

## BARTH MEETS BORGES IN THE FUNHOUSE

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Many critics have pointed out that Jorge Luis Borges's and John Barth's works share clear affinities. This resemblance, however, is not based on an imitation of style and content. Instead, Barth adopts many of Borges's narrative techniques and themes and adapts them to suit his own needs. The result is a convergence of thought, a common response toward creation as a means of expressing their view of reality. Both authors question the nature of reality and explore the possibilities that literature offers as a medium which can express a paradoxical reality that defies apprehension through language.

*Lost in the Funhouse* (1966) is Barth's first collection of short stories. They draw on one of Borges's main themes: the view of the world as fragmentary, which is expressed by using symbols and images such as the mirror, the labyrinth or the appearances of doubles in the stories. Barth himself has acknowledged his debt to the Argentinean author in various essays. In "The Literature of Exhaustion," he pays tribute to Borges's work and points out its importance in relation to postmodernism.

For him, Borges is the father of postmodernism due to his innovative style and the self-reflexive aspect of his stories. According to Barth, Borges's short stories are not to be considered as independent entities, but as parts of a whole text which express a certain view of the world and of literature. Barth admits that *Lost in the Funhouse* was inspired by Borges's stories. He says in the foreword of the collection:

It was about this time when I came across the writings of the great Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, whose temper was so wedded to the short story form, that like Chekhov, he never wrote a novel, and whose unorthodox brilliance transformed the short story for me. Writers learn from the experience of others, as well as from their experience of life in the world; it was the happy marriage of form and content in Borges's *Ficciones*—the way he regularly turned

his narrative means into part of his message—that suggested how I might try to do something similar, in my way and with my materials. (vii)

It is only after having read Borges's stories that Barth tried his hand at writing short stories.<sup>1</sup> What Barth admires most in Borges is the "marriage of form and content," that is, the use of the short story's form to express his view of reality and of course, of literature. For Barth, Borges's works combine both technique and passion.<sup>2</sup>

Borges's short stories are not traditional at all. The development of a plot that often does not come to a final conclusion makes readers aware of the impossibility of closure, both in the story and in life. They also embody Borges's vision of reality as infinite and inexpressible. His "fictions" are sparse and present almost an outline of a story that will never be completed: the story that would express the whole of reality. Readers must fill the gaps in the tales if they are to experience the pleasure of reading.

Borges's short stories express his view of literature as the infinite search for a metaphysical truth which can never be expressed fully. In this sense, Borges follows the post-Kantian tradition of Schopenhauer, who believed that the ultimate truth was impossible to reach and that what was left was only its reflection, or the phenomena.<sup>3</sup> Borges's stories are full of symbols that are the representation of that elusive truth, as we will see later. Borges believes that behind the surface of the work there are many meanings, not just one, and that the more meanings the text has, the richer it is:

Quizás conviene que lo escrito exceda lo que uno ha querido escribir y que sea felizmente ambiguo. De modo que cuantos más sentidos pueda tener mejor si el texto es rico en sugerencias y ambigüedades; si el texto es sabiamente rico en sugerencias y en ambigüedades, mejor todavía. (*Literatura Fantástica* 27)

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1. Before *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth had written only novels, such as *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road*, *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles-Goat Boy*.

2. Barth explains what ideal literature is for him in his essay "Algebra and Fire," in the *Friday Book*. He believes that good literature must achieve a passionate virtuosity: a balance between logos or technique, order, and the Eros of passion. In that essay Barth says:

I should explain that the title of this talk—"Algebra and Fire"—is borrowed from the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, one of whose stories is about the encyclopedia of an imaginary world, exhaustively described in twenty meticulous volumes . . . from its algebra to its fire. Let Algebra stand for technique, or the technical and formal aspects of a work of literature; let fire stand for the writer's passion, the things he or she is trying to get eloquently said. The burden of my sermon is that good literature, for example, involves and requires both the algebra and the fire; in short, passionate virtuosity. (167)

3. Borges also developed many ideas from the Idealistic tradition of Berkeley and Hume. See Rivero-Potter.

Borges's notions are similar to Roland Barthes in that the ideal text is the "plural" text, as opposed to the classic text where the author plays the role of God and privileges his own message. Barthes says in *S/Z* that in a plural text several readings are possible and there is a dynamic relationship between the reader and the text. Furthermore, the plural text is "replete with multiple, discontinuous, accumulated meanings" (*S/Z* 200).

Borges's concept of the ideal text is therefore very close to Barthes's and to the view many critics have of so-called self-reflexive, postmodern texts.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely in this vision of the text as an endless source of meaning that Borges's fiction has an affinity with Barthes's.

Borges does not only reflect upon the ontological status of literature, but also upon that of the world by creating his own universe:

Acosado por un mundo demasiado real pero que al mismo tiempo carece de sentido, busca liberarse de su obsesión creando otro mundo de fantasmagorías tan coherente, que nos hace dudar, de rechazo, de la misma realidad en que nos apoyamos. (Barrenechea 19)

Borges uses literature as a means of un-realizing the world. He suggests that the existence of things is only a reflection of reality. From Borges's idealist position, the material world is only a reversed image, a reflection of an absent center. His stories mix the fictitious and the real in such a way that nothing is either one or the other. Everything is unreal. Emir Rodríguez Monegal explains how Borges's use of fantasy expresses his view of reality:

Para Borges, la literatura fantástica se vale de la ficción no para evadirse de la realidad, como creen (o fingen creer) sus detractores más superficiales, sino para expresar una visión más compleja de la realidad. (79)

Borges's metaphors convey the illusory nature of the world which surrounds him. He mixes references to real authors with quotations from the apocryphal texts he invents. In this way, he confounds readers and makes them aware that just as they can be misled by a playful author, so Borges himself and human beings in general are confounded by the falsity of many things that seem real and by the reality of others that appear unreal:

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4. Among the critics who discuss the plurality of the text in general are, of course, Eco in *The Open Work*, Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* and Mc Hale in *Postmodernist Fiction*. With regard to Borges, see Genette "L'Utopie," Rivero-Potter "Jorge Luis Borges" in *Autor/Lector*, and Rodríguez Monegal's *Borges por El Mismo*.

El mundo coherente en el que creemos vivir, gobernado por la razón y codificado por el esfuerzo creador en categorías morales e inmutables, no es real. Es una invención de los hombres (artistas, teólogos, filósofos, visionarios) que se superpone a una realidad absurda, caótica. (Rodríguez Monegal 80)

For Rodríguez Monegal, Borges considers our world a mirage of coherence and reason. Its true nature is chaotic and absurd, and it is human beings who have invented an illusion of rationality to feel sure about themselves and the world. The spurious nature of this world thus affects us as readers. In "El Sueño de Coleridge," the emperor Kubla Khan dreams of a palace in the thirteenth century and he builds it, and five centuries later, Coleridge dreams about a poem on the palace. Not only is literary creation the result of a dream. We, as readers, cannot be sure whether we are being dreamt by Somebody and are, therefore, fictions. The certainty of things such as literary creation or our own reality is called into question by Borges. Borges and John Barth after him try to express such a quandary in their stories.

Barth shares Borges's idea of the short story as a paradoxical representation of the world. Like him, Barth believes in the misleading reality of the world, but Barth is not an idealist. Whereas Borges would like to have faith in the existence of the final truth, Barth's perspective is more limited. At first sight, Barth seems to think that what is visible is what exists. The fragments that we can see are important in themselves, not as a means to reach an end. However, for Barth,

It's the notion of the world as a text whose surface meaning may not be its real meaning; the notion that Nature and, indeed, human actions and all the things around us, whatever their apparent coherence, perhaps have a deeper coherence that we can only speculate upon: the world as God's Book or . . . the world as a novel and God as a novelist. . . material creation as a kind of metaphor, something to be read and not just experienced. (Lampkin 485)

Barth equates literary creation with the creation of worlds. This brings to mind the old *topos* of the author as God, which will be studied in detail later when analyzing the role of the author and the role of the reader in Borges's and Barth's texts. Barth is primarily interested in making the reader aware of the chaos and fragmentation of the world by experimenting with narrative devices that express multiplicity. He complicates the narrative levels in his stories in order to convey the transgression of the boundaries between reality and fiction. For Barth, as for Borges, the notion of reality is related to the idea of infinity: they employ the *mise en abyme* to convey an unknowable and frightening reality.

Literary creation functions as an inquiry of the reality of our world in Borges and Barth. They question our ontological status as human beings in several ways. One

is the intrusion of the fictional world in ours or vice versa. The figure of the author that appears in the text is an example of the latter technique. Brian McHale says in *Postmodernist Fiction*:

No longer content with invisibly exercising his freedom to create worlds, the artist makes his freedom visible by thrusting himself into the foreground of his work. There is a catch, of course: the represented in the act of creation or destruction is himself inevitably a fiction. (30)

The intrusion of the author in his work is one of the main devices used by postmodernist writers such as Nabokov or Calvino to dissolve the boundaries between fiction and reality. If the author presents himself on the same level as what is supposed to be his creation, then there is no clear distinction between the real world and the literary one. The intrusion of the author represents the subversion of the traditional hierarchical order of author/narrator/characters, since now there is no division of levels but a blurring of all these elements, which mingle and interact.

For instance, Borges appears in stories such as “Borges y Yo,” and his presence reinforces the idea of the dissolution of such boundaries. Borges is author, reader, and character:

yo vivo, yo me dejo vivir, para que Borges pueda tramar su literatura y esa literatura me justifica. Nada me cuesta confesar que ha logrado ciertas páginas válidas, pero esas páginas no me pueden salvar, quizá porque lo bueno ya no es de nadie, ni siquiera del otro, sino del lenguaje o la tradición. (OC 2: 186)

In Barth’s “Life-Story,” the narrator, “he,” alludes to his author “B” who obviously stands for Barth. In this case, the intradiegetical level expands towards the extradiegetical, in Genette’s terms. That is to say, elements of the extradiegetic or outer frame emerge within the diegesis, provoking a shift from fiction to non-fiction. The result of mixing the extradiegetic, diegetic and intradiegetic levels is a hybrid of fiction and reality. The creation of an impossible, unreal world is thus generated by Borges and Barth. Umberto Eco affirms in *The Role* that it is unfeasible to have impossible worlds. He states that

The proper effect of such narrative constructs (be they sci-fi novels or avant-garde texts in which the very notion of self-identity is challenged) is just that of producing a sense of logical uneasiness and of narrative discomfort. So they arouse a sense of suspicion with respect to our common beliefs and affect our disposition to trust the most credited laws of the world of our encyclopedia rather than build up another self-sustaining world. (234)

Eco criticizes works that question our ontological status because they do not provide valid alternatives. He says that such texts do not create worlds, but merely destroy previous ones.<sup>5</sup> In Borges's and in Barth's case, that is not necessarily true.

For Borges and for Barth the "impossible" world highlights all the contradictions and relative categories of order of our world itself. Ours is a world in which nothing deserves to be taken for granted. The author functions as a dissenter god by creating such worlds, as John Barth comments:

This is perhaps a clue to our universe that the novelist offers in his immodest and subversive resemblance to God. . . . Consider that if the novelist is like God and a novel like the universe, then the converse ought to have at least some metaphorical truth: the universe is a novel, God is a novelist; (I have observed that the trouble with God is not that he is a bad novelist, only that he is a realistic one, and that dates him). (*Friday Book 23*)

According to Borges, the universe is the creation of a God, but an implacable one. In "La Lotería de Babilonia," God is represented by "La Compañía" who arbitrarily rules the world. In the chaos of Babilonia there is an order, the order imposed by "La Compañía," which is that of a cosmic lottery that determines the fate of the characters cruelly and haphazardly.

The reader is an essential part of the process of literary creation. Without the reader the world that the author creates does not come into being. However, reader and author are not the same. As Alicia Rivero-Potter has pointed out in *Autor/Lector*,

La lectura o rememoración transforma el texto en el conocimiento del que lo lee o recuerda; modifica la obra que el autor escribió. Cada nuevo lector la enriquece al interpretarla a su manera; lo hace igualmente cada lectura y relectura de un mismo lector. Leer, como escribir, es una forma de creación según Borges, a pesar de que no son lo mismo. (68)

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5. In contrast, Christopher Nash proposes that avant-garde or experimental texts do make impossible worlds. He divides the anti-realist novels into "neocosmic" and "anticosmic" narrative:

The word 'cosmic' here refers to a variety of narratives in which the universe described is implied to have a complete integrated and autonomous order at the level of the story. And a "neocosmic" narrative sets its particular cosmos over and against not the "real" world, but against the kind of universe customarily proposed in Realist fiction. (76)

He also says that "anticosmic" narratives "institute the uncustomary at the level of the discourse broadly speaking, to signal among other things that orderly signification itself is subject to question" (98).

The role of the reader and that of the author in Borges are different, but the reader's function is not inferior to the author's. Both are complementary.

Borges and Barth insist that the active participation of the reader is necessary, but they give due importance to the author as creator. The text is a dynamic entity which is brought to life by its interaction with the reader, as Rodríguez Monegal and Rivero-Potter show. Borges doesn't want the technique of the story to be obvious from the beginning; instead, the reader has to participate in the narrative process. As Rivero-Potter observes: "el lector es un partícipe que colabora en la producción de textos borgianos. . . . [Borges] Reconoce el papel estructurador inicial del escritor en el libro, pero el lector define la obra por su estilo de leerla" (67). In the preface to *Ficciones*, for instance, Borges's first sentence is: "Las siete piezas de este libro no requieren mayor elucidación" (OC 1: 429). This is only a little joke aimed at the reader, since Borges expects our reading and perspicacity to elucidate the questions proposed in the stories.

Barth's "Funhouse," for instance, is constructed initially by the author. The participant/reader has to decide which way to go, or which way to read, but the operator of the funhouse is the one who plans the labyrinthine path. Barth's character, Ambrose, who seems to share many of the preoccupations of the author with writing, dreams of working in a funhouse:

He envisions a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex yet . . . controlled from a great switchboard like the console of a great pipe-organ. Nobody has enough imagination. He could design such a place himself, wiring and all . . . He would be his operator. (LFH 97)

A relationship of mutual dependence emerges, since the readers depend upon the author and his/her creation, and the writer on the readers in the sense that the work does not come into being until somebody reads it.

For Barth as for Borges, the role of the reader is precisely what prevents literature from being exhausted. In his article "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth comments on this:

I agree with Borges that literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single text can ever be exhausted—its meaning residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space and language. (FB 265)

The text, then, acquires a new meaning with every reading; readers create their own "fictions" as a result of their interaction with the text. Every new reading means a new interpretation because every reader is different.

The role of the reader as creator is evidenced in "Pierre Menard, Autor del *Quijote*." Pierre Menard "no quería componer otro *Quijote*, lo cual es fácil, sino el *Quijote*" (OC 1: 446). Menard's text, though apparently identical to Cervantes's, is

richer. Having been written three centuries later, it is addressed to a reader with a more complete background who can give another reading to the text.

In Genette's terms, Cervantes's *Quijote* would be the "hypotext" or the primary text and Menard's the "hypertext," that is, the posterior one. The beauty of the hypertext lies in its ambiguity. The duplicity of the text (the new laid over the old) gives it its palimpsestic nature. As Alazraqui says: "Escribir es releer un texto anterior, es reescribirlo" ("El Texto" 281).

Once finished, the hypotext loses its original character and becomes the property of its readers. For Genette:

Aucune oeuvre est originale, parce que la quantité de fables ou de métaphores dont est capable l'imagination des hommes est limitée, mais toute oeuvre est universelle, parce que ce petit nombre d'inventions peut être tout à tous, comme l'apôtre. (*Palimpsestes* 130)

Readers also have an active part in the production of the text. It is precisely their participation that gives the text its palimpsestic nature, since every new reading makes the text have a new nuance.

The hypotext is independent from the hypertext, but it acquires more connotations if regarded from the point of view of the hypertext because it is like reading two texts in one. Increasing the complexity of the text by the superimposition of levels of reading, the text also becomes more ambiguous. Hypotexts are naive and limited compared to hypertexts because the latter carry within themselves the cultural load of many readers: "El texto de Cervantes y el de Menard son verbalmente idénticos, pero el segundo es casi infinitamente más rico (más ambiguo, dirán sus detractores; pero la ambigüedad es una riqueza)" (OC 1: 449).

By presenting the fictional world as ambiguous, and thus calling for the reader to become involved in deciphering its depiction in the text, Borges and Barth make us aware of their own confusion: for them the world is essentially inexplicable, multiple, and labyrinthic. In "Life-Story," Barth's persona asks:

Had he written for his readers' sake? The phrase implied a hitherto-unappreciated metaphysical dimension. Suspense. If his life was a fictional narrative it consisted of three terms—teller, tale, told—each dependent on the other two but not in the same ways . . . the reader! Even if his author were his only reader as was he himself of his work-in-progress as of the sentence-in-progress and his protagonist of his, et cetera, his character as reader was not the same as his character as author. (LFH 122-123)

The narrator in the quote alludes to "his author," Barth. He himself is an author too, but he is also a character and a reader of his own work. There is a distinction

between the roles, however, as the quote indicates. Although the same person can have the three roles, that does not mean that the roles are the same. In "La Lotería de Babilonia," it would seem that Borges is ironically ridiculing the absolute author. The fact that the name of the absolute power in the story is "La Compañía" immediately evokes multiplicity, however. As in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the makers of the encyclopedia and, therefore, of the other world are not one single author but several. Furthermore, the "Compañía" in the story is cruel and pitiless, playing with people the way that authors can play with the reader, misleading him/her in many ways (Rivero-Potter 73).

Overcome by the sense of unreality that surrounds them, the inhabitants of Babilonia suffer a kind of paralysis due to the uselessness of any action against the rules of these "gods," since they are more powerful than the Babilonians and can deceive the populace. This parallels Borges's ironical comment on the role of the author as God:

Bajo el influjo bienhechor de la Compañía, nuestras costumbres están saturadas de azar. El comprador de una docena de ánforas de vino damasceno no se maravillará si una de ellas encierra un talismán o una vñbora; el escribano que redacta un contrato no deja casi nunca de introducir algún dato erróneo; yo mismo, en esta apresurada declaración he falseado algún esplendor, alguna atrocidad. Quizás también alguna monstruosa monotonía. (OC 1: 460)

Borges acknowledges that he can assume the role of a playful God sometimes in his stories by providing the reader with inaccurate data or false bibliographical references. The reader is put in the uncomfortable position of having to discern what is true and what is not in Borges's stories.

The difference in the way in which Borges and Barth conceive the relationship between author, text and reader is to be found mainly in Borges's idealistic background and Barth's postmodernist one. For Borges, the author attempts to transmit a cosmic truth, only partially glimpsed in his work, which the reader interprets in his or her own way. Barth, more democratic than Borges, believes in an even greater interaction of the reader and the text. For instance, in the "Author's Note" to *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth gives instructions to the readers regarding how to approach the different stories in the book. He says that some were conceived to be read aloud by the reader ("Glossolalia"), some "take the print medium for granted but lose or gain nothing in oral recitation" ("Ambrose His Mark" and "Water Message") and in one ("Frame-Tale") Barth explicitly requires the active collaboration of the reader to make the Möebius strip.

As in Borges's "La Compañía," we also find paralysis in Barth's stories when he attempts to communicate the ineffable. In *Lost in the Funhouse* such powerlessness appears especially in the figure of Ambrose, the main character of the stories, who

represents on different levels the author, reader and text itself. Ambrose is passive, as we can see in "Lost in the Funhouse" where he presents himself as the opposite of his brother Peter described as a "happy-go-lucky youngster" (LFH 94). Ambrose, in contrast, is melancholic and solitary. Like Joyce's Stephen, to whom he alludes in the story, Ambrose wants to be an artist. As Carol Booth-Olson has said,

For the speakers in *Funhouse*, the act of writing is the one thing that gives them any sense of self. In the world of fiction, they can assume any "identity" they choose and destroy people and places with the stroke of a pen. Unfortunately, they cannot seem to integrate thought and action, words and things, mental and physical. Their commitment to the imagination is at the expense of (and obviously a replacement for) a meaningful existence in everyday life. (58-59)

Booth Olson sees writing as the response to a nihilistic attitude toward living. Faced with a situation which they find impossible to assimilate, the characters in this text choose words as substitutes for the world. Literary creation becomes then the only active function possible for them.

For Borges and for Barth, language is the only way of expressing a chaotic reality. Through their stories and through their characters, these authors try to communicate with their readers. They do not give readers a definite answer, but make them consider the spurious and fictional nature of the world.

Both Barth and Borges often construct their stories around the image of the labyrinth. For Barrenechea, the labyrinth is both a symbol of the infinite and of chaos: "El laberinto sin salida por donde el hombre vaga extraviado acaba por convertirse en el doble símbolo del infinito y del caos" (79). It is important to notice that she says "el doble símbolo" because this reinforces the plural nature of the labyrinth.

What Barrenechea means by "caos" is precisely the lack of any rational order, the lack of any answer to the questions that human beings have in this world. According to her, "El vivir es, pues, un conjunto caótico y arbitrario en el que predominan las notas del desorden y el azar, la pesadilla, la irracionalidad y la locura, la soledad y el desamparo del hombre" (64). Because we are limited, human beings are unable to understand the haphazard rules that govern the world.

More enlightening than Barrenechea's remark is Wendy B. Faris's comment on the use of the labyrinth by Borges:

Borges often thinks in terms of labyrinths, but not always the same kind of labyrinths. . . . Borges persistently uses the labyrinth to suggest how the shapes of thoughts and their printouts in writing both inform and reflect the shapes of the world. (88)

For Borges, the labyrinth is the image that represents the absent center best. In Medieval literature—Guillaume de Lorris' *Le Roman de la Rose* or Juan de Mena's *Laberinto de Fortuna*, for instance—the labyrinth functioned as a representation of the different paths that man must follow on earth to arrive at the center: God or paradise. In Borges's case this notion is complicated because the center remains unattainable.

Labyrinths are the representation of the world. Borges introduces labyrinths in his stories and makes labyrinthine stories in order to express his view of reality. These labyrinths, however, are not homogeneous. In effect, for Borges there are physical labyrinths, mental labyrinths and oneiric labyrinths, and the three coincide. As Faris says: "Over and over again in his fiction, labyrinths of words or thoughts coexist with labyrinthine itineraries, each variety implicating the other" (88).

For Borges, the labyrinth serves as a metaphor. Faris states that

Because in his work the labyrinth most commonly symbolizes the world, Borges's frequent use of the adjective and the metaphor causes an imaginative expansion; the labyrinthine object or event tends to pervade the literary landscape, to radiate outward into the world-as-labyrinth, merging the one with the many. (91)

Labyrinths, whether they appear thematically or formally, represent the world and literature.

Borges's use of the labyrinth has been taken up by Barth in his article "The Literature of Exhaustion." He sees the image as representative of literature and especially of that type of work to which he dedicates the article: the literature of exhausted possibilities. Barth says: "A labyrinth, after all, is a place in which, ideally, all the possibilities of choice (of direction in this case) are embodied, and—barring special dispensation like Theseus's—must be exhausted before one reaches the heart" (FB 75). The problem is, of course, that one never reaches the "heart" or center.

Later in the same article, Barth compares Borges to Theseus, for Borges has the key to the labyrinth. Due to its own paradoxical nature, the solution to the labyrinth does not consist of choosing between two alternatives. The important thing is to acknowledge that presence implies absence and vice versa. Therefore, choosing between two things means limiting oneself and narrowing our view of the world. A double nature proves to be insufficient for reaching the center and does not provide completeness.

A clear symbol of duality is the Minotaur. Half man, half bull, the Minotaur lives in the labyrinth. He is trapped in a plural world which he cannot comprehend. He represents the paradox of being neither one nor the other, but both entities, man and animal. This is reminiscent of Barth's siamese brothers. In Borges's "La Casa de Asterión," the Minotaur does not offer any resistance when Theseus kills him because he could not bear his dual nature. In "El Examen de la Obra de Herbert Quain," Borges

comments on the difference between binary and plural systems: “[Quain] predijo que los hombres que lo imitaran optarían por el binario . . . y los demiurgos y los dioses por el infinito: infinitas historias, infinitamente ramificadas” (OC 1: 461). The gods know that the solution does not lie in discarding one thing and choosing another, but in accepting that everything is equally important. The only possible answer is plurality.

In “El Jardín de los Senderos que se Bifurcan,” book and labyrinth turn out to be the same object. In the same way, Borges’s “book,” that is, his entire *oeuvre*, is a maze itself. By writing short stories, these become parts of a labyrinth in which we never seem to reach the center. Men have to learn from the gods not to forget the plural nature of the world to find their way in the world. It is the principle of non-selection, of multiplicity and of literature as infinite.

Faris sees this multiple or plural aspect of the nature of the labyrinth as related to the use of the short story form. She says,

In the case of Borges, most of his stories are short, though they often contain references to an entire life. Borges’s use of the labyrinth in them allows him to avoid detailing a character’s progression in time, and still permits him to evoke the power of destiny as it operates through a lifetime or through universal history. (95)

By the “power of destiny,” Faris is alluding to the idea of the world as the representation of a superior world, and of man as the representation of the Final Being. Our lives are not free, but rather we carry the burden of being a reflection of something. Man is then incomplete and lost in a labyrinthine world, in which chaos and order coexist in a paradoxical way. As man is made up of contradictory natures, so is the world as seen from a human perspective: an ordered labyrinth governed by chaotic rules.

Barth takes up Borges’s idea of the world and literature as a labyrinth. This is illustrated especially by the narrative devices he uses in *Lost in the Funhouse*. First, as we have seen, the image of the funhouse is itself a maze of mirrors, in which there is no center. Ambrose, does not have the key to the labyrinth; he does not see that he himself is part of the labyrinth: “Stepping from the treacherous passage at last into the mirror-maze, he saw once again, more clearly than ever, how readily he deceived himself into supposing he was a person” (LFH 93). He remains outside, isolated because he lacks the understanding of plurality that Barth has as a writer. Ambrose wants to be a writer, a labyrinth maker, but he also wants to be among the lovers who enjoy the funhouse. He knows that being both at the same time is not possible for him. For Ambrose one is either author or reader, not both; one is forced to choose between building labyrinths or being in them: “For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is a place of fear and confusion” (72).

The word “labyrinth,” however, functions better if applied to Barth’s structural devices in the stories. The intricate paths which readers have to face comprise a maze of narrative levels and voices which mingle and confound us. Probably the most sophisticated one is “Glossolalia,” which in the manner of the tower of Babel includes several voices together without having any dominant one. John Barth tells us in “Glossolalia”: “The senselesst babble, could we ken it, might disclose a dark message, or prayer” (LFH, 115). In “Glossolalia,” the speakers are, in order,

Cassandra, Philomela, the fellow mentioned by Paul in the fourteenth verse of his first epistle to the Corinthians, the Queen of Sheba’s talking bird, an unidentified psalmist employing what happens to be the tongue of a historical glossolalist. . . . and the author. . . . The insufferability of the fiction, once this correspondence is recognized, makes its double point: that language may be a compound code, and that the discovery of an enormous complexity beneath a simple surface may well be more dismaying than delightful. (LFH, 203)

For Barth, as for Borges, the path to the center of the labyrinth is the essential factor, because it is through the fragments that we can apprehend the glimpses of that center. As Eco said in *El Nombre de la Rosa*, partially citing St. Paul<sup>6</sup>:

Pero videmus nunc per speculum et in aenigmate y la verdad, antes de manifestarse a cara descubierta, se muestra en fragmentos (¡ay! ¡Cuán ilegibles!) mezclada con el error de este mundo, de modo que debemos deletrear sus fieles signaculos incluso allí donde nos parecen oscuros y casi forjados por una voluntad totalmente orientada hacia el mal. (17)

For Eco, everything in the world is a sign. Sometimes, these signs are not clear. It is our mission as readers to decipher them so as to find the way to the truth or center. The idea that the signs can be misleading since they are produced by a superior being who intends to confound us (“casi forjados por una voluntad totalmente orientada hacia el mal”) appeared in Borges’s story “La Lotería de Babilonia,” where the lives of the Babilonians were haphazardly ruled by the capricious gods of the Company. Eco might be making a reference to Borges here. Moreover, *The Name of the Rose* contains numerous allusions to Borgesian images and themes, including Eco’s tribute to Borgés

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6. “Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate: tunc autem facie ad faciem. Nunc cognosco ex parte: tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum” (St. Paul, Corinthians, 13: 12). This passage is also quoted by Borges in “El Espejo de Los Enigmas” (*Otras Inquisiciones*). A translation he proposes is: “Ahora vemos por espejo, en oscuridad; mas entonces veremos cara a cara. Ahora conozco en parte, mas entonces conoceré como soy conocido” (OC 2: 98).

by naming the blind murderer-librarian Jorge de Burgos. For Eco, as for Borges, the truth is always unattainable for us.

Barth's stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* express Borges's idea that some labyrinths are infinite. The ultimate labyrinth in Barth is the structure of the book itself: a Möebius strip. The first story, "Frame-Tale," anticipates this idea; formed by the endless repetition of the typical beginning of tales ("once upon a time, there was a story that began once upon a time," and so on *ad infinitum*), it contains all the stories of the book within itself. The second story, "Life-Story," introduces the sperm which appears transformed in the message of the minstrel in "Anonymiad," the last story of the collection. Nevertheless, *Lost in the Funhouse* does not have a circular structure. As Barth tells us, the book is a Möebius strip because it has a twist in the center, and that twist is "Lost in the Funhouse" because it is in it that Ambrose reaches the center of the funhouse.

The Möebius strip functions as the representation of a reality which appears complex and is inexpressible by language. Christopher P. Morris offers a psychoanalytical reading of the use of the Möebius strip in *Lost in the Funhouse*. He uses Lacan's theory to explain the symbol:

The Möebius strip becomes a symbol of the paradox by providing an image which is simultaneously one and two and also suggests that the signifiers which compose it have no connection with anything outside themselves (i.e. the "signified" is nothing at all). (70)

Morris believes that the funhouse stands for the world of language. When Ambrose enters it, he is faced with the problem that the world of language exists without a center.

According to Lacan's theory, the delay of the center implies its absence and presence at the same time. For Morris, however, "at the center of the funhouse stands an absence: the signified is nothing at all" (75). What actually lies at the heart of the labyrinth, at the center of the funhouse is another labyrinth—a labyrinth made of mirrors that send endless reflections of something that is there and at the same time is not.

The story represents, then, Ambrose's realization of the absence of a center, since language has no center at all. The emphasis in *Lost in the Funhouse* is placed on language. According to Morris, "Barth extends the notion of language as an all-encompassing but autotelic medium, a Möebius strip which is wholly independent of everything outside it, even the speaker who uses it" (72).

Words are the final structure and the final center. Language is paradoxical, both absence and presence. It is important to consider not only what words say, but also what they do not say, what they imply. Words are the glimpses we contemplate of the center and these fragments of the center are the only thing that we, as limited human beings (paradoxically, limited by language), can attain.

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