

Borges' "Library of Babel" and the Internet

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Published in: IJOWLAC (Indian Journal of World Literature and Culture) (Kolkata/Calcutta, India), Vol.1.1, January-June 2004, pp. 117-120

On 16 April 1999, the French newspaper *Libération* carried an interview with Ignacio Ramonet, the editor of the prestigious publication *Le Monde Diplomatique*, on the subject of the communications revolution and entitled "Sur l'Internet, 'une rumeur et une info se valent'" ("On the Internet, 'rumour and fact become as one'")¹.

Ramonet was launching his book *La Tyrannie de la communication (The Tyranny of Communication)*², offered to the world as an interrogation of what *Libération* called the "prolifération d'une information de plus en plus diffusée, et de moins en moins contrôlée" ("proliferation of information in a form which is more and more diffuse and less and less subject to control")³. The book is primarily a critique of the distortions, oversimplifications and misinformations perpetrated by newspapers and audiovisual media; the main targets are the global communications empires and the "nouvelle idéologie de l'information en continu et en temps direct" ("the new ideology of continuous, real-time information")⁴. In the course of his critique, Ramonet airs the notion that the "network of networks" is creating an overload or surfeit of fact and opinion, a "surabondance de l'information" ("information overkill")⁵, much of which has not been checked and cannot be verified: "le pouvoir de publier est désormais décentralisé, toute rumeur, vraie ou fausse, devient de l'information, et les contrôles, effectués naguère par la rédaction en chef, volent en éclats" ("ability to publish has now been decentralised: any rumour, true or false, can become information, and the old editorial checking process simply falls apart")⁶.

In the *Libération* interview, Ramonet confronts the Internet head-on, further developing the views expressed in his book. Elements of his position merit careful examination. Of particular interest is the comparison he makes with a celebrated image of twentieth-century literature, namely the imaginary, infinite library of Jorge Luis Borges' story "La Biblioteca de Babel" ("The Library of Babel"). Ramonet declares: "Il y a ... l'excès de l'information, qui confronte tout internaute à sa propre ignorance en matière de pilotage dans un océan d'informations souvent difficiles à hiérarchiser, à vérifier; c'est le syndrome de la bibliothèque de Babel qu'avait imaginée Jorge Luis Borges, dans laquelle se trouvent tous les livres écrits et à écrire (dans toutes les langues et toutes les écritures) ... Comme dans cette bibliothèque de Babel, beaucoup d'informations se trouvent sur le Net, avec toutes leurs variantes et approximations; rien ne garantit la véracité des données; une rumeur et une info se valent" ("There is ... the excess of information, which confronts all Internet users with their own ignorance as they try to find their way through an ocean of information which tends to be difficult to organise or verify; this is the syndrome of the Library of Babel as imagined by Jorge Luis Borges, which contains all the books ever written or to be written [in every language and every script] ... Just as in that Library of Babel, vast amounts of information are there on the Net, with all their variants and approximations; nothing guarantees the reliability of the data; rumour and fact become as one")⁷.

The fictions of Borges are often adduced today as prolepses of our age, not only by critics and academics but by creative writers. Salman Rushdie's epic novel of globalisation, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), ironically cites imaginary books and authors invented by Borges (the

Chinese novel *The Garden of Forking Paths*; the writer Pierre Menard), as if they were real, within a cultural universe where fact and fiction have become interchangeable⁸. The Portuguese novelist and 1998 Nobel literature laureate José Saramago, who is a confessed admirer of Borges, evoked, in a speech in Brussels on 23 March 1999, the Argentinian writer's "literatura ritual anunciando um mundo, também ele, ritual" ("literature of ritual, announcing a world itself composed of rituals")⁹; and, indeed, Saramago's own novel of 1997, *Todos os Nomes* (*All the Names*), set in the central registry office of an unnamed country, confronts the reader with an intimidating vista of endless shelves, "ciclópicas e sobre-humanas" ("cyclopean and superhuman")¹⁰, which resembles Borges' library, except that this labyrinth contains, not books or knowledge, but dry-as-dust bureaucratic files.

To return to Ramonet's argument, it may certainly appear a seductive prospect to push the notion of contemporary relevance further and interpret Borges' Library of Babel as some kind of prefiguration of the Internet. However, examination of the actual text of Borges' story suggests that, if such analogies are to be drawn, a number of crucial qualifications will need to be made.

Borges wrote "La Biblioteca de Babel" in 1941, and it was published the same year in the collection of stories entitled *El jardín de senderos que bifurcan* (*The Garden of Forking Paths*)¹¹. The infinite library is presented from the viewpoint of one of its denizens, "los hombres de la Biblioteca" ("the men of the Library"), who was born in the library, has spent his life among the bookstacks, and knows he will die within its walls. This, certainly, could be read as prefiguring the inhabitants of today's or tomorrow's world of virtual information, with their consciousness saturated by an endless flow of cyberdata. The volumes of Borges' library add up in their totality to the sum of all texts ever written, and, indeed, all texts which could possibly ever be written - and, going well beyond that, also contain every possible combination of letters in every language and, at least by extension, every script: "la Biblioteca es total y ... sus anaqueles registran todas las posibles combinaciones de los veinticuatro símbolos ortográficos ... en todos los idiomas" ("the Library is total and ... its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd [*the Spanish text says 'twenty-four'*] orthographical symbols ... in all languages").

In other words, the great majority of the books are completely useless, and statistically it would be a remarkable feat to find even one "real", actually readable book in months searching the shelves - and even then, the chances of its content being of any use or interest to the seeker would be minimal. This "naturaleza informe y caótica de casi todos los libros" ("formless and chaotic nature of almost all the books") could, of course, be taken by Net-sceptics as darkly foreshadowing today's cyberuniverse, with what some see as the endless proliferation of trivial, ephemeral or downright harmful material, as acres of dross render the few genuinely useful texts all but invisible. Even the keenest Net users may at some times feel that the "signal-to-noise" ratio on certain newsgroups - or in their own mailboxes, alas ever more cluttered with "spam" - raises shades of Borges' nightmare library: "Afirman los impíos que el disparate es normal en la Biblioteca y que lo razonable (y aun la humilde y pura coherencia) es una casi milagrosa excepción" ("The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable [and even humble and pure coherence] is an almost miraculous exception"). Following this line of thought, Ramonet declares to *Libération*, in a somewhat patrician tone: "On voit déjà, dans le réseau, se multiplier les 'pages éditoriaux', où n'importe qui donne une opinion sentencieuse sur les questions les plus diverses ... ce n'est pas plus scientifique que le café du commerce" ("Already on the network, we find a multiplication of 'editorial pages', with anyone and everyone offering sententious opinions on everything and anything ... this is no more scientific than the corner café")¹².

At this point, however, it becomes necessary to change the direction of the argument, and remind the Jeremiahs that the analogy with the Library of Babel is only partial. The Internet is, after all, *also made by its users*. The proliferation of websites and newsgroups has not descended from outer space: Borges' library is presented as a pre-existing, immutable given ("La Biblioteca existe ab aeterno" - "The Library exists ab aeterno"), but the Internet is nothing of the sort. The virtual library now evolving in cyberspace differs from any previous library - real or imaginary, Alexandria or Babel - because it is also the creation of its readers. It includes, certainly, material which has been put there by society's rulers, as well as pre-existing works by established authors of past or present; but the cybershelves also contain row on row of volumes written by the readers, who thus become not only readers but writers too, not just passive consumers but also producers. Anyone with an Internet account can start up their own website, or post a message in a newsgroup, without having to pass through a prior filtering, sifting or, indeed, censoring mechanism. The recent, and to some disturbing, growth of subscriber-only newspaper sites, even though it gives rise to a series of reserved areas within the great library and to that extent part-privatises a public good, does not fundamentally affect the nature of the Internet, since open-access sites continue to proliferate, in line with the medium's founding spirit. The great library that is the Internet is continually expanding, and that expansion is the work of its ordinary, common readers as much as anyone else.

This phenomenon is without precedent in the annals of human history. It is quite true that much of the material in this library is of value to few but its producers; that some of it is harmful; and that parts of it have been privatised. However, these factors need to be counterbalanced against the massive gains being made in the collective potential of the human race for self-expression, communication, dialogue and democratic participation.

Borges' fable contains an episode in which, back in the distant past, hundreds of the library's dwellers thronged its shelves, each in pursuit of his "Vindication," the book which would justify the existence of the individual who read it: "libros de apología y de profecía, que para siempre vindicaban los actos de cada hombre del universo" ("books of apology and prophecy which vindicated for all time the acts of every man in the universe"). The search was for the most part in vain, thanks to the vastness of the library: "Las Vindicaciones existen (yo he visto dos que se refieren a personas del porvenir, a personas acaso no imaginarias), pero los buscadores no recordaban que la posibilidad de que un hombre encuentre la suya, o alguna páfida variación de la suya, es computable en cero" ("The Vindications exist [I have seen two which refer to persons of the future, to persons who are perhaps not imaginary] but the searchers did not remember that the possibility of a man's finding his Vindication, or some treacherous variation thereof, can be computed as zero"). By contrast, in today's real-virtual world, there is a simple answer to the problem: seekers who fail to find their personal vindication on the network can write the missing text themselves, and add it to the library at the click of a mouse - and there it is on the shelves, for anyone to read - or rewrite, improve, embroider, illustrate, refute, contradict, forget, or simply ignore.

Meanwhile, in a further twist of Borgesian logic, the master's own work has taken up residence on the Internet. Cyberspace contains many mansions, and among those mansions may be counted the proliferation of websites devoted to Jorge Luis Borges, who must, beyond any doubt, be one of the canonic literary figures whose work has most lent itself to diffusion and discussion via the new medium. In a surely rather Borgesian development, a study placed on the Web by Tay Shi'an of the National University of Singapore¹³ lists a hundred sites related to "La Biblioteca de Babel" alone. The specialist Borges sites range from the ultra-professional and hyper-academic (notably the quasi-official site at Aarhus University in Denmark, which presents Borges' work as an example of

"transversal epistemologies" and a paradigm of interdisciplinarity¹⁴), to patently amateur, unsustainably tendentious or downright eccentric "personal pages" lurking in the nooks and crannies of cyberspace. Within the cyber-academic mainstream, in both literary and non-literary circles, the Argentinian fabulist is hailed, in a dazzling kaleidoscope of readings, as a precursor not only of the Internet, but of everything from chaos theory¹⁵ to the human genome project¹⁶. A parallel universe of Borgesian exegesis is in process of creation, doubling and mirroring the world of the master's texts - as, indeed, in Borges' own story of 1940, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the imaginary world of Tlön mirrors and doubles that of familiar reality. The risk of course exists that the hall of mirrors may distort more than it reflects - or that the texts themselves may end up crushed under a mountain of professional and personal commentary. Even so, it is difficult not to imagine the ghost of Borges slyly exulting in the counter-labyrinth that now doubles the labyrinth of his own work.

To return finally to Ramonet's critique, it may be added that some today feel we are living in a time when mainstream media increasingly push the message of "pensée unique" ("single thought"), of one-dimensional goodthink and sanitised, centrally-approved orthodoxies. In these circumstances, the Internet has emerged to meet the need for expression of alternative positions which are not those of governments or multinational companies. The attitudes of journalists such as Ignacio Ramonet, who, while quite justifiably stigmatising the whole phenomenon of "pensée unique," simultaneously impugn the "unscientific" nature of the citizens' speech that now exists on the Internet, may, perhaps, not be totally unfree of what Freud once named the "professional complex" - in this case, the notion, surely eminently dubious today, that only professional journalists and intellectuals have the "right" to make public comment on the great issues of the time. If today's cyberuniverse is a Library of Babel, it is a library which you who read and I who write are building up each day, with our own hands and minds.

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

The first version of this essay appeared on the Internet in the <rec.arts.books> newsgroup in 1999. A Greek translation of that version was published in the electronic magazine *Saturnalia* (No 5, Summer 2000): <<http://users.otenet.gr/~kondel/Xxirimata/tikanoumeedo/tikanoumeedo.html>>. A second version was published in 2000 on the *Modern Word* website at: <www.themodernword.com/borges/borges_papers_rollason2.html>. A Portuguese translation of that (second) version appeared in print as "A Biblioteca de Babel de Borges: Precursora da Internet?" (*Farol* [Viana do Castelo], No 13, May 2000, 8-11), and on-line at: <www.deb.min-edu.pt/revista/revista6>. The present third version was revised and updated in July 2003.

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¹ Ramonet, "Sur l'Internet, "une rumeur et une info se valent".

² References are to the first edition of Ramonet's book.

³ *Libération*, editorial remark appended to Ramonet, "Sur l'Internet".

⁴ Ramonet, *La Tyrannie de la communication*, 67.

⁵ Ramonet, *La Tyrannie*, 109.

⁶ Ramonet, *La Tyrannie*, 192.

⁷ Ramonet, "Sur l'Internet".

⁸ Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, 280 and 351.

⁹ Cited in Rollason, "Encontro com José Saramago no Parlamento Europeu".

¹⁰ Saramago, *Todos os Nomes*, 13.

¹¹ References to the Spanish text are to the republication in the volume *Ficciones* (Madrid: Alianza, 1971, 89-100); the English translation used is that published in the Borges anthology *Labyrinths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, 78-86). The quotations from "La Biblioteca de Babel"/"The Library of Babel" that follow are from those editions, *passim*.

¹² Ramonet, "Sur l'Internet".

¹³ Tay Shi'an, "Uses and Adaptations of the Library of Babel".

¹⁴ *The Jorge Luis Borges Center for Studies & Documentation*, site maintained by the University of Aarhus, Denmark: <www.hum.au.dk/romansk/borges/english.htm>.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Pineda Cachero, "Literatura, Comunicación y Caos".

¹⁶ See, for instance, Allen, "Genes And Memes".