Depicting Borgesian Possible Worlds

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The main purpose of this essay is to show that the philosophical concept of a possible world is part of Borges's fiction: particularly in "The Garden of Forking Paths." The main thesis is as follows: possible worlds are part of the narrative content of the two stories thereby involved, the main one and the novel embedded in it, namely, the book-labyrinth owed to Ts'ui Pên; moreover, the concept of a possible world is used in the main story to explain the meaning of the embedded novel. In this sense, the concept can be taken to play an explanatory role that is similar to the one it plays in semantic theories, and more specifically, in those that appeal to possible worlds in their account of fictional discourse. Finally, the analysis of the use of the possible world concept will enable me to put forward a hypothesis about Borges's conception of the relationship between metaphysics and fantastical literature

CR: The New Centennial Review, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2011, pp. 113–xxx, ISSN 1532-687x.

1.

Philosophers, as is known, have invented possible worlds to account for the meaning of some sentences whose truth (or falsity) does not depend—or, at least, does not *exclusively* depend—on what happens in the real and effective world. As an example, the sentence:

(1) 4 – 2 = 2

describes not a particular fact of the world, which might not have existed—such as the fact that this morning I bought four apples, or the fact that the solar system has nine planets—but something that could not have been otherwise. Philosophers will then say that (1), as well as many other sentences similar to it, is true under all possible circumstances of the world, or in other terms, that there is no possible world in which it is false. Accordingly, a *necessary* truth is defined as a sentence that is true in relation to all possible worlds, whereas a sentence that is true only in relation to the real and effective world will be considered a *contingent* truth. Another kind of example is provided by this sentence:

(2) Beethoven might have died before writing the Seventh Symphony.

Such an example describes not a particular fact of the real world, but rather a state of affairs that might have happened but did not. Once again, according to the philosophers, we are dealing with a sentence that is made true by an alternative circumstance of the world, or in other terms, by a merely possible world, one that is different from the real one. Consequently, positing such worlds allows us to understand and evaluate sentences—more specifically, counterfactual conditionals—like the following:

(3) If the Argentine territory had been colonized by the British, there would have been no crossing of races.

(4) If Pedro had been born in China, he would have been a Buddhist.

These represent the kind of sentences that we utter when making conjectures about the consequences of ways of being and behaving that are different from the actual ones. As is thus clear, the concept of a possible world can play an explanatory role of intuitive notions such as *necessity, possibility, contingency,* and *impossibility*—those that philosophers call "modal notions"—and indeed that is the role it has been assigned to it within the framework of some formal theories about natural language.

Moreover, some philosophers have appealed to possible worlds to explain the meaning and truth value of a particular kind of sentence, namely, that belonging in fictional discourse, such as:

(5) Firmly clutching his knife, which he perhaps would not know how to wield, Dahlmann went out into the plain(Borges 1993b, 142).[1]

Such sentences pose the following problem: if "Dahlmann" does not designate anything, any existent entity, it does not seem to be possible to assign either meaning or truth value to any sentence containing that name. The nineteenth-century philosopher Alexius Meinong decided to increase the ontological commitment by including *nonexistent* objects, to which fictional names, among other empty ones, were taken to refer (1960). For those who like possible worlds, there is the alternative of considering Dahlmann to be, instead of a nonexistent object, a merely possible one (Lewis 1983). Accordingly, to continue with the example, "The South" may be interpreted as a story about an alternative possible world, a fictional one, in relation to which the sentences of the story can be considered to be true.

A relevant question, in relation to possible worlds, thus presents itself: How many individual features must be preserved in another possible world for the corresponding individual to be the same as the actual one? That is, what are the identity conditions of an individual across not only times but the whole *spectrum* of his/her/its possible circumstances? Must Dahlmann preserve all the features that Borges has ascribed to him in "The South" to keep being who he is? Might there be a world of circular ruins where I, actually a woman, were a man dreamt by a magician, in turn merely the main character of another man's dream?Another interesting question is: Are

possible worlds discovered or merely stipulated or, rather, invented? Some philosophers tend to think that possible worlds exist independently of our minds and are discovered when grasped by them; some others, instead, think that it is our finite minds that posit their existence. It is worth noticing that the question at stake has also been asked concerning abstract entities of different kinds, such as numbers and works of art. For some, numbers exist in a Platonic heaven; knowing them amounts to discovering them and grasping a reality that exists independently of our thought. For others, by contrast, knowing numbers and thinking about them is making them up. Something analogous can be claimed concerning art works; there are people who think that when Pierre Ménard wrote his version of *Don Quixote,* he was discovering a preexistent, universal reality. Most people tend to think, though, that the existence of the book strongly depends on Ménard's existence, and ultimately on Borges's, the author of the story about Ménard.[2]

To summarize, in the philosophical study of language, the concept of a possible world is a theoretical concept that serves to explain the meaning of sentences—especially of those containing modal expressions, but not only them, as we have seen. Consequently, possible worlds can be said to be useful in formulating a semantic theory for natural language. Since any theory about language has to be itself formulated in language, the sentences of the theory can be said to belong to a level of language that is higher than the level of natural language, namely, a metalanguage. In other words, possible worlds belong in the metalanguage characteristic of semantic theorizing.

2.

There cannot be any doubt as to whether the concept of a possible world appears in the narrative content of the two stories contained in "The Garden of Forking Paths." In the main one, Stephen Albert refers to some of his possible destinies:

> Differing from Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not think of time as absolute and uniform. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel

> times. This web of time—the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries—embraces *every* possibility. We do not exist in most of them. In some you exist and not I, while in others I do, and you do not, and in yet others both of us exist. In this one, in which chance has favoured me, you have come to my gate. In another, you, crossing the garden, have found me dead. In yet another, I say these very same words, but am an error, a phantom. (Borges 1993a, 77)

As far as the embedded story is concerned, it is clear that alternative possible worlds are also part of the narrative content, as shown by the disqualifying remarks made by Yu Tsun: "Those of the blood of Ts'ui Pên . . . still curse the memory of that monk. Such a publication was madness. The book is a shapeless mass of contradictory rough drafts. I examined it once upon a time: the hero dies in the third chapter, while in the fourth he is alive" (Borges 1993a, 73). Now, what I take to be characteristic of Borges's story is not only the fact that it is possible to identify a philosophical concept playing a central role in the narrative, but the further fact that the philosophical concept in question is given an *explanatory* use—as is clear from the previous fragments.

Therefore, the two stories, the main one and the Chinese novel embedded in it, can be interpreted as being related to each other in different ways. On one hand, they are related at the fictional level, given that Yu Tsun is Ts'ui Pên's great-grandson, and Albert is an expert in his work. But, on the other hand, they are also related to each other in a more theoretical way: in Borges's main story, the embedded novel is explicitly explained, and it is in the explanation thereby offered that the concept of a possible world plays a central role. The main story provides us with a theoretical account of the content of the embedded novel; it may even be said that the story contains a semantic reflection that makes use of the concept of a possible world that is analogous to its philosophical use. In that sense, the concept of a possible world is not a constitutive part of the meaning of the book-labyrinth, but it instead serves to explain from outside of it, at a metalinguistic level, certain central aspects of its meaning. It is in terms of this concept that we can identify the world of the embedded novel ,in relation to which its sentences can be evaluated as true.

3.

Moreover, as also shown by the above-quoted fragments, in making such use of the concept of a possible world, Borges presents us with a metaphysical problem that is also characteristic of philosophical theories: the problem of determining which worlds are possible ones, namely, whether there is a set of conditions that a world must satisfy to be considered a possible world, and hence a world that can be taken to be "real in fiction." In particular, there is the issue of *whether or not the metaphysics of fiction allows for contradictory worlds.*

Regarding this point, there seems to be a significant difference between the main story and the embedded novel. The former seems to determine a privileged world that makes its sentences true: the one in which the main action takes place. At this narrative level, all the different destinies are neither claimed nor presumed to be real, as they are described as mere possibilities. It is only in Yu Tsun's feverish mind that the alternative destinies coexist for a brief moment of time, as when he perceives the garden as if it were densely populated by his many different possible "personalities" as much as Albert's. "Once again I sensed the pullulation of which I have already spoken. It seemed to me that the dew-damp garden surrounding the house was infinitely saturated with invisible people. All were Albert and myself, secretive, busy and multiform in other dimensions of time. I lifted my eyes and the short nightmare disappeared" (1993a, 77). A bit ahead, however, it is clear a privileged world is determined by the story, which is made explicit by Yu Tsun's misleading reply: "The future exists now. . . . But I am your friend. Can I take another look at the letter?" (78). This reply illustrates that only destiny allows us to select one among the many possible worlds as the real world of the fiction, as the world in which Borges's story belongs—namely, the world that makes it true.

That world, if compared to our real and effective world, the actual one, ceases to be real and effective; it is only "real in fiction," it is the world *considered as real* in the fiction, which is different from *being real simpliciter.* The similarity with some philosophical conceptions, noted in the previous section, should be clear enough: from the above-mentioned perspective, the sentences of a fictional discourse must be evaluated relative to the world of

the fiction as a merely possible one. More precisely, we could think that each fictional story determines a set of such worlds, all those in which the fictional story is told as a historic one, namely, as a story about real facts. To put it differently, there may be different alternative circumstances, different from one another, under which Borges's main story would be true.

In contrast, the embedded novel—the book-labyrinth—does not seem to determine a uniquely privileged world that makes it true. Moreover, it cannot be considered that the thereby alluded possible worlds are merely slight variations of one another. Indeed, far from that, there are incompatibilities among some of them, as for instance, the one in which the main character dies and the one in which he survives. As explained by Albert,

> In all fiction, when a man is faced with alternatives he chooses one at the expense of the others. In the most unfathomable Ts'ui Pên, *he chooses—simultaneously—all of them.* He thus *creates* various futures, various times which start others that will in their turn branch out and bifurcate in other times. *This is the cause of the contradictions in the novel.*Fang, let us say, has a secret. A stranger knocks at his door. Fang makes up his mind to kill him. Naturally, there are various possible outcomes. Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, both can be saved, both can die and so on and so on. *In Ts'ui Pên´s work, all the possible solutions occur,* each one being the point of departure for other bifurcations. (1993a, 75; the first, third, and fourth emphases are mine)

4.

At this point, we may ask ourselves the following question: *Is it possible for a fictional story to determine as real a set of mutually contradictory worlds?* Notice that *prima facie* the analysis of Borges's story may seem to suggest an affirmative answer to that question, since a sentence such as

(6) Our hero is dead.

uttered in the context of the novel turns out to be both true and false, in that the hero dies in some of the worlds determined by the story, yet survives

in others. In other terms, our fictional story seems to legitimate logically contradictory sentences, with the form "*p* and not *p*," such as

(7) Our hero is dead and our hero is not dead.

These could be taken to imply that, according to Borges, fictional discourse is based on a metaphysics that goes beyond the limits of logic—at least, of classical logic. But, logic seems to impose limits on rationality, doesn't it? How is it possible to understand and interpret a discourse that is not rational? Moreover, can we take Borges to be suggesting that an adequate conception of fictional discourse should locate it beyond any rational discourse, due precisely to its purely fantastical character, and its lack of concern for reality and the corresponding limits thereof? I do not think this is so, which certainly demands a more refined interpretation of the book-labyrinth.

Concerning Borges's "The Other Death,"[3] Alberto Moretti has said,

> Borges tends to make us think that possible worlds, or possible variations of our world, can only be for us narratives that are permitted by language, namely, possible narratives, maybe contradictory among themselves but each internally coherent. That the real world includes and does not include Pedro Damián's death in 1946 is unintelligible (on the assumption that the classical principle of noncontradiction holds), but it is perfectly conceivable that there are many similar narratives that start differing from one another in 1904. If those narratives are incomplete, and we do not have any reason to believe in one of them in particular . . . , then Borges, instead of being interpreted as encouraging the belief in several simultaneous real worlds, could adopt what dialectics would consider a reasonable way out, based on the fallibility of memory, perception, and belief. God can change the past without violating logic because he can change the world without our realizing it. (2008, 67; my translation)

Likewise, it is unintelligible to claim that the world considered as real should both include and not include the hero's death: however, in the story that is

the object of our analysis, there is no chance of appealing to the existence of multiple narratives, each one coming from an equally limited, human viewpoint; to put it differently, this time we cannot appeal to "the fallibility of memory, perception, and belief." In spite of this, I think that our case also allows for a more caritative interpretation, according to which, *the truth of a fictional sentence must be relativized to an assessor's standpoint, namely, that of the one who knows all the facts that are constitutive of one of the character's possible histories.*[4] Let's go back to our story:

> With slow precision he [Albert] read two versions of the same epic chapter. In the first, an army marches into battle over a desolate mountain pass. The bleak and somber aspect of the rocky landscape made the soldiers feel that life itself was of little value, and so they won the battle easily. In the second, the same army passes through a palace where a banquet is in progress. The splendour of the feast remained a memory throughout the glorious battle, and so victory followed. (1993a, 75)

Ts'ui Pên's story seems to be positing a real world that both includes the fact that the army goes to the battle through a desolate mountain and excludes that very fact; therefore, the set of possible worlds *prima facie* postulated by the novel is a self-contradictory one. That's why we may say that a sentence such as

(8) The bleak and somber aspect of the rocky landscape made the soldiers feel that life itself was of little value.

is both true and false, since it is both true and false in relation to that set. The interpretation that I would like to defend so as to avoid that conclusion is thinking that *fictional truth or "truth in fiction" is not to be regarded as absolute,* namely, *it is to be established not with respect to the totality of the corresponding worlds but relative to an assessor's viewpoint, who must be located in one of them at a time—first in one, then in another, and so on. This makes it possible to take into account all the alternative worlds, without privileging any of them in particular.* Accordingly, (8) can only be held true relative to one

of those worlds at a time: the one involving the adoption of the perspective characteristic of one of a certain character's possible histories.

By analogy, concerning a sentence about a contingent future, such as the well-known Aristotelian sentence,

(9) Tomorrow there will be a sea battle.

it is possible to consider that from a certain perspective on world history, let's say from the future time in which the battle takes place, (9) is true, whereas, from the standpoint of a different future time in which it does not take place, (9) is false. The future is only underdetermined from the present point of view, but it is not if we take as a reference point each one of its future developments in which either there is a sea battle or there is not; so much that, retrospectively evaluated, (9) turns out as either determinately true or determinately false, and no basic logical principle is violated. As stated by Borges himself, *time is the key:* it is the passing of time that allows us to select a destiny, one possible history of the world among many, and only relative to it can we hold a sentence about the contingent future to be true. The same point can be made concerning fictional sentences such as those contained in Ts'ui Pên's book: they can only be evaluated relative to the choice of a certain life history. But each of them can be taken, successively, as an alternative evaluative context, on equal conditions. None of them represents a privileged point of view.

Ts'ui Pên's madness consists in trying to embrace all the viewpoints at the same time. And this is what determines his failure in constructing the book-labyrinth—the chaos and lack of understanding that have characterized his work. What Borges seems to be showing us, by means of Ts'ui Pên, is not that fictional discourse involves an irrational metaphysics, but that when metaphysics fails or reaches its inescapable limits—the limits of logic; which else could they be?—there is the open path of fantastical literature, which undoubtedly provides the appropriate framework for an overflowing love of labyrinths.

NOTES

1. This is the last line of "The South" (Borges 1993b).
2. This example is in reference to "Pierre Ménard, Author of *Don Quixote*" (Borges 1993a).
3. "The Other Death" is the English translation of another of Borges's stories, "La otra muerte" (Borges 1974).
4. The proposal is inspired by MacFarlane's analysis of sentences about future contingents (compare MacFarlane 2003; 2005; 2008).

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