Fact (in Fiction)

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In the final section of his 1962 collection, *Labyrinths*, Jorge Luis Borges presents us with his “Parables.” These pithy essays, brief entertainments of cavernous concepts that could spawn lengthy treatises but are granted at most two and a half pages, rest on intentionally familiar foundations. Borges builds his postulates from established figures and fables, from Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* to the gods of ancient Greek and Egyptian mythology to William Shakespeare. But viewed through his narrative lens, these well-known people and stories become unrecognizable, disfigured by Borges’s dismantling of their most identifiable traits. In “Ragnarök,” the ancient gods, typically painted as heroic paragons of the human condition, become hideous, degenerate mutes, with “[v]ery low foreheads, yellow teeth, stringy mulatto or Chinese moustaches and thick bestial lips” (277). Still more unsettling, they become mortal and are “joyfully killed” with the ignominiously mundane bullets of “heavy revolvers” by those who formerly revered them (277). In “Everything and Nothing,” Shakespeare’s plays, the crown jewels of the English canon, become “only a bit of coldness . . . dream[s] dreamt by no one” (284). Borges’s readers are driven to question who this author is, that he feels himself qualified to so desecrate strains of human thought and tradition that have survived for centuries.

His reply would probably be similar to the one that the God in “Everything and Nothing” grants Shakespeare after his death: “Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one” (285). The philosophical upshot of this endlessly paradoxical statement is that we all dream our own reality. Not objectivity but subjectivity molds what we ground ourselves in. The past constructs of human imagination that Borges toys with, even the facts and figures of history itself, are not untouchable golden idols before which to kneel and pray, but rather malleable passageways through which our thoughts may bang and blow to great effect. Reality is a figment of the imagination, developed by humans to remedy the
inescapable aimlessness that stems from consciousness of our finite existence. We clutch at the idea of a single reality, a source of truth independent of perspective, to give ourselves a purpose and direction that transcend each individual life. We create a passing of time, a universal measure of human progress, dichotomizing human existence into what was real then and what is real now: our past and our present. We constantly seek to confirm our existence, establishing bureaucracies to document births, deaths, and all the milestones in between. In doing so, we try to stave off the horrifying knowledge that, despite our efforts, most of us will be forgotten forever.

Borges illustrates this human thirst for solidity of self and suggests its futility in his short story “The Circular Ruins.” The protagonist, an unnamed sorcerer, aims to leave some sign of his existence by developing progeny “created in thought” (77). Completing this task, “[h]is life’s purpose,” promises to grant him “victory and peace” in the knowledge of his own ability to affect his surroundings—an ability that would offer proof of his existence (76). He succeeds in dreaming up a boy, “his dream child,” a son impervious to flame, whom the sorceror accustoms to reality only to discover that he is himself similarly incombustible and, therefore, another’s dreamed companion (76). In seeking to prove himself real by creating another, the sorceror uncovers the unreal, insubstantial basis for his own existence. In actual fact (or actual fiction), each of us is just “a mere appearance, dreamt by another” (77).

Borges does offer a potential solution to this seeming dissolution of human significance. In “The Circular Ruins,” he touches upon the full potential of man’s creative instinct, averring in the words of his magician of dreams that “the effort to mould the incoherent and vertiginous matter dreams are made of [is] the most arduous task a man [can] undertake, though he might penetrate all enigmas of the upper and lower orders” (74). Borges speaks through this character as he is each of his characters in turn, just as the Shakespeare of “Everything and Nothing” has “been so many men in vain” (285). Through “controlled hallucinations,” Shakespeare succeeds in “being so many kings who die by the sword and so many suffering lovers who converge, diverge and melodiously expire” (285). This ability to adopt many identities seems, in Borges’s opinion, to be the mark of a life well spent: one lived in the active exercise of our boundless faculty for imagination. In this way, an individual can live a thousand lifetimes, and can hope that, together, they will form a sign of her existence that endures beyond the span of any single life.

Borges imbues humanity with the obligation to be actively imaginative. He himself dutifully adheres to this philosophy, indulging in the complex and
the impossible as tools to embellish and confuse the realities he is shaping, blurring the boundaries between the fictional and the real. In “The Library of Babel,” Borges illustrates a view of the universe as an “unlimited and cyclical” grid of hexagonal rooms (85). These rooms contain bookshelves in whose books, it is believed, every possible permutation of letters, punctuation, and spaces, can be found. Borges describes the society that lives and dies among the infinite shelves, every generation struggling to interpret a world that seems to mean everything, and therefore nothing. A similar community, portrayed in “The Lottery of Babylon,” relies on a mystical lottery to determine its course to such an extent that Babylon becomes “nothing else than an infinite game of chance” balanced by the two opposing forces: those who believe in the lottery absolutely and those who maintain “that it has never existed and will not exist” (61). These two stories exemplify the scrambled relationship Borges aims to nurture between “the world of the reader and the world of the book” (“Partial Magic” 229). He allows the book’s world to overlap in some ways with the outside world, threading in commonplace elements like lotteries and libraries, and lets it diverge completely from this reality in other areas; the lotteries become tools of fatalism, the libraries analogies for the infinite, inconceivable nature of the universe. As he states in his essay “Partial Magic in the Quixote,” every piece of fiction is “an ideal plane inserted into the realm of reality” (229).

This ideal plane becomes Borges’s playground, a space where he can entertain every possible manifestation of the nonsensical, unimpeded by logic or likelihood. He plays off the reader’s expectations, interweaving the real with the much more seductive surreal. The story “Death and the Compass,” for instance, opens as a typical murder mystery. Borges manipulates his reader into admiring and trusting the Detective Erik Lönnrot, describing him as “a pure reasoner,” an “adventurer,” and a “gambler” and contrasting him with the seemingly simple and unimaginative Inspector Treviranus (106). Borges plays on the topos created by duos like Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, tricking the reader into accepting Lönnrot as the archetypal investigator and, therefore, incontestably right. At the opening of the story, Lönnrot proclaims that “reality hasn’t the least obligation to be interesting . . . reality may avoid that obligation [but] hypotheses may not,” a statement that crucially echoes Borges’s literary technique (107). Unfortunately, Lönnrot’s obsessive pursuit of intricate explanations for a sequence of murders leads him ever further away from their true cause into an inescapable labyrinth of deceptive patterns and symmetries. On one level, “Death and the Compass” deals with the illusion of order, symmetry, and elegance in a world of random and chaotic
crime. On another level, order and symmetry are re-established through the
figure of Lönnrot’s enemy Scharlach, who relies on Lönnrot’s penchant for
elaborate patterns to construct a sophisticated trap for the detective. While
ostensibly moving backwards to decipher the messages of the past killings,
Lönnrot is actually moving forward by unconsciously collaborating in his
own murder. Past turns into future, hunter into prey, and punishment into
revenge. Through these reversals, Borges again subverts the reader’s precon-
ceptions about reality. His right to this literary license comes by way of his
willingness to use the creative aspect of his mind. We are all within our rights
to manipulate and distort our reality, like Detective Lönnrot, through the
refractive prism of our own imagination; some, like Borges, use this distor-
tion to create art.

Borges’s complex love affair with art as a process of the mind and eventu-
ally a tool of history is best elucidated in “The Secret Miracle,” a story
about a Jewish playwright coming to terms with his impending execution and
the fate of his unfinished play. Here, as in many of his writings, Borges plays
with time, imagining a reality in which God is able to grant the playwright a
year of subjective time to finish his play within the instant between the com-
mand to shoot and the firing squad’s execution of the protagonist. Notably,
the play in question is called, among other titles, “Vindication of Eternity,” a
name that indicates the immense significance this work has for the author
(118). It will be the only proof of his existence, the only trace of his life left
behind. Through art, he has achieved eternity. In an interview, Borges echoes
this idea beautifully, stating that “the task of art is to transform what is con-
tinuously happening to us, to transform all these things into symbols, into
music, into something which can last in man’s memory” (Kral).

Through this process of art and dreams and imagination, our world
endures. This realization represents Borges’s chief preoccupation in this
anthology. Beyond the stunningly complex plotlines and beautiful prose,
through stories where the individual elements fit together as delicately and
perfectly as tessellated tiles, yet stand alone as gracefully as the Venus de Milo,
runs a steady undercurrent of metaphysics. Borges is obsessed with how we
exist on this earth. More specifically, his stories explore the extent to which
we can control that existence and evidence it through the physical products
of our own imagination. Borges’s texts are rife with allusions to abstruse texts
by thinkers—some real, some imagined—like Diodorus Siculus (“Paradiso”
274), Silas Haslam (“TLón” 29) and Peter the Deacon (“Warrior” 159). He
recalls (or invents) these texts, makes use of them, and thus makes them etern-
al. The gods of ancient mythology are still a part of human consciousness
because of their mark on literature. Shakespeare will never be forgotten because of his plays. Cervantes’ frail knight, Don Quixote, is constantly referenced, having even produced the adjective “quixotic.” Ironically, we can only be remembered by spinning tangible tapestries from the intangible threads of our dreams. Fiction, not fact, is the author of history.

WORKS CITED

   “Death and the Compass.” 106-17.
   “Everything and Nothing.” 284-86.
   “The Library of Babel.” 78-86.
   “Paradiso, XXXI, 108.” 274-75.
   “Partial Magic in the Quixote.” 228-31.
   “Ragnarök.” 276-77.
   “Story of the Warrior and the Captive.” 159-63.
