

Borges' Babel: two versions

of *La Biblioteca de Babel*

The everywhere present mirrors of the Library of Babel *faithfully duplicate appearances*: from which circumstance its clerkly men *are wont to infer that the Library is not infinite*. The narrating librarian seems to demur. *Yo prefiero soñar*, he records, *que las superficies bruñidas figuran y prometen el infinito*: literally: *I myself prefer to dream that their burnished surfaces figure and promise the infinite*.

A man will prefer one or other between feasible choices; usually at least; and one cannot choose what to dream. But a persevering man may, nonetheless, continue to prefer what he cannot proceed to choose: he may keep wanting what he cannot have. To prefer does not presuppose being able to actually choose then; not strictly considered; and we may rescue 'prefer to dream' from mere solecism thus. But the effort seems wasted, for the locution remains strange even so: to dream that mirrors figure and promise the infinite would not be to *dream* mirrors whose surfaces *do* so figure and promise. So the promiscuously literary version which accompanies the literal transcription here renders the sentence thus: *I wish always to dream their burnished faces: which prefigure and promise infinity*.

Such pronounced difference will offend faithful readers of Borges; but I shall have to risk more. Upon recording what he prefers to dream our narrator says: *la luz procede de unas frutas sfericas que llevan el nombre de lamparas*. Literally again: *light comes from some spherical fruits that bear the name of lamps*. Faced with the monstrosity of spherical fruits that are called lamps, only, my literary redaction must content itself thus: *light comes from lamps round as fruit* : which seems boneless here.

The first paragraph of *La Biblioteca de Babel* closes with the *insufficient, incessant light its fruiting lamps emit*: and the deft successions of its twelve curious and curiously awkward sentences have diagrammed, already, a world grown weird: but a world as near as far, even so, at once daily and alien. The diction of its chronicler remains as awkward as he proceeds;

seems to grow more so even; and a translator able to make his English sentences do just what their Spanish originals do, in this so singular among the *ficciones* of Borges, would be a transcreating genius. To proceed as I have, facing a literal transcription with fanciful turns upon and across its sentences, is to have already confessed incapacity.

The literary version will seem wantonly false to the original; and only in the sudden if modest assertion of his last and valedictory sentence does the plausible commentator there show himself kin, at all, to his fictive model. But just so must I seek excuse: I must hope that the pronounced difference here, between locution literally transcribed and its egregiously literary glossing, will somehow disclose, between them, the strange presence that the speaking voice becomes in the original.

As he ends his *futile and wordy letter* the now dying narrator records *the present condition of men* : which is *la certidumbre de que todo está escrito nos anula o nos afantasma*: literally once again: *the certitude that what is written annuls or phantasmizes us*. The nonce word 'phantasmizes' seems to recover the coinage 'afantasma' : which improvises a verb upon the substantive 'fantasma' : 'phantom' : for which 'phantasma' served English once. Anyhow: *our* present condition is properly described just so as well: what is written annuls us. Tweeting and blogging and wikiing netizens will very likely not think so: but the votary of Borges must endure the sombre pleasure of finding forecast his world gone multitudinous word. To read our author so is illicit of course: we are very far already from the human world into which *La Biblioteca de Babel* was written: as much remote from that — though near enough in years — as that itself was remote from the supernally scriptural universe of the first Kabbalists: whose millennially decayed and amnesiate posterity the librarians of his Babel seem most to be.

Some curious word must declare how the librarians of Babel stand to their imagined forebears. 'Amnesiac' miscasts them; and 'misremembering' brings them much too near. I have pitched on 'amnesiate' : which I may define by ostension only of course: *amnesiate* is just what, toward their Kabbalist ancestors, the dying librarians of Borges' Babel have grown. The coinage will entice the curious reader I hope.

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The translations follow . The literal transcription is on the left; the literary version faces it on the right. The paragraphs of the original have been preserved on the left; but they are sometimes spaced so as to bring them squarely across their doubles.

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The Library of Babel

Jorge Luis Borges

*By this art you may contemplate the variation of
the 23 letters... Anatomy of Melancholy, 2,II,IV*

The universe (which others call The Library) is composed of an indefinite number, perhaps infinite, of hexagonal galleries, with great shafts for ventilation in the middle, enclosed by very low railings. From any gallery one sees the floors above and below: interminably. The apportioning of the galleries is invariable. Twenty shelves, with five long shelves to each wall, cover all but two of its six sides; their height, which is the height of the apartment, scarcely exceeds that of an average librarian. 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. To the left and right of this passage are two closets. One of these is for sleeping, on foot; the other for the satisfaction of fecal necessities. Through there a spiral stairway passes, which plunges and climbs into the remoteness. In the corridor there is a mirror that faithfully duplicates appearances. Men are wont to infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (were it really so why this illusory duplication ?); I myself prefer to dream that their burnished surfaces figure and promise the infinite ... Light comes from some spherical fruits that bear the name of lamps. There are two in each hexagon: transversal. The light they emit is insufficient, incessant.

Like every man in the Library, I have traveled in my youth; I journeyed in search of a book; the catalogue of catalogues perhaps; now that my eyes can hardly decipher what I write, I am preparing to die some few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born. Dead, there will not lack pious hands to cast me over the railing; the fathomless air will be my grave: through which my body will long sink, and corrode and disperse in the wind of its fall, which is infinite. I affirm that the Library is interminable. The idealists argue 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 that their ecstasies reveal

The universe, which other men call the Library, consists of an innumerable number of hexagonal galleries: there are infinitely many perhaps. Great shafts for air join the hexagons, opening into the middle of each chamber, and falling away from there. A very low railing fences the vent. From any gallery one sees the levels above and below go interminably on. The galleries are all alike. Twenty long and perfectly even shelves, five to each wall, cover four of the six sides. They are as high as the chamber: which itself barely exceeds the height of an average librarian. Its two free faces give on narrow corridors leading to galleries identical to itself and to all the rest. To either side of these passages are closets: one is for sleeping where one stands: the other for defecation. Through the second a spiral stairway climbs and plunges into the distance. A mirror in the corridor doubles appearances faithfully. Some deduce from these mirrors that the Library is finite. The illusory duplication, so they say, discloses nothing besides. I wish always to dream their burnished faces: which prefigure and promise infinity. Light comes from lamps round as fruit, two to each chamber, each turned to the other. The illumination they provide is incessant and insufficient.

As every man in the Library has I travelled in my youth, wandering in search of a book, the Catalogue of catalogues it may have been. Now that my eyes barely make out what I write I am preparing to die some few leagues from the hexagon I was born in. Pious hands will lift me over the railing when I am dead, and the fathomless air will be my grave, through which my body will drop, corroding and dispersing in the wind of its endless fall. I affirm that the Library is without end. The Idealists propound that its hexagons are the form proper to absolute space, or to our intuition of Space at least, to which a triangular or pentagonal chamber is inconceivable they reason. The ecstasy of the mystics has

a circular chamber with a great circular book of continuous binding, which meets the entire curve of the walls. But their testimony is suspect; their words obscure. That cyclic book is God.) It suffices me, for now, to repeat the ancient dictum: "The Library is a sphere whose precise center is any hexagon: and whose circumference is inaccessible."

To each of the walls of each hexagon correspond five shelves; each shelf holds thirty two books of uniform format; each book is of four hundred and ten pages; each page, of forty lines, each line of some eighty letters of a black colour. There are also letters on the spine of each book; those letters do not indicate or prefigure what the pages will say. I know that this incoherence, sometimes, appears mysterious. Before summarizing the solution (whose discovery, despite its tragic projections, is perhaps the very important fact of History) I wish to recall certain axioms.

The first: The Library exists *ab aeterno*. Of that truth whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world, no reasonable mind could be in doubt. Man, the imperfect Librarian, could be the work of chance or of malevolent demiurges; the universe, with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatic tomes, of indefatigable stairways for the traveller and latrines for the seated librarian, could only be the work of a god. To perceive the distance there is between the divine and the human, it is enough 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.

The second: The number of orthographic symbols is twenty-five.¹ That comprobation permitted, three hundred years ago, 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. One, which my father saw in a hexagon of circuit

¹ The original manuscript contains no figures or capitals. Punctuation is limited to the comma and the period. These two marks, the blank, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet, are the twenty-five sufficient symbols that enumerate the unknown. (*Editor's note.*)

revealed to them an immense circular book, so they pretend, bounding the vast chamber its leaves open toward. But their words are obscure and their testimony suspect: that circle of words is God. To repeat the ancient dictum will suffice: the Library is a sphere whose centre is any hexagon, anywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere.

Each wall of each gallery bears five shelves I have said. Each shelf bears thirty-two books. Each book has four hundred and ten uniform pages: each page forty lines: and each line some eighty black letters. There are letters on the spine of each book as well; but these do not indicate at all what the pages may say, and that incoherence will appear mysterious. But before I summarize its resolution, the discovery of which, despite all its tragic implication, is the most important circumstance of History altogether, I must recall certain axioms.

The first: the Library exists *ab aeterno*. No reasoning mind will doubt this truth: whose immediate corollary is the certain futurity of the world. The imperfect librarian that is Man may be the work of chance or of malevolent demiurges: but the universe, endowed with elegant shelves and enigmatic tomes, with surely paced stairs for the peregrinant clerk and ready latrines for the seated lector, cannot but be the work of a god. To apprehend the difference between the divine and the human it is enough to compare these rude and tremulous letters, which my fallible hand leaves across the cover of a book, with the organic characters inside: which are delicate, precise, perfectly black and inimitably symmetrical.

The second: there are twenty-five orthographic symbols.[†] That postulate permitted the formulation, some three hundred years ago, of a general theory of the Library, and the satisfactory resolving then of a problem no conjecture had penetrated: the seeming formlessness and chaos nearly all the books display. My father once saw in a hexagon of circuit 1594 a book which repeated the letters M C V from its first

[†] An earlier editor's note: the original manuscript contains no figures or capitals, and punctuation is limited to the apostrophe and the period. These two marks, the blank, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet, are the twenty-five sufficient symbols that enumerate the unknown.

1594, consisted of the letters MCV perversely repeated from the first line to the last. Another (much consulted in that zone) is a mere labyrinth of letters, but the penultimate page says “O Time thy pyramids.” One knows already: for one reasonable line or faithful report there are leagues of insensate cacophony, of verbose farragoes and incoherences. (I know of a wild region whose librarians repudiate the superstition and the futile custom of looking for meaning in the books and compare it to that of seeking it in dreams or in the chaotic lines of the palm ... They admit that the inventors of the writing imitate the twenty-five natural symbols, but maintain that that diligence is causal and that the books signify nothing in themselves. That judgement, we shall soon see, is not entirely false.)

For a long time it was believed that these impenetrable books corresponded to languages antique or remote. It is true that the oldest men, the first librarians, used a language quite different from the one which we now speak; it is true that some miles to the right the tongue is dialectal and that ninety more floors above it is incomprehensible. All that, I say it again, is true, but four hundred and ten pages of unalterable MCV cannot correspond to any idiom, however dialectal or rudimentary it may be. Some insinuated that each letter was able to influence the subsequent one and that the value of MCV in the third line of page 71 was not that which the same sequence could possess in another position on another page, but that vague thesis did not prosper. Others thought upon encryptions; that conjecture has been accepted universally, although not in the sense in which its inventors formulated it.

Five hundred years ago, the head of an upper hexagon² found a book as confused as the others, but which had almost two sheets of homogeneous lines. He showed his find to a itinerant interpreter, who told him that it was composed in Portuguese; others told him that it was Yiddish. Before a century he was able to establish the language: a Samoyed-

² Before, there was a man for every three hexagons. Suicide and pulmonary infirmities have destroyed that proportion. A memory of unutterable melancholy: sometimes I have journeyed many nights through corridors and polished stairs without finding a single librarian.

perverse line to its last. Another tome much consulted in that zone is a labyrinth of letters: until the penultimate page invokes *O Time, thy pyramids*. One knows this already: for each reasoned conclusion and every direct report there are pages of insensate cacophony, sprawling farragoes, passage upon passage of verbose incoherence. I know of an unsettled region whose librarians abjure the futile search for meaning in the books, comparing that to superstitious seekings into dreams, or to haruspication upon the meandering lines of a palm. They admit that the inventors of the writing mime the twenty-five natural symbols. But that diligence is only casual, they maintain, and they conclude that the books say nothing. The verdict, as we shall soon see, is not altogether false.

For a long time we believed that these impenetrable books were in languages antique or remote. The oldest men, the first librarians, employed a language different from ours, it is true. It is true also that some miles to our right the language becomes dialect, and as true that ninety levels above it is incomprehensible. All this, I grant, is doubtless true: but four hundred pages of M C V could not communicate anything, in any tongue, however dialectal or rudimentary that may be. Sophists have insinuated that each letter tells upon the succeeding one; and that neither the meaning nor the reference of the triad is uniform therefore. But their vague thesis has not prospered. Others have conjectured encryptions: and that hypothesis has been accepted universally, but in another sense than its first proponents intended.

Five hundred years ago the master¹ of an upper chamber discovered a volume as confused as the others but showing, nonetheless, two pages almost of homogeneous lines. He showed his find to an itinerant interpreter. The man said it was composed in Portuguese; but others said it was in Yiddish. In a century or so he was able to decide the language: a Samoyedo-Lithuanian dialect spoken among the Guarani, with the

¹ Once there was a man for every three galleries. Suicide, or failing lungs otherwise, have reduced the proportion. I have gone many nights along the strict corridors and the polished stairs without encountering a single librarian: unutterable melancholy to remember.

Lithuanian dialect of the Guarani, with the inflections of Classical Arabic. He also deciphered the contents: ideas of combinatorial analysis, illustrated by examples of variations with unlimited repetition. Those examples allowed a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This thinker observed that all the books, however diverse they may be, consist of the same elements: the space, the period, the comma, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also adduced a fact which all travellers have confirmed: There are not, in the Library, two identical books. From these incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total and 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. Everything: the detailed history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallaciousness of these catalogues, the demonstration of the fallaciousness of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the truthful relation of your death, the translation of each book in all the languages, the interpolations of each book in every book.

When it was proclaimed that the Library contained every book, the first effect was of extravagant happiness. All men felt themselves the proprietors of an intact and secret treasure. There was no problem personal or universal whose eloquent solution did not exist: in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe brusquely usurped the limitless dimensions of hope. At that time much was said of the Vindications: books of apology and prophecy which vindicated forever the acts of every man in the universe and reserved to his future prodigious mysteries. Avaricious thousands abandoned the soft natal hexagon and threw themselves up the stairs, urged by the vain intent of finding their vindication. These pilgrims disputed in the narrow corridors, uttered obscure maledictions, were strangled on the divine stairs, threw the deceitful books

inflections of Classical Arabic. He deciphered the contents also: ideas of combinatorial analysis, illustrated by examples and exercises limitless in their variation. Such exemplae allowed a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This thinker asserted that each book in every hexagon must consist of the same elements: the twenty-two letters of the alphabet, the punctum, the apostrophe, and the blank. He adduced thereupon a circumstance all travellers confirm: that there are not, in all the vast extent of the Library, two identical books. From these incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total: that on its shelves are to be found all the sequences that are possible with the twenty-five orthographic symbols: all that it is possible to express, that is to say, in all languages. The number of these combinations is vast but not infinite: but they record everything regardless. Everything: the detailed history of the future, the testaments of the archangels, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands upon thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallaciousness of these catalogues, the falsity of the true catalogue denounced, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the truthful relation of one's death, the translation of every book into each language, the interpolations of each book in every other.

Extravagant happiness followed the proclamation that the Library contained every book, as if each man had found himself the owner of a treasure secret and intact. There was no failing individual or common whose correction did not await men in some hexagon. The universe would be justified: and all at once the world was manifold hope. Much was said in those days of the Vindications, books of apology and prophecy which justified every act of each man, once and for all, and reserved to his future prodigious mysteries. Avid men abandoned in droves their natal chambers and swarmed the stairways. Each intent on finding his vindication they rushed falling along the steps, fell upon each other in the corridors, fell away uttering obscure maledictions, rummaged the galleries, flung the deceiving volumes into the mortuary shafts: and

into the depths of the tunnels, perished so, hurled down by the men of remote regions. Others went mad ... The Vindications exist (I have seen two that tell of persons in the future, of persons perhaps not imaginary) but the seekers did not recollect that the possibility that a man would find his, and not some perfidious variation of his, is computable as zero.

The explanation of the basic mysteries of humankind were also expected at that time: the origin of the Library and of Time. It is credible that those grave mysteries can be explained in words: if the language of the philosophers does not suffice, the multiform Library will have produced the unsayable language that is required and the vocabulary and the grammar of that language. It is four centuries already that men fatigue the hexagons ... There are official seekers, inquisitors. I have seen them in the discharge of their function: they always arrive exhausted; speak of a stairway without steps that almost killed them; speak with the librarian about galleries and stairways; take a nearby book and leaf through it, in search of infamous words. Visibly, no one expects to discover anything.

To lawless hope there succeeded, as is natural, an excessive depression. The certitude that some shelf in some hexagon contained precious books and that those precious books were inaccessible, seemed to be almost intolerable. One blasphemous sect suggested that the seekings be stopped and that all men shuffle the letters and the symbols, until the constructing, through an improbable gift of chance, of the canonical books. The authorities found themselves obliged to issue severe orders. The sect disappeared, but in my childhood I have seen old men who mostly concealed themselves in the latrines, with some metal discs in a forbidden dice-cup, weakly imitating the divine disorder.

Others, to the contrary, believed that eliminating useless works was paramount. They invaded the hexagons, displayed credentials not always false, looked with disgust through one volume and condemned entire shelves: to their hygienic, ascetic rage is owed the senseless loss of millions of books. Their

themselves perished so at last, cast away by the men of the remote regions their avarice had lost them in. Others went mad. The Vindications do exist. I myself have seen two that tell of men to come, persons not imaginary perhaps. But the seekers forgot that the chance of a man finding his vindication, and not some perfidious variation of that, must be accounted infinitesimal.

In those heady days the elucidation of the final mysteries seemed imminent: the origin of the Library, of Time itself, awaited seeking men. That words can dispel even such darkness is not to be doubted: if the language of the philosophers does not suffice the pluriform Library will surely have produced the unsayable tongue, and its lexicons, and the grammars anatomizing its sentences. It is four centuries now that men have gone disarranging the shelves and littering the galleries. There are official searchers: the Inquisitors. I have witnessed the doings of these functionaries. The man arrives exhausted, always, talking of a stair without steps from which he fell to his death almost. He speaks to the librarian of certain hexagons, and of the stairways going toward them; will take a book lying to hand then, and leaf through it, looking for infamous words he will say; he visibly expects to find nothing.

To lawless hope there succeeded an excess of despair. The certitude of revelations granted and forgone was intolerable. That in some hexagon somewhere some shelf bore the precious books: that could hardly be borne. Blasphemers arose denouncing the seekers: among them one whose sedulous sectaries urged that all men everywhere sift the divine symbols until, by some gift of Chance, or of their own accord, the letters should spell out the oracles. The authorities were obliged to issue severe orders. The sect disappeared. But in my childhood I remember having seen, in the latrines, furtive old men shaking metal discs in the forbidden cups for dice, mumming so the godlike madness of their ancestor. Other more muscular reformers counselled extirpation; and their zealots invaded the galleries, brandished seals not always counterfeit, paged through some one volume in disgust, condemned entire shelves. The

name is execrated, but those who deplore the 'treasures' that their frenzy destroyed neglect two evident facts. One: the Library is so vast that any reduction of human origin will prove infinitesimal. The other: each unique copy is irreplaceable, but (as the Library is total) there are always several hundreds of thousands of imperfect facsimiles: of works that do not differ except for one letter or one comma. Against the general opinion I venture to suppose that the consequences of the depredations committed by the Purifiers have been exaggerated by the horror that these fanatics provoked. They were urged by the madness to possess the books of the Crimson Hexagon: books of a format smaller than is natural; omnipotent, learned and magical.

We know too the other superstition of that time: that of the Man of the Book. On some shelf of some hexagon (men reasoned) there must exist a book which would be the key and the perfect compendium of all the rest: some librarian has examined that book and is analogous to a god. In the language of this zone there still persist vestiges of the cult of that remote functionary. Many wandered in search of Him. For a century they fatigued in vain the most diverse routes. How to locate the venerated secret hexagon that housed him? Some proposed a regressive method: to locate book A, consult in advance a book B which indicates the site of A: to locate B, consult in advance C: and so on to infinity. In ventures like those I squandered and consumed my years. It does not appear incredible to me that on some shelf of the universe there should be a total book;³ I 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. 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. Let me be humiliated

³ I repeat: it is enough that a book be possible in order that it exist. Only the impossible is excluded. For example: no book is a stairway, although there are doubtless books that dispute and negate and demonstrate that possibility, and others whose structure corresponds to that of a stairway.

furore consumed millions of books: a senseless loss. Their name is execrated. But those who deplore the seeming treasures their frenzy destroyed neglect two evident circumstances. The first: depredation merely human cannot diminish the universe. The second: each unique volume is irreplaceable but, the Library being total, each book possesses hundreds upon thousands of almost perfect facsimiles, books differing between themselves by no more than a single letter or punctum. Though my fellow men think otherwise I venture to say that the excesses of the Purifiers have been exaggerated by the horror these fanatics provoked. They were deranged: maddened by the desire to possess the books of the Crimson Hexagon: omniscient and powerful tomes whose magical leaves bristle, so some say, with letters strangely small.

The Man of the Book was the other superstition of that desperate time. On some shelf of some hexagon, so men reasoned, there must exist a book which is the key to every other and the compendium of all together. One librarian has examined that book: he is the image of God. In my natal tongue there persist vestiges, even now, of the cult of the Holy Lector. So many wandered in search of Him. For a hundred years his votaries scoured in vain their many turning stairways. To close upon His secret and venerated chamber some proposed a recurrence: to locate a volume A consult a volume B which locates A, to locate B consult a C which locates B, and so on ad infinitum. In such and like misadventures I squandered and consumed my years, but it does not seem incredible to me that some shelf of the Library should bear the Book of books.² I entreat the ignorant gods: let one man have read the Book, one only, even if it be thousands of years hence. Let there be honour and felicity and wisdom for some man though I am granted none. Let there be sky though I go in darkness. Let me be humiliated: annihilated: but for some one man, for one moment, let the universe be justified.

² I repeat: every possible book is actual: only impossibilia are excluded. No book is a stairway clearly: but doubtless there are books which dispute or negate or demonstrate the possibility: and volumes whose disposition corresponds, as surely, to the structure of a stairway.

and annihilated, but for some one being, for an instant, let your enormous Library be justified.

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 perdurable 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?)

Methodical writing distracts me from the present condition of men. The certainty that all that is written annuls or phantasmizes us. I know of districts in which the young prostrate themselves before books and kiss them barbarously,

The impious assert that the Library is without order or measure: that reasoned consequences, and mere and modest coherence even, are miraculous egregia. They speak, I have heard them, 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.’ The disorder they denounce their words themselves display: are themselves abominate despair and ignorance. The Library compasses all that words are let to do: all the variations the twenty-five orthographic symbols permit: but not a single absurdity. The more coherent volumes of the many chambers in my care are, I will admit, oddly named: *Thunder Coiffed*, for instance, or *The Cramping of Plaster*. But the concession is futile. Such seemingly inconsistent constatives are doubtless allegories, whose complete glossing the Library will already contain. There is no combination of characters the Library lacks: and the random and sudden concatenation *dhcmrlchtdj* I have just now set down will bear some terrible meaning, surely, in some secret language of the universe. Each syllable is full of tenderness or dread: or on some tongue the potent name of a god. Our assertion is all tautology: our speaking is done, already, as soon as we are begun. This verbose summary is futile: it is already written: and its refutation as well has long lain ready on one of the five shelves on some one face of one of the innumerable hexagons of the Library.

Very many languages might use the same lexicon. In some of these the element ‘library’ might well receive the correct and canonical definition ‘ubiquitous and perduring system of hexagonal galleries’. But ‘bread’ or ‘pyramid’ may serve to name libraries there, nonetheless, and the seven elements of the correct definition will have other uses. You who are reading this may be sure you understand my words: I am certain only of the letters that spell them out.

In the labour of writing I forget the common plight: the abrogating plenitude of the word: that what is written annuls us. The young have begun to fall prostrate before their books and fervently kiss the letters they cannot tell apart: not one, even, from any other. The discord of

but do not know how to decipher a single letter. Epidemics, heretical discords, the peregrinations that inevitably degenerate into banditry, have decimated the population. I believe I have mentioned the suicides, more frequent every year. Perhaps age and fear deceive me, but I suspect that the human species — the only one — is to die out and that the Library will endure: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, armed with precious books, useless, incorruptible, secret.

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.⁴

⁴ Letizia Alvarez de Toledo has observed 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: each apparent leaf would divide into analogous others; the inconceivable central leaf would have no back.

heresy deranges the few men plagues have spared. Pilgrims turn to banditry. Suicides are yearly more frequent. My advanced age and my timorous disposition may deceive me but I fear that humankind will die out: the sole created nature, ours, is to perish. But the Library will endure: perdure luminous and immovable and infinite, and perfectly one in its manifold armament of volumes incorruptible and precious and secret.

Eloquence may allow itself the word 'infinite' with propriety: my speech is rude. But to think the Library endless is not, I assert, at all illogical. Those who declare the universe limited must postulate that in remote places the perfect hexagons and the strict corridors and the polished stairs abruptly end: which is inconceivable. But those who suppose the world limitless forget that there are not infinitely many books. To the ancient problem I postulate this solution: the Library is periodic. A deathless lector traversing its stairways in one unchanging direction would at some term of his centuries find again the same volumes in the same disorder: the repeating of which would be order: the Order. In seemly hope I endure my solitude.[†]

[†] A severe and learned correspondent has observed that the vast Library is a useless fiction. A single volume with an infinite number of pages printed on leaves infinitely fine would suffice she avers: and adds that Cavalieri had postulated, at the beginning of the 17th century, that every solid body is the superposition of an infinite number of planes. But to page her silken *vade mecum* through would not be easy: each apparent leaf would divide upon itself no end: the inconceivable central leaf could have no reverse.