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### THE 'INFINITE' LIBRARY: THE ANTIPHILOSOPHER AT BABEL

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### Abstract

The problem of accommodating the theoretical idea of infinity-within-finitude is a potent and recurrent theme in most of Jorge Luis Borges' work. While this single problematic has had diverse and often varied manifestations—some of it embedded within the very fabric of language and narratology—this paper tries to read "The Library of Babel" by Borges as a particular, and iconic instance of expounding the 'inherently antiphilosophic' aesthetic of Borges' oeuvre as a whole, creating tangible space for him in the line of philosophers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Alain Badiou and Bruno Bosteels. As a consequence, it also uses the story as a site for exemplification for Borges' own exhortation of the 'fictive' over the 'scientific' in the broader scheme of critical engagements.

"I look on them as infinite, elemental fulfillers of a very ancient pact to multiply the world, as in the act of generation, sleepless and dangerous" —Jorge Luis Borges, "Mirrors" (105)

In Michel Foucault's "Language to Infinity" is recounted an exemplary tale from Homer's Odyssey: Odysseus, on his way home, is faced with a seemingly never-ending series of menaces which threaten him with death. Yet each time, he escapes this well affirmed certitude, the close to obligatory stance that Death presents him, through an intricate description of the ways in which he is able to avert death. And even so, the moment Odysseus begins to speak of his own guile to avert them, the dangers return, ready to push him over the line that separates this life from the next. The delicate balance that is maintained in the epic between life, death and the illusory power of language remains, for Foucault, an apt illustration of the "infinite resourcefulness of speech". The gift of language that the gods

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grant the mortals help them, as it were, to infinitely defer the moment of impending death that is about to engulf them. And this is all the more evident when Odysseus faces a country bard who sings his tale to him, but one in which his death, perhaps in no less grandiose a manner, is recounted. It is as if Odysseus, through the web of language is brought before himself by the power of narration through the selfsame language; and this is a self he cannot (or would not agree to, at least for the present) recognize. Therefore, he in turn informs the country bard of his own true identity, affirming his own life that has not yet reached its end. And finally, it becomes a matter of no less irony when we, readers, discover that Odysseus' tale was to made immortal by the songs of this very bard, for whom, the hero is already as good as dead and his deeds have become legendary. For Odysseus, the hero who remembers the tale of his own life, the bard's tale is a worthy counterpoint wherein his impending death in the real world is averted through language and his fictional death, though yet unforeseen, seems to outlive his 'real' death (Foucault, "Language to Infinity", 53-77)

Language, when faced with death—which is also the symbol for its extinction within the human consciousness—inevitably defers death. It looks inward, and is thus self-reflexively turned towards the point where it first began—from a birth preceded by a necessary death—and was stretched through life up to this point. The process is endlessly renewed until the whole of our being tends to become trapped within an endless maze, a labyrinth of language from which there is no escape. Perhaps it is not incidental that the "essence" of language is an originary breach in the order of its signification. Any act of signification consists of one signifier pointing to an endless series of other signifiers pointing to yet another series ad infinitum. Therefore, all human enunciation is essentially a 'reduplication' and to carry the argument one step forward, all language is auto-representational in nature in so far as it always fails to unveil meaning completely; but paradoxically, positions itself so as to assert its own 'being' in the interim.

i. The Limits of Language: Borges as Antiphilosopher

An iconic essay by Bruno Bosteels forms the general body of the de-tour I shall take to arrive at a shift in the Borgesian aesthetics of linguistic infinity—one from language to theme, but only as a structural decoy based on futility—as well as placing him as one of the key antiphilosopher figures in the general background of the "linguistic turn" in modernity. Bosteels quotes Borges, describing himself as "simply a man of letters" or as "an Argentine adrift in the sea of metaphysics". In an interview with Jean de Mileret Borges says, "Because they want to make me into a philosopher and a thinker. But it is certain that I repudiate all systematic thinking because it always tends to mislead." (Borges, interview with Jean Milleret)

Yet, Bosteel's precise achievement lies in showing that a rejection of all systematic philosophy in Borges is carried out in an astonishingly systematic way. (Bosteels, 'Borges as Antiphilosopher')

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This organized system of linguistic anti-positioning to philosophy, which Bosteel, following Alan Badiou, aligns to a school of antiphilosophers can be seen as helpful in understanding the Borgesian canon. Heraclitus, Saint Paul, Pascal, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and the early Wittgenstein are a few of the eminent figures who appear in Badiou's genealogy of antiphilosophers. Badiou's ideas on the antiphilosophical position of Wittgenstein perhaps need to be spelt out clearly first, before one can approach the question of the Borgesian conception of artistry, and by extension, his conception of the universe into a wider paradigm of antiphilosophy. As a term, "antiphilosophy" was coined by Jacques lacan, which tried to determine an intermediate position-both inside as well outside-with regard to the claims of truth that has largely guided the course of philosophical enquiry since its inception in ancient Greece. Bosteel himself reads Badiou's early work Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy as approaching the question of "what constitutes antiphilosophy in an attempt to recapture the project of philosophy from the hands of its antiphilosophical rivals". What constitutes antiphilosophy, is for Badiou, its difference from philosophy, with regard to the latter's "truth" claim. While philosophy is dedicated to "say" or "unveil" truth, antiphilosophy concerns itself to unveil the "unsayable" in favour of more conventional, axiomatic truths.

In Badiou's reading of Wittgenstein, three operations are used to understand antiphilosophy. All of these three operations are based upon Wittgenstein's distinction between "sense" and "nonsense" in philosophy. In Wittgenstein's TractatusLogico-Philosophicus, the logical construction of a philosophical system has a purpose—to find the limits of world, thought and language; in other words, to distinguish between sense and nonsense. The possibility of representation or picturing is the determinant to the understanding of "sense". The bedeutung (reference/meaning) is essential for him in the conception of names, but they can only be held to be valid in the broader context of propositions which have a logical form in the natural world. Only factual, documented states of being (those closely aligned to physical science) can therefore be clearly represented or picturised, and therefore have "sense". A large number of "other" statements fall outside the boundaries of "sense" and are therefore, devoid of it. They may include strictly logical propositions, tautologies and contradictions which form the limit of "sense" and hence, also of language. They are, in Wittgenstein's terms, "senseless" (sinnlos).

Now, three of the operations that distinguish antiphilosophy can be summarized as follows:

i. The first is antiphilosophy's "deposing of the category of truth; an unraveling of the pretensions of philosophy as a theory" (75). For Wittgenstein, the singular problematic of philosophical propositions and questions is not that they are false, but rather that they are nonsensical, or deprived of sense. According to Catherine Ryan, "given that Wittgenstein also defines thought as a proposition with sense, Badiou infers that Wittgenstein holds philosophy to be non-thought."

ii. Secondly, antiphilosophy begins with the recognition that thought "cannot be reduced to its discursive appearance, its propositions, its fallacious theoretical exterior" (75). Philosophical fabulations of truth are therefore no more than "mere clothing" that embellish elements that are situated beyond the realm of the sayable, the domain of "non-thought". Philosophy attempts "to bend non-thought by force into the theoretical proposition" (79), and then pretend that such ideas have an ontological or essential validity.

iii. Thirdly, antiphilosophy "overcomes" philosophy by undoing its nonsensical search "to incarnate 'the problems of life' in theoretical propositions" (79). The antiphilosophical act consists in letting "what there is" beyond language show itself, in trying to break the despotism of philosophy to reduce both thought and non-thought into the domain of the "sayable". (Badiou, Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy, 73-111)

From the above Bosteel identifies four cardinal features of antiphilosophy. These can be enumerated as follows:

a. The assumption that the limits of language coincide with the limits of the world. In other words, the "non-thought", though not necessarily false, is a strictly contingent idea that, if needed, may be used to understand and apprehend the world of "sense", but once its object has been adequately fulfilled, it has to be rightfully thrown away.

b. Second, the reduction of "truth" to being nothing more than a linguistic or rhetorical effect, which is also the outcome of historically and culturally specific language games. It goes without saying here, that the "language game" in each particular instance is governed by a set of implicitly understood "rules".

c. Thirdly, an appeal to what lies just beyond language, or at the upper limit of the sayable, as a domain of meaning irreducible to truth, and

d. A "radical act" necessitates our having access to this domain, "such as the religious leap of faith or the revolutionary break, the intense thrill of which would disqualify in advance any systematic theoretical or conceptual elaboration." (86)

Bosteel calls the act of reducing the world to the limits of language the "constructivist or nominalist side" of antiphilosophy, as shown by the rhetorical weapon of a metaphor that captures, although only imperfectly (the "pure perfection" is more ideational and rest more within the domain of the non-thought) the mind-boggling vastness of the world—a book, or a library with a logically finite (but understandably infinite; or "transfinite") collection of books. In his essay "On the Cult of Books" Borges plays with the idea of a book sufficing for

the universe. He draws a distinction between two opposed but similarly originating teleologies—"one speaks of telling the story and the other of books". The examination of the 'Cult of Books' first deals with the radical distrust of the book as an "aesthetic justification for evils" in an a predominantly "oral age" where the written word was only an inferior (and dangerous) rendering of the spoken one, and later proceeds to a conception of the book "as an end in itself, not as a means to an end." Therefore, one can choose read Borges' idea of the Holy Scripture as an Absolute Book, superimposed upon the notion of an Infinite Divinity:

"Superimposed on the notion of a God who speaks with men in order to command them to do something or to forbid them to do something was that of the Absolute Book, of a Sacred Scripture. For Muslims, the Koran...is not merely a work of God, like men's souls or the universe; it is one of the attributes of God, like His Eternity or his Rage." (Borges, "On the Cult of Books", 360)

The 'Mother of the Book' is deposited in Heaven and is therefore seen by George Sale as nothing other than a Platonic archetype of the Book that is to be pronounced with the tongue and remembered in the heart. At best, it is only an imperfect vehicle of the originary Ideal, but suffices, for the present in reduplicating all its functions—

"The world, according to Mallarme, exists for a book; according to Bloy, we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world: more exactly, it is the world." (362).

ii. Reduplicating abAeterno: 'The Total Library' and 'The Library of Babel'

In an essay he had written for the El Hogar magazine in 1939, Borges ascribes his "first inkling of the problem of infinity" to a large biscuit tin. On one side of the tin was an image of a "Japanese scene", but at the corner of the same image, the "same biscuit tin reappeared with the same picture, and in it the same picture again, and so on (at least by implication) infinitely..."(Borges, 'When Fiction Lives in Fiction', 160)

This same mise en abyme or recursion which holds good in case of pictorial reduplication is carried over by Borges to Cervantes' inclusion of a short novel in the Quixote, Apuleius' insertion of the fable of Cupid and Psyche in The Golden Ass and to a dizzying array of redoubling techniques that constitute The Arabian Nights. The first translator of Borges into French, Roger Caillois, located this thematic of infinity in Borges to be represented most suitably by the figure of the labyrinth in which the investigating subject, as Oswaldo Zavala writes, "is lost forever, searching for an exit that may exist, but that is not for him to find. The supposed presence of the exit eluding the prisoner of the labyrinth can be a nightmare but also the ultimate dream of the creator, for the possibilities of movement and exploration are, again, infinite" (Oswaldo Zavala, "Literature to Infinity: A Borgesian Genealogy of Contemporary Mexican Narrative", 125).For Caillois, the problem of infinity put forward in a story such as 'The Library of Babel' radically opens up the possibility of an equal number of writings and readings that could be carried out in the history of reading and writing.The

Borgesian universe of labyrinths then, would support an almost complete abjuring of responsibility on part of a delimited author who leaves his position of credit, as it has been, over time, invalidated as only a role that consists in a further rearrangement of words and metaphors (these being, after all, limited). Thus, Gerard Genette pays homage to Borges by reading his works as a challenge to the "prejudice" of authorship in the construction of a work.

However, we should also carefully delineate the possible outcomes of such a position in Borges' fiction. Whereas, in Genette, we find a eulogistic disposition to Borges' works for destabilizing the possibility of invention in authorship by the radical exhaustion of language, I would like to propose that 'The Library of Babel' challenges any form of closure that can be associated with a metaphysical certitude that posits the end of innovation in all possible forms. Genette writes,

"The Borgesian contracts the myth that anything is modern or classic, writing everything (that) is written in an even more ambitious formula, which would be close to everything is Written. The Library of Babel, which is abaeterno and contains "everything that can be expressed in any language," (is therefore) obviously confused with the Universe". (Gerard Genette, "La littératureselon Borges", 323-27)

We should be particularly careful in making such a conclusion, for reasons I will elaborate upon when I analyse the story. But perhaps first, we should look into 'The Total Library', which is sometimes read as a companion piece to 'The Library of Babel'. Borges explicitly acknowledges that the theme elaborated within the story can be traced back to many precursors, but the immediate source he had in mind was a 1901 story by Kurd Lasswitz titled "The Universal Library". In it, Borges designates the Utopia of the Total Library as having prefigured in many forms, namely the concept of Circular Time that owes its origins from Aristotle (who in turn attributes it Democritus and Leucippus). Borges mentions Theodor Wolff's books, The Race with the Tortoise which suggests that the idea is a derivation from Ramon Llull's thinking machine. Borges adds that it explicates the doctrine of the Eternal return that was adopted by the Stoics, Blanqui, the Pythagorreans and Nietzsche. After giving us a brief genealogy of the stages through which the idea originated, Borges rephrases a comment made by Huxley that the number of given signs in a language being limited, "so too is the number of their possible combinations or of their books'. Therefore, half a dozen monkeys, provided with typewriters, "would, in a few eternities, produce all the books in the British Museum." Therefore could Lewis Carroll, in his dream novel Sylvie and Bruno, arrive at the impasse that "Soon...literary men will not ask themselves, 'What book shall I write?' but 'Which book?" (Borges, 'The Total Library', 214-16)

The last one is an important theoretical corollary, which, when seen in the light of Genette's analysis, seems to posit the end of all writing. Yet Borges cleverly plays a double game

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within the boundaries of 'The Library of Babel' which challenges even this proposition, or at least, considers it as only one of the infinitude of possibilities that such a Library entails. At the very beginning of the story, 'The Library of Babel' the nameless narrator has told us that there exists a (at least fabled) connection between the Universe and the endless Library. The air shafts, low railings and the galleries are described thereafter in considerable detail. However, the first visible sign that casts doubt on the possibility of the library being truly endless is the presence of a mirror in the hallway:

"Men usually infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it really were, why this illusory duplication?) I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite..." (Borges, "The Library of Babel", 78)

The enigma of the mirror is resolved in two different ways by "men" and the "narrator" in question. The fact that both the narrator and the men have gathered a piece of information (that the Library is infinite) that has turned axiomatic is apparent from the very beginning. Beginning with that given premise, they resolve the apparent contradiction through their respective beliefs. But there are few more important axioms that follow: first, that the Library "exists abaeterno" (79) and therefore can be conceived as only the work of a God who is perfect, as opposed to Man, who is the "imperfect librarian" in that universe. A crucial point, which I think many past readings of the story have missed, is the fact that by a strained use of logic, Borges has already imprisoned us, the readers within the limits of the Library that is also the universe. Like the narrator, who accepts his imperfection and "prefers" to believe in the Library's infinity, readers are also accorded that same position in the epistemological order of the library as the various contesting groups of scholars and critics who repeatedly affirm and deny it over the ages. Therefore, any proposition made within the textual space of the story will be contingent and subject to doubts, as there is no outside of this Universe. The strategies of synecdoche and partial selection are to be noted here: the observable forms the reader is exposed to within the story are finite, geometrically ordered, limited sets which act as 'imperfections' to the theoretical notion of infinity which is given as "the universe" itself. But the equal 'imperfections' of the experiencing subject, from whose consciousness the story filters out to the reader essentially expands the liminally ambiguous notion of the "threshold" of apparently finite borders. The virtual "threshold" is always set at a distance from the subject who vainly tries to add up the resulting universes to arrive at a (yet) larger one.

The second axiom states that the "orthographical symbols are twenty-five in number" (80). This axiom is thought to have emerged out of a finding, made about three hundred years ago, "to formulate a general theory of the Library" and solve the problem of the "formless and chaotic nature of all books". For every statement that can be regarded as meaningful, there are a horde of "senseless cacophonies" (80). These "cacophonies" include verbal, visual as well as orthographical incoherencies. The abundance of such chaotic manifestations have led

generations of scholars to wonder at their meaning, and finally, through frustration, led to the emergence of a cult of 'unmeaning', whose librarians "repudiate the vain and superstitious custom of finding a meaning in books". The library has led to the formation and destabilisation of a number of other suppositions, adequately supported and refuted on either side, such as "these impenetrable books corresponded to past or remote languages" or the narrator's arriving at a proposition which is the result of an inevitable futility:

"All this, I repeat is true, but four hundred and ten pages of inalterable MCV's cannot correspond to any language, no matter how dialectal or rudimentary it may be." (80)

This brings us to a third premise, that "in the vast Library, there are no two identical books". One must remember that this is a premise devised by a fabled (an equally obscure) 'librarian of genius', who further developed a deductive inference that "the Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols (a number which, though extremely vast, is not infinite): in other words, all that is given to express, in all languages." (81). The parenthetical aside is crucial: the narrator cannot logically discern why the Library, inspite of having thought to possess an astronomical number of volumes, should be considered infinite. The precise problem here is the limit to knowledge that is imposed upon us all—author, reader, librarian et al—who repeatedly try to escape the infinite spiral of textual density that the Library holds, yet fail miserably each time Thus can we understand the narrator's admission that he uses the word 'infinite' not out of "rhetorical habit" but because "it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite" (82). However, Borges' thought-experiment must be taken warily-after all, it is not impossible to think of a library which has only one copy for each of its volumes, while the number of volumes are discernibly finite. This will bring us to the next axiom: "The Library is unlimited and cyclical". (84). Both sides of the "infinity question" are here addressed. Those who think the Library is finite do so from the supposition that the precise number of volumes, however monstrous, is not infinite after all. However, the inability to point out the final limit of the Library with a limited consciousness is precisely what makes the textual space so gigantic that it devours the experiencing subject within.

A taut dialectical tension prevails in the entire story, in the Hegelian sense, through the conflict between appearance (an astronomically large but finite Library) and essence (an Infinite Library which is like the unfathomable Universe, or better still, the Universe itself). In refuting the Kantian idea of the distinction between Form and Content, Hegel developed the idea of the Appearance "showing forth" the Thing-in-Itself. The latter continually move into or becomes the former and vice-versa. To reach Essence, which is traditionally considered as hidden beneath Appearance, one must go on penetrating the layers as one peels an onion. However, to think that there is a terminal point would be only a fallacy, the process consists of a continual probing of the "in-itself" in order to try to reach what lies beyond:

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"The Essence must appear or shine forth. It's shining or reflection in it is the suspension and translation of it to immediacy, which, while as reflection-into-self it is matter or subsistence, is also form, reflection-on-something-else, a subsistence which sets itself aside. To show or shine is the characteristic by which essence is distinguished from Being – by which it is essence; and it is this show which, when it is developed, shows itself, and is Appearance. Essence accordingly is not something beyond or behind appearance, but – just because it is the essence which exists – the existence is Appearance." (Hegel, "Shorter Logic" § 131)

The finite Library which appears to the reader at first, tends to become an Infinite one through the gradual unfolding of the story—the master Catalogue of catalogues ("which is the formula and perfect compendium of all the rest") eludes the unsuspecting reader as much as the elusive Man of the Book, the perfect librarian analogous to a God in that Universe. This is presented through a regressive method of induction, where in order to locate Book A, one must first look for its reference in Book B—which itself must be sought after in Book C—and so on, ad infinitum. Having known that the Library is logically finite, the reader engages himself in a search to reach the end, the frustration of which brings him back to suppose that the originary idea was perhaps, fallacious after all. A conception of the Library may thus emerge where not only it is Infinite owing to the limits imposed on its experiencing (imperfect) subjects, but also through its own self-referential cyclicality. The Library is Borges' equivalent of a monstrous Ouroboros, the ancient symbol of a serpent eating its own tail. The linguistic equivalent to this self-referentiality is also made manifest:

"No one can articulate a syllable which is not filled with tenderness and fear, which is not, in one of these languages, the powerful name of a god. To speak is to fall into tautology." (85) (my italics)

This notion of cyclicality is part of Borges' general use of the Doctrine of the Eternal Return, a cardinal concept used in the Ancient World which originated in Indian and Egyptian philosophy, from which it was taken up by the Pythagoreans and the Stoics, a greater discussion of which will not properly befit the scope of the present paper.

However, the greatest 'problem' in the Library is its own state as a cornucopian matrix of reduplication. Although each of the volumes in the Library is unique and therefore irreplaceable, for each perfect copy, "there are always several hundred thousand imperfect facsimiles: works which differ only in a letter or a comma" (83). This fact is sufficient to induce a general delirium and phases of heightened madness and frenzy within the Library, such as the "Purifiers' degradations" where the agitators resolved to destroy the plethora of 'imperfect' volumes in order that the only 'perfect' copy be preserved. From this point, the Library, as a space of constant flux, endangers the stability generated by stable meanings and orthographical coherences, echoing the Biblical origin of its name— a Tower that stood as a

hubristic act of defiance against God, who "confounded the language of all the Earth." (Genesis 11:7)

And yet, there is a definite sense of Divine Order in the ensuing chaos. As the story ends, the notion of an eternal traveler trying to traverse the length of the Library is invoked, only to conclude that he would come back to the point from which he started from and find the volumes arranged in similar disorder. This is the theoretical limit on Borges' notion of infinite linguistic possibilities of combination. However, judging from the fact that the number of possible outcomes in the events of permutation and combination are incalculably immense, the probability of a particular event recurring mathematically tends to zero. In this sense, the Library could be considered as a point of departure within the space of textualisation in the general history of books, producing an endless number of possibilities. It is the sheer variety of available detours one may take within the Library that renders it open to antiphilosophical strains; and which, by the same token, frustrates organised philosophy's quest for the infinite through its limitation in its very obverse, the quasi-finitude of geometrically ordered spaces of the cubicles and the hexagons.

In its deliberately staunch refusal to seek out the 'truth value' of its 'final' propositions obtained through deductive (and inductive) reasoning, 'The Library of Babel' frustrates any attempt to limit knowledge (connaissance) as derivative of organised, and therefore, carefully delineated systems of thought. Instead, the verity of its claims to the 'antiphilosophic' is given by its radical abandonment of reasonable discourse, somewhat akin to a Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith'—the radical act in antiphilosophy—which seeks satisfaction in the credibility of the fictive over the philosophical. Bosteel's own course taken here is to stress the pre-eminence of the 'aesthetic (f)act' (el hechoestético) which is seen in so many of Borges' shorter essays, most notably 'The Wall and the Books', where Borges gives it as "the imminence of a revelation which does not happen".

It would be certainly be irate to state that 'The Library of Babel' is the only extant Borges story which so strongly reveals his 'antiphilosophic' strains. There are at least stories such as 'The Yellow Rose' and 'Dreamtigers' to elucidate more on the 'fictive' in a much more elaborate manner—among others such as 'The Aleph' or 'The Garden of Forking Paths'— which points to the greater satisfaction of the 'will to fiction' as a better means of survival against the forces of collective oblivion. The 'aesthetic (f)act'which Bosteel underlines informs, at any rate, the whole of the Borgesian poetic oeuvre. Yet, in its outright refusal to accept systematic thinking, and in its wilful uses of ambiguity and equivocation in the order of exposition, 'The Library of Babel' debunks the prematurity of metaphysical certitude to a degree that has not been paralleled very often. It hovers around painfully, obnoxiously, in that eternally deferred imperative of unfulfilled instances that push back knowledge where 'satisfaction' truly can generate:

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"This "act" or "fact" does not produce a new truth, but what matters is rather its effect on the subject, the "thrill," which in principle disqualifies any systematic theoretical or conceptual purpose." (Bosteels, 'Borges as Antiphilosopher')

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For the Lasswitx story, see <u>http://eduscapes.com/history/contemporary/UniversalLibrary.PDF</u>. Lasswitz's story is not the only example of the idea of a Universal Library. The idea is at least as old as Conrad Gessner'sBibliotheca universalis(1545).

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