies*, that cannot but recall the supernal tautology “I am that I am” which once fell potent upon the understandings of their ancestors: and what “the pure” whose forefathers were faithful to the Law inherit at last – so it will seem now to the willing reader in his own person at least — what the actually “pure and meek” inherit is the Library of Babel: the contraction of Spirit to final and impenetrable Letter within its *incomprehensible volumes* — a *consummatio* obscurely disclosed by the ancient confusion of tongues, rehearsed as wonder at Pentecost, mistaken by the deluded Apostles of Christ for the sign of their election — and a horror revealed as entirely divine now: which would show for true sign to the “truly pure and meek” scribes of Babel could they only remember their progenitors: whose babbling was the founding and dissonant and even so con-sonant seal of their fate: whom what is written was ever to annul.

For the recollecting reader in his own person the babble of ancient Babel becomes the sign-made-annulling wonder of the Library then: and “annulling wonder” because he is by now willingly joined to his listening diegetic double there: in a mutual sublation seeming now to make the reader-in-his-own-person even more fellow, somehow, to the scribes whom what is written was ever to annul: and I trust I have now tracked closely enough that estranging movement of mind, upon recollection, the conducting of which had been postulated as the “special doing” which distinguishes *The Library of Babel*. But we cannot rest quite: our *fiction* takes one last turn more.

The *comprobat*ion of the sacred alphabet was asserted to have *permitted*, we must remember at this juncture, *the formulation of a general theory of the Library* and, as well, *the satisfactory resolution of the problem* posed by *the formless and chaotic nature of nearly all the books*: a problem which *no conjecture had deciphered* recall. Neither theory nor resolution are spelt out we had noted: that *the library is total* is all we were given. As

readers remaining-within-our-own-persons we seem to possess, now, a “general theory of the Library” that serves as a “resolution of the problem” also: a resolution which is “satisfactory” in that it discloses how the books are indeed such *encryptions* as some had thought them, *although not in the sense in which the inventors of that universally accepted conjecture had formulated it*. What this “sense” may be our scribe has not said; or indicated at all explicitly; and neither his fellows, nor our listening diegetic doubles going among them, are given to understand these encryptions as “the contraction of Spirit to final and impenetrable Letter” of course; not seemingly at least.¹⁷ But such is the design of *The Library of Babel* — diabolical in its divinations, so one wants to say — such is its design that our being “illuminated” so will seem to darken, strangely, within what is intimated at last to our reading-persons-become-fellows to the annulled-by-what-is-written scribes of Babel.

It is after the question which joins our reading selves to their diegetic doubles, upon their mutual sublation, that we are told that *the Library will endure* — *illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, armed with precious books, useless, incorruptible, secret* — while *the only species Man* is to waste and die away: and upon that we read:

I have just written infinite. I have not interpolated that adjective through rhetorical custom; I say that it is not illogical to believe that the world is infinite. Those who judge it limited postulate that in remote places the corridors and stairways and hexagons inconceivably cease — which is absurd. Those who imagine it without limits forget that the number of possible books has a limit. I venture to insinuate this solution to the ancient problem: The Library is unlimited and periodic. If an eternal traveller traverses it in any direction, he would discern at the end of centuries that the same volumes repeat themselves in the same disorder (which, repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by that elegant hope.

The telling ends thus: the narrating scribe will *venture to insinuate* his own solution to the ancient problem of the limit of the Library. Let us note first that an “own solution” is not any such testimony-proved-by-collective-avowal as comprobatation will provide: which proves crucial we

17 An extended parenthesis talks of *a wild region whose librarians maintain that, even though the inventors of the writing imitate the twenty-five natural symbols, their diligence is casual and the books signify nothing in themselves: and that judgement, we shall soon see, is not entirely false*, our scribe says: but there is no mention more of this wild region or of the judgment of its librarians.

shall see. Now a man who declares what he means to insinuate will defeat his own purpose ordinarily: but only if he is declaring so to the very men, of course, upon whom he means to so practise: given which illocutionary complication the *solitude* of our scribe casts the odd diction as locution weirdly slant, then, toward our reading selves preserved as “thinking moments” within our willed joining to our listening diegetic doubles: and, to such readers-in-our-own-persons as we remain, the initially only startling word ‘insinuate’ should recall Satan come as serpent upon straying Eve — whose insinuations to her so cupidous understanding, that eating of the forbidden fruit would make her the equal of her maker, had “brought Death into this world and all our woe” we will remember — upon which we could not but recall our scribe’s petition to *let the sky exist, although my place be the inferno*. That the Library as “perfect material factum” is nowise the Inferno of Dante or Milton’s Hell is crucial now: which absolute difference should recall to us that our scribe was willing to *be humiliated and annihilated*, even, rather than be left annulled and wasting away among the *latrines, stairways* and *letters* that are, recall, equally the handiwork of the gods of Babel — who would have acknowledged this one among their creatures, at least, by humiliating and annihilating him — in due recompense for which most individual sacrifice, so it will seem now, did our scribe ask of his *ignorant gods* that their *enormous Library be justified* if only *for some one being* and *for an instant* only.

“To justify the ways of God to men” made in His image and banished from His presence: so Milton had contrived. The justification our scribe has sought is just so plenary: but that it should be *for some one being* and *for an instant* only reminds us, by just so contracting Christ’s sacrifice for all men, that there is no hope anymore of regaining our earth to that Eden from which our first parents were driven. It is only our scribe who knows, one is tempted to think now, that *what other men call the Library* is actually their universe all: for we will now recall that parenthetical “aside” to us as “insinuation” toward his fellows: and we may wonder whether the scribes of Babel are “become solitaries all.” But our solitary narrator is particularly set apart from his fellows anyhow: for the *elegant hope* that gladdens his solitude is nowise lawful, so we suspect, is as

much “without the Law” as the *lawless hope* which had deceived and deranged their forefathers once: because *the same disorder repeated* is not *an order* which has been comprobated as such by his fellow scribes. The parenthesized disclosure of that disorder as an order is both proposed and insinuated as *the Order* thus: is proposed to us as readers-in-our-own-persons, and insinuated even so to our listening-diegetic-doubles: and that illocutive doubling, so poorly to term it, that seems to make of our reading-persons-become-fellows-to-the-annulled-scribes his particular confidants now, somehow — by the slant wording ‘elegant hope’ not least, however much the words remind us that we may not be *understanding his language* quite — and such oblique disclosure folds our reading selves into the *fiction* at last as the familiars, almost, of some once supernal captive kindred to Lucifer fallen ... but a distant brother to Satan now, rebellious angel no more, worn in spirit: chastened by having understood with tutelary Basilides, perhaps, that the God his original contended against was not the Author of the universe¹⁸

6 the reading defended

I may have gone too far, I fear, in drawing out just as I have the singular suggestiveness our *fiction* acquires as it ends: and readers who took in the words ‘venture to insinuate’ readily enough may feel that I have made too much of what may have been adventurous phrasing only: which may be transcribed away even, they may insist, without any loss to whole design of *The Library of Babel*. My emphasis on diction will have seemed exaggerated to such readers; and the distinction between speech and writing adventitious merely, not integral to the fiction, and too strenuously worked therefore; and, certainly, the digiteratus who set me writing had not been very much struck by the sentence pronounced, as it has seemed to me, that *all that is written annuls us*.

18 ... even should its *stairways* and *corridors* and *identical hexagons* seem to perdure *illuminated* as the “darkness visible, not light” of Milton’s Hell, somehow, all *armed with precious books*. Should the epithet ‘once supernal captive’ seem excessive recall our newly strange teller’s prayer to *let the sky exist, though my place be the inferno* — though it will not seem so to anyone familiar with Gnostic doctrine — and ‘tutelary Basilides’ is warranted enough, surely, by the particular mention made of *the commentary on the commentary on the Gnostic Gospel of Basilides*.

Our *ficcion* must be accounted an early work: written much before its author came to the notice of the world: and in my defence I must cite the older and now far-famed Borges himself: who in the preface to *Dr. Brodie's Report* firmly abjured *the surprises inherent in a baroque style*, and was content now, so he says, *to satisfy an expectation rather than to provide a startling shock*. For many years, he goes on to say, *I thought it might be given me to achieve a good page by means of variations and novelties; now, having passed seventy, I believe I have found my own voice*. Slight rewording *neither spoils nor improves what I dictate, except in cases of lightening a clumsy sentence or toning down an exaggeration*. I take the confession to imply that any rewording however slight would only spoil *The Library of Babel*; and no one who has read Borges' verse could regard as inadvertent, at all, the so often singular wording of our *ficcion*. I need no excuse more for having attended so closely to its words, then, and for having premised my reading on its startling enough diction.

Whether I have done so to purpose or effect is another question of course; and a very willing reader, even, may have balked at my taking the narrating scribe of Babel for "a distant brother to Satan" finally. But I have cast my lot so; may not recant; and I shall not ask how much the remainder of the interpretation essayed here will be compromised, and how, if its concluding identification is refused.

The distinction between speech and writing is essential to the reader-in-his-own-person and his listening-diegetic-double continuing as "thinking moments" in their mutual sublation: and its salience has been argued enough. But there is direct allusion in the *ficcion* itself. *It is credible*, our scribe had averred, *that the grave mysteries of the origin of the Library and of Time can be explained in words: and if the language of the philosophers does not suffice, the multiform Library will have produced the unsayable language that is required, he was sure, and the vocabulary and the grammar of that language*. The import of the distinction, to the deciphering of sacred Hebrew, may be thought too esoteric to be a commonplace: but there is sufficient reason to think that the *topos* was a familiar one to the intended readers of the story.¹⁹ Whether or not they took the brackets

19 To those among them who had read its author's own *Vindication of the Cabbala* at least: in which explicit mention is made of *los puntos diacríticos – que las versiones primitivas no conocieron*.

just as I have, for “conspicuously written” marks, is another matter. But that the parenthetical asides, as they first seem, should be recalled as insinuations at last, that does considerably inflect the estranging movement of mind which the *fiction* conduces upon recollection.²⁰

I had ventured that “the grave theodicy of The Book of Job” would show “prefigured and foreshadowed at the close” of the *fiction*; I must attempt to say how. The lesson of the book is that power and authority are identical in God: one thing: which hard truth Job learns only at the end of his “humiliation” and “annihilation,” almost, when his remonstrances are satisfied by the monsters Leviathan and Behemoth: who are also Yahweh’s creatures, and, as such, disclose the ordonnance of His creation also, however darkly. We must recall now that Satan is the “accuser” who proposes to Yahweh that his faithful servant Job be tried: and remember then that Lucifer falls because he does not comprehend the strict identity of power and authority in God. So a willing reader-in-his-own-person would suppose the votaries of Yahweh to have maintained. But we are become familiars now to a distant brother to Satan tutored by Basilides: and the quotidian distinction between power and authority that we are apt to make, amongst and appertaining to ourselves, that too will seem “a distinction of words” merely, now, and not “a distinction of things” themselves, at all, nor any sure “distinction of thought” even.^{21, 22}

20 The distinction between writing and speech is most present to the reader-in-his-own-person: which upon recollection makes bodily present, so one might now say, the distinction between what is divinely written and what is understood by mortal men: which latter is a distinction both readerly and diegetic: and the diegetic echo of the readerly distinction heard in ‘unsayable language’ will just so show in retrospect for proleptic insinuation, by the distant-brother-to-Satan-in-waiting our scribe toward us his familiars-to-be, of the-contraction-of-Spirit-to-impenetrable-Letter we apprehend: a cognate instance of the “inflection” just asserted.

21 Such “lapsing to word” will inflect, of course, the estranging movement of mind the *fiction* conduces upon recollection. But I shall not attempt to trace that: or try to spell out how it bears on the distinctive per-scription of *The Library of Babel*: and shall only refer the curious reader to Borges’ essay *A Defense of Basilides the False*.

22 It is very tempting, now, to recall in a particular way the *search for the Man of the Book* in which our scribe says he *squandered and consumed his years*: to recollect that as a failed reprise of Satan’s successful search of Eden for the new creation Man: but the failure of which is another thing, entirely, to such “real failure” as Satan’s “apparent success” becomes in the soteriological doctrine of “the fortunate Fall.”

Some few striking particulars remain to be accounted for; and I shall proceed very summarily now. The *uniform format* of the books of Babel is one such: which discloses that each finite thing is *just as small* as every other finite thing, so I shall venture, considered beside the infinite Library: and is an *apophysis* of infinity thus, I shall hazard more, that Cusanus himself might have approved.^{23, 24} It follows immediately that the quantity of books in the Library is *not infinite, although vast*, for each book is a concatenation of an identical number of letters, now, each drawn from a common alphabet.²⁵

The extent of the Library is a question broached at the very beginning: where we had read that *in the corridor* going between any connected pair of hexagons *there is a mirror that faithfully duplicates appearances*: and *men are wont to infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite*, so our scribe had noted, parenthetically asking, and on their behalf seemingly, *were it really so why this illusory duplication?* But *I myself prefer to dream that their burnished surfaces figure and promise the infinite* he went immediately on to say; and the disconcerting locution ‘prefer to dream that’ was our first intimation of those “surprises-inherent-in-a-baroque-style” that were to come. In retrospect one might gloss the passage thus. The God in whose image the men of Babel had supposed themselves made, once, has been reduced to the sole “attribute” of Infinity. A distant brother to Satan tutored by Basilides should not let himself think, perhaps, that the *burnished surfaces* of mirrors, where each of us sees most the finite creature he is, could at all *figure and promise the infinite* — but he might allow himself, nonetheless, to dream that they

23 For which he might well have proposed a simple numeric parallel thus: let k and m be any two natural numbers however different in magnitude: the set of numbers larger than k is just as large as the set of numbers larger than m .

24 The necessary finitude of created things seems to be affirmed, however obliquely, in the concluding authorial note. A certain *Letizia Alvarez de Toledo* has observed, it records, *that the vast Library is useless: strictly, a single volume would suffice, in a common format, printed in a 9 or 10 point type, which consisted of an infinite number of leaves infinitely fine.* (Cavalieri at the beginning of the 17th century asserted that every solid body is the superposition of a infinite number of planes.) *The handling of this silken vade mecum would not be easy* however; for *each apparent leaf would divide into analogous others*; and *the inconceivable central leaf would have no back*.

25 Each book is a string of some fixed and finite length ω whose constituent symbols are drawn from a finite alphabet having α symbols: so there would be α^ω books: and due apology is rendered for misusing so the symbol sometimes used for the first infinite cardinal.

do so —being unable to actually dream their promise, one might now say, having been made a phantasm by *all that is written*.²⁶

7 a geometric excursus

I must begin with an apology to readers who are averse to mathematics: and with the assurance that whatever is of any consequence to the *fiction*, in the elementary considerations that are to follow, will be made plain enough to them at the end. The exercise might be excused by adverting to some recently published books on Borges: or more largely by alluding to the “inimitable fusión de mentalidad matemática, profundidad metafísica y captación poética del mundo” that his writing is praised for: a fusion in which “la estética de la inteligencia borgiana” is said to consist.^f But I am most of all discharging an obligation incurred when I had sought to gloss the words “unlimited and periodic” as they applied to the Library that is also *a sphere whose centre is every hexagon and whose circumference is inaccessible*.

We had referred this “ancient dictum of Babel” to Cusa’s geometric *figura* for God: *a circle whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere*. So let us try to think on that first. Begin with the Euclidean plane: which may be thought of as an even surface evenly and indefinitely extended in all directions. Pick any point as a centre and suppose ourselves equipped with some unit of measure. For any positive number ρ let \mathbf{D}_ρ be the “open disk” of radius ρ consisting of those points in the plane whose distance from the chosen centre is less than ρ ; and let \mathbf{C}_ρ be the circle of radius ρ around this centre. The disk \mathbf{D}_ρ is naturally included in the disk \mathbf{D}_σ when ρ is less than σ ; there is one such disk for every positive real number; and these disks and their natural inclusions taken all together are said to form a “direct spectrum” over the index set

26 But we could think so only after enduring “the estranging movement of mind conducted upon recollection”: the economy of which the transcription “phantasmized” serves in its way.

^f I repeat the fulsome praise I find on the back cover of my copy of *El Aleph*: which is the printing of 1989, published in Madrid by Alianza Editorial, S.A. (ISBN: 84-206-1309-60). Here are the titles of two quite recent texts: *Borges and Mathematics*, by Guillermo Martínez, and *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Babel*, by William Block.

of positive real numbers directed by magnitude. The interested reader may consult any first text on general topology for the precise definitions.^g A direct spectrum of topological spaces gives rise to a “direct limit” of the constituent spaces; and, as every point in the plane lies at some definite distance from our chosen centre, one readily shows that the Euclidean plane is “homeomorphic” to the direct limit of the spectrum we have specified: these “topological spaces” may be identified with each other. Choosing another central point gives us another and analogous direct spectrum: but one can show directly that the resulting direct limits are homeomorphic. Let us consider the bounding circles C_ρ next. The inverse of the radius squared is the usual measure of the curvature of a circle, so as ρ increases toward infinity the curvatures of these bounding circles decrease toward zero; and were it licit, at all, to postulate a “limit at infinity” for these bounding circles, one would have a “circle of curvature zero” which could be postulated as “the boundary of the plane” now, being the “limit” of the circles bounding those disks whose direct limit the Euclidean plane may be identified with. Such postulation is mathematically illicit of course: no mathematical object could serve the phrases ‘circle of curvature zero’ and ‘boundary of the plane’ as their referent: and if these formulae do afford any purchase to mind, at all, they would do so in some “negative” fashion only.

But grant for the moment that the words do afford our minds some such negative purchase: then the formula ‘limit at infinity’ could be supposed to negatively specify *a circle whose centre is everywhere* — precisely because the Euclidean plane may be reconstituted as the direct limit of disks around any point there — and the formula ‘circle of curvature zero bounding the plane’ could likewise specify a *circumference that is a nowhere*. We have employed the term ‘circle’ in a strict way: for the one-dimensional boundary of a two-dimensional disk. But ‘circle’ is used for ‘disk’ in common parlance: and our reconstitution of the plane as a direct limit of disks allows us to regard the Euclidean plane itself as “a circle whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere.”

Going back to Nicholas of Cusa once more: it is crucial that the term ‘God’ does not stand to the term ‘circle’ as *definiendum* to *definiens* in his

^g I have used the language of Dugundji’s *Topology*: a standard text in my student days.

geometric *figura*: some apperception of divinity, only, could make pregnant paradox of its words: which would be just as empty of reference, else, as the phrase “a round square” is. But if some apperceiving of God, however delusive, could be supposed to have provided mind the needed purchase on his formulae, then Cusa’s circle would have been an *apophasis* adapting the omnipresence of God to the minds of men: which properly “collected” for His finite creatures the “perfection” that the divine attribute of infinity would be: and such ideation as the *figura* had permitted would have been, for pious mediaeval minds pondering the Ontological Argument certainly, an instance of the Creator’s gracious “condescension” to their fallen selves.

The exercise conducted for the Euclidean plane may be repeated for Euclidean space: which may be reconstituted as the direct limit of three-dimensional “open balls” \mathbf{B}_ρ of finite radius ρ around some chosen centre, balls bounded by two-dimensional spheres \mathbf{S}_ρ of the same radius; and the nominal “limit at infinity” of these spheres may be taken for an “inaccessible sphere of infinite radius and curvature zero” now, which serves in a negative way as well to “bound the space of experience” that three-dimensional space may be taken for; though, again, this purely nominal boundary could have no geometrical referent of course. We have used the term ‘sphere’ in its strict sense again: but common parlance uses ‘sphere’ for our ‘ball’ as well: and our reconstitution of Euclidean space as a direct limit will allow us, just as the cognate equivalence of ‘disk’ and ‘circle’ had allowed us before, to regard “the space of experience” itself as “a sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere.” The formula seems just as licit as Cusa’s own for his God: would provide a like *apophasis* of divinity: and the Library whose *precise centre is each hexagon and circumference inaccessible* is our infinite sphere *sans* God one might now suppose.

We gain some negative apprehension thereby, I shall risk saying, of the unlimited sphere that our scribe declares the Library to be: but we must come to grips with the epithet ‘periodic’ as well. Uniform motion along a circle is the exemplary exhibition of periodicity — the minute hand of a clock returning to the same point hour upon hour for instance — a “revolution” constituting one “period” of motion. Take

any plane in space, next, which passes through the chosen centre for the balls \mathbf{B}_ρ above. The intersections of this plane with their boundaries \mathbf{S}_ρ will be “great circles” \mathbf{C}_ρ along these spheres: and the nominal limit at infinity of these great circles could be taken for a “great circle of curvature zero” along the “boundary” and “inaccessible circumference” of the unlimited sphere that we negatively apprehend the Library as. Let us note before we go on that any “curve of curvature zero” would be indistinguishable from a straight line: which we shall take as the exemplary instance of “one direction” here. Now things in motion along these great circles, but all moving at some uniform speed, will take longer and longer to complete one period of their motion as the circles get larger: and were it licit at all to “pass to the limit at infinity” here as well, one could “entertain the thought” that something moving uniformly on a “great circle of curvature zero along the boundary” of our “unlimited sphere” would take “an eternity” to complete one period of its motion: and I trust I have managed thusly to gloss, if at considerable length, but in some properly “negative” way still I hope, our scribe’s parting gambit that *the Library is unlimited and periodic. If an eternal traveller traverses it in any direction, he would discern at the end of centuries that the same volumes repeat themselves in the same disorder.*

The reader who did not pause over the words ‘venture to insinuate’ may want to leave things just so. But as readers who have let ourselves become “familiar almost” to a “distant brother to Satan” we would be puzzled now should we recall once more our scribe’s earlier avowal that *the Library is a sphere whose precise centre is any hexagon: and whose circumference is inaccessible* — which *ancient dictum* he had repeated to us, remember, upon abjuring as God the *cyclic book* dreamed by the disavowed mystics of Babel — and puzzled because the “sphere” in the dictum must be three-dimensional, given that the hexagons are each in the Library: while in the *solution* he ventures at last only the traversal of its “two-dimensional boundary” and “inaccessible circumference” may be properly termed *periodic*. Our scribe is pointedly equivocating with the casually equivalent terms of common parlance: or so it will seem to the readers within-our-own-persons we remain: and *the Order* that is proposed to us as readers in our own persons will seem delusively

insinuated to our listening diegetic doubles then ... as if our listening selves were as much prey to him as our first parents to his original²⁷

The interpretive consequence of our very elementary *mathesis* has become plain enough, I hope, even to readers who had ignored its detail: however carious or dubious even the “ideation” attempted thus remains. But our geometrical adventurings have even so complemented and underwritten, I trust, my initial and crucially initiating gloss of the word ‘transversal’: which may have seemed too sudden where it came. Of the lucent *spherical fruits* of the Library we were told that *there are two in each hexagon: transversal*. I had claimed that this “spatial detail” is just as definite to geometric conception as it is vague to our intuiting senses: and at once particular and schematic therefore: a receiving instrumental to the Library’s becoming “a lived world at once daily and alien.” The “infinite two-dimensional boundary” that we had just conjured, for an “inaccessible circumference traversed by an eternal traveller,” is even so just as vague to conception as it is definite to sense: a satisfying inversion: and the “disorder as Order elegantly hoped” upon its traversal is otherwise and darkly “particular and schematic”.

8 coda

The surface reading I undertook to provide is quite complete: and a diligent interpreter would seek some indication now, in the record of commentary on the *fiction*, that *The Library of Babel* was indeed received so by its intended readers. I have not sought such confirmation at all; nor attempted to chart very closely its original discursive context; and I must rest my claim to fidelity on the consistency and comprehensiveness of the interpretation. The *fiction* was addressed, so I had claimed, to readers whose coming of age would have been either bereaved or rejoiced by the proclaimed death of the One God of the

27 When we first considered the matter I had asserted that “the elaboration of any ideational correlative” to the unlimited and periodic Library would undo itself. I trust I have made good that claim: and the “negative apprehendings” so tediously attempted above serve at last to twist again, and finally, the estranging movement of mind conduced upon recollection that is the distinctive per-scription, to assert that once last time more, of our *fiction*.

Torah and the Bible. I take that as certain: and, to the recently Christian among the story's first readers certainly, the contraction-of-Spirit-to-impenetrable-Letter which annuls the men of Babel would have rehearsed in reverse the scandal of the Incarnation — precisely because that annulling consists in a phantasmizing-of-body — a making phantasmal that would have shown then, to such readers at least, for a “creaturely obverse” to the “perfect material factum” of the Library. But an Israelite gone from Yahweh's jealous care, as well, would take the strange lived world of the Library for “form made matter or matter made form without defect or residue” surely: and the circumstance that *the young prostrate themselves before the books and kiss them barbarously*, in the end, *but do not know how to decipher a single letter*, that would seem to such as him some blind reprise of the “veneration of the letter” which had so exalted their forebears once.²⁸

9 what is written annuls us

The surface reading of a literary text attempts to recover the work of art it was for its intended readers: fraught doing we had conceded: and an exercise useless if not specious an adventurous exegete might declare: and would, surely, should he take the worth of a text to be, most of all, just such thought as it prompts in an imaginative reader.^h *The Library of*

28 A veneration declared by the psalm to the sacred letters: and become mystic rule in the *Sefer Yezirah* — and I shall hazard now that, to an orthodox rabbi, the librarians of Babel will seem the millennially decayed posterity of the first Kabbalists — who did not heed his master Akiva's warning that “whosoever ponders these four things, what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is after, it were better that he had not been born.”

^h A text on “proteomics” likens its special object the proteome to the Library: the “totality of the proteome” is of theoretical import maybe. The author of *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Babel*, adverted to above, was prompted by our *fiction* to formulate and prove a proposition about planar graphs: having computed in numbing detail just how many books the Library has. A set-theorist on holiday might be diverted by the familiarity with Cantor that Borges displays in *A History of Eternity*. I had ventured to note, in connection with our scribe's asking us if we are sure of understanding his language, that a theory articulated in the predicate calculus may have different models: and the amateur logician in me is teased, I confess, by some reflection in the Lowenheim-Skolem Theorem, in its usual proof — but vague, a delusive shadow only maybe — of that “contracting of each finally real thing to its proper name” in which “the contraction of Spirit to impenetrable Letter” consists — which might have intrigued votaries of Hilbert's Formalism, even, before the undecidabilities of Godel embarrassed their presumption.

Babel may be most valuable just so perhaps; and the *analogia entis* of the Web and the Library may be a most fortunately mistaken one. When I began I had undertaken, rashly, to attempt a reading more answerable to that “compelling and encompassing” analogy: anagogy I must now hazard: *kata-goge* more.

All that is written annuls or phantasmizes us: that is what the enigmatic and at last impenetrable books of Babel finally effect: and the burden of reading here is to specify just what in-or-on-or-around the world-wide Web is so written as to annul us: to annul somehow or other if not quite by phantasmizing our bodies.²⁹ The “content” proliferating on the Web is what nullifies us one might insist: by drowning any real ideation, say, and washing mind away in a deluge of information.ⁱ But the tweeting and blogging and wikiing abounding on the Web, however “incoherent” and “cacophonous” that may be, taken altogether, is neither enigmatic nor impenetrable. I would see our approaching nullity forecast otherwise: and thus. The Internet seems more and more to make of human brains switches and relays, merely, in a continual flow of “information” and “instruction” between automata: which supervenient and isolating concertion of human nervure — so to term it, risking solecism — which aliening consolidation seems to have effected some considerable detrition, already, of the powers of memory and attention that had emerged in human beings upon the invention of writing, and would have been collectively developed thereafter.^j The collective development of memory and attention would have been redirected by the printed book: which redirecting may or may not have been an entirely organic change, of course, in these powers of mind: and might have been as much loss as gain even. But the general “rewiring” of memory and attention effected by the Internet seems very much more loss than any gainful change: and the “writing” that is to annul us could be taken for compiled code then — impenetrable if

29 My surface reading had taken the particle “or” to convey not disjunction but some equivalence: to say ‘annuls, or makes phantasmal that is’: as common parlance usually does.

i But the advent of printing had occasioned just such apprehension also: which the *Anatomy of Melancholy* conspicuously records, as it happens.

j Because that “supervenient concertion” makes for cognitively isolating routine — recall that the routine of *methodical writing* distracts our solitary scribe from the present condition of men.

not enigmatic — the executable binaries on which the nodal automata of the Internet run: whose penetration into and pervasively through daily life everywhere, abetted so much now by the rapid spread of “the wireless Web” along “the Internet of things,” seems to have set in train a general and exponential and irreversible contro-version of brain to isolate switch and relay.^k

To go on would be more than rash. Expert allegorists will have smiled at my poor contriving: and *los digiterati borgiana* will disdain, I do not doubt, so impoverished an understanding of their *analogia entis*. A willing fool must learn to bear gladly both laughter and scorn.^l

^k Code is written by human beings still: mostly at least: and may continue to be: but consider that a “decentralized version control system” could well collect and shape human code-writing to emergent orders of “machine intelligence”.

^l The theologically adept may hear in ‘*analogia entis*’ some echo of the great dispute between the spiritual heirs of Luther and the descendants in spirit of Augustine: which had been intently and loudly prosecuted, through the decade before *The Library of Babel* was published, by the Protestant Barth and the Jesuit Pryzwara. So I must record again that I have used the words naively: as naively as Bonaventura seemed to: have said them out negligently even, it may be.

I do not know if Borges accorded to contemporary theologians the attention he seems to have lavished on their mediaeval and antique forebears. But readers who take him for a theologian *manque* might well find in our *fiction* some oblique confession of the entire otherness of God that Barth had propounded: considering his expressed partiality toward the Protestants over their Roman brethren.

postscript

There is one particular discrepancy, in the narrator's account of the conformation of the Library, which I have ignored. The first paragraph, after describing the *invariable apportioning* of its hexagonal galleries, says that *one of the free faces gives on a narrow corridor, leading to another gallery, which is identical to the first, and to all the others*. Each gallery seems connected to exactly one other, now, by the corridor it gives on: and to reach anywhere else the librarians must use *the spiral stairway that passes through the corridor and plunges and climbs into the remoteness*. Every hexagon is one of a particular pair then, joined to its twin by the corridor going between them: and the Library as a whole seems to consist of these pairs linked by one spiralling stairway. There is no mention or indication of structure after, until, midway through the story, the narrator comes to speak of the languages of Babel. *It is true*, he says then, *that some miles to the right the tongue is dialectal and that ninety more floors above it is incomprehensible*. But one could not go "some miles to the right" or left, of course, if the Library has the conformation initially imputed to it.

In retrospect it will not seem innocuous, anymore, that 'some miles to the right' and 'ninety floors above' are conspicuously perspectival specifications of position — directions centred about an individual body facing some one way — and no more innocuous because the narrator is inditing a *History* of the Library, we will remember, which *other men call the universe* and declare to be *a sphere whose centre is every hexagon and circumference inaccessible*. The "willing readers" I have sought to conjure may now recall, returned to "their own persons," just why *hexagons are a form necessary to absolute space, or to our intuition, at least, of space*. But this is how *the idealists* of Babel *argue* the narrator was careful to say: and that our scribe should speak as he does, in ways that an "idealism" not "comprobated" by his fellows might well approve, that may seem an initial indication, now, that he meant all along to practise upon our "listening diegetic doubles."

So the discrepancy does not compromise the reading I have given: might in its own small way underwrite the interpretation even. But readers who were only wearied by that may find further proof, in the adequation of detail to whole just now attempted, of the perversity of sifting a literary text through so minutely: which only denatures our story, they might protest, by anatomizing too much its subtle suggestion. Whether that is so or not I cannot say: I must hope not. The *fiction* itself seems immune to misreading however: and I shall record that I am able to read *The Library of Babel* again, after all my contriving, with all the curious excitement I felt on first reading it.