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The Key

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By Jorge Luis Borges and Robert Zend

The End.

FOOTNOTE ON THE CONCEPTION OF THE SHORT STORY ENTITLED "THE KEY".

Whenever we returned (from a walk, or a bookstore, or the University, or a restaurant, or the library, or the cemetery) to the apartment house in which he lives, Borges took the key out of his pocket,

opened the door and, invariably stopping between the half-opened door and the door frame, started to speak about keys. The first time he said: "Isn't it fascinating that a small piece of metal like this can open a huge building like this?" I replied: "Similarly, the prick, a small piece of flesh that can open the body and the soul of a woman . . . " Another time he said: "One key, you see, but it isn't one key, you can have duplicates made of it so that many different people can open the same house with it . . . " Still another time he said: "I am fascinated with the idea of the Key, I think it was the greatest invention in man's history, not the telephone, not the airplane . . . " So, during our last conversation (the eighth within the week), I asked: "During your whole life you seem to have been fascinated with the idea of the Labyrinth and you have been writing about all sorts of Labyrinths, like the mythological one in which the Minotaur lived, or Labyrinths stretching through space and time, or the Labyrinth of the human mind which tries, in vain, to comprehend that other Labyrinth, that of the Universe, and you also wrote about the Labyrinth of the infinite sand in the Sahara and Labyrinthian castles and gardens built by emperors . . . "

"Yes," Borges nodded, "because I find it particularly intriguing that someone builds a Labyrinth in order to get lost in it . . . "

"And you are also fascinated with the idea of the Key. Have you ever thought of combining the two and writing a short story about a key which opens a Labyrinth?"

Borges seemed astonished. "No! I have never thought of that! Very interesting. A short story about a man's search for the key to the Labyrinth. Yes!"

I became excited: "He is searching for the key so that he could enter the Labyrinth in order to get lost in it . . . "

"Yes," Borges continued, "and do you know how I would end the story? The man never finds the key, but when he dies, in the moment of his death, he realizes that his search for the key was futile because the Labyrinth was his own life . . . "

"But," I barged in, "the search for the key made him wander in many lands and made him meet many people and made him study many books and made him learn many languages, so while his search *for the key* was futile, as you say, the search *itself* was not futile because through it he did enter the Labyrinth of his life because the search was the key!"

"Well," Borges smiled, "a new short story! Thank you very much!"

"Will you write it?" I asked with sparkling eyes.

"Yes, I might. But no. You should write it. I give it to you. After all, it is your story, isn't it?"

"No, no, no!" I said, "it is your story! I would be very happy if you wrote it. I wouldn't steal it . . ."

"Look," Borges said, sliding his palm over the edges of the table, "it doesn't matter who writes it, you, or me, or you and me together. I am sitting at this side of the table, you at that side, certain elements of the story came from this side, others from that side . . ."

"It should be written by the *Table!*" I said.

"It *is* written by the Table," Borges said and laughed.

**FOOTNOTE ON THE MISCARRIAGE OF THE SHORT STORY
ENTITLED "THE KEY".**

After this last conversation with Borges, a cloud of inspiration descended on me and kept my mind enshrouded. A voice, independent from my will, talked in my head incessantly, dictating startling-new-beautiful thoughts, sentences, half-sentences, expressions, adjectives, and I obediently recorded everything immediately no matter where I happened to be when it spoke, walking on the streets of Buenos Aires, sitting on park benches or in sidewalk cafés, and once, while I was falling asleep, it even pushed me out of my bed.

Before my departure from Argentina — since my suitcases were too many and too heavy to carry — I mailed all my books and notes and tapes to myself in Toronto. At the time of present writing, this shipment has still not arrived.

However, a few days after my return, on a certain Tuesday morning, while visiting the Editor of this literary quarterly, with the purpose of correcting the galleys of my short stories entitled "A Bunch of Proses," I was complaining about the unbearable slowness of the mail from Argentina which prevented me from writing another prose piece to follow and conclude those which I had just corrected. He seemed to be interested, so I told him how the idea of this piece was conceived by Borges

and me, and asked him if he wanted me to write the short story, entitled "The Key," as soon as my notes arrived.

"No," he said, "I am not interested in the story about the key to the Labyrinth, but you can write the story of Borges and Zend inventing the story of the key to the Labyrinth, as you just told me."

I thought for a moment. "Hm. I never thought that the story about the story could be a story. This, actually, is your idea. Should it be written then by Borges and Zend and you?"

The Editor laughed: "As you wish. After all, it is your story, isn't it?"

I found his idea quite inspiring, so upon returning home, I grabbed a pen and, without hesitation, I wrote down the story of how the story, entitled "The Key," was conceived (by Borges and me) and received (by the Editor). This second version was a straightforward narrative, it started with the sentence, "Whenever we returned . . ." and ended with the Editor saying to me: "After all, it is your story, isn't it?" Having finished writing it, I read it aloud to myself, I liked it, so I read it aloud to myself again, I liked it even more, so I called the Editor on the phone and read it to him. He sounded somewhat disturbed by the ending of my story involving him (in that version I used his name instead of calling him the Editor) and he said: "I don't think that you should use my name."

"You're wrong (I said) because it is not you but me who is writing about you since my story would be incomplete without you, and anyway, don't forget that after all, it is my story, isn't it?" We laughed. "You know what?" (I added) I will not end the story two hours ago, that is, as I've read it to you now on the phone, but I will end it with my saying to you, 'isn't it?' just a sentence ago. So I will include your protesting and my refuting your protesting, and . . ."

"And you will entitle it, 'Isn't it?' as first said by Borges, then by me, then by you . . ." the Editor said, and I felt a bit lost.

"Maybe I should write a series of footnotes without a story and entitle it 'Feetnotes' . . ."

"It's getting too confusing (the Editor said), but try it, anyway, and we'll see . . ."

When I hung up the receiver, suddenly I saw the shape of the third version of my story clearly projected on the inner screen of my mind.

When trying to understand abstract ideas, I cannot help simplifying them into structures. Everybody, more or less, does it: doodles drawn during a lecture or a conversation subconsciously reflect the visual model of how the listener *sees* what is said. With me, this process has always been extremely conscious. In elementary school, for instance, when the teacher explained to us that every composition must have an introduction, a treatment and a conclusion, I immediately saw in my mind this tripartite form:



Ever since, if I hear someone talking about linear stories, I visualize them:



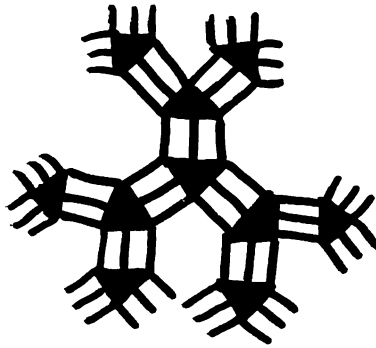
Therefore, Boccaccio's Decamerone, a linear story about ten people, each telling ten linear stories in the course of ten days (altogether 101 linear stories), looks to me like:



Whereas A Thousand and One Nights, another chest-of-drawers story, a world of Eastern magic, with its convoluted framework, containing stories within stories, rather looks like this:



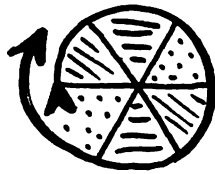
The Divine Comedy, Dante's epic consisting of 3 parts, each part containing 33 cantos, each canto written in 3-line stanzas, takes this shape in my mind:



I see the intricate plots of Shakespearean-tragedy, with the colliding emotions of its heroes, most of whom die sooner or later, something like this:



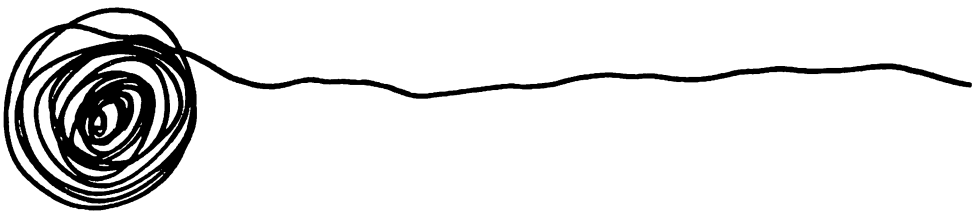
Pirandello's stories are based on the games inherent in the number Two, mirrors and parallels and shadows and portraits and alteregos, and their plots usually end with a new start, making a spiral out of a circle:



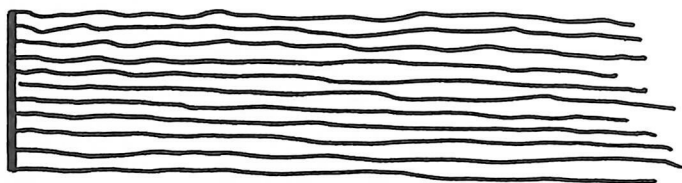
Ionesco is full with unexpected flashes of wit, seemingly fragmentary, but based on a closed and wholesome (perhaps morbid) wisdom:



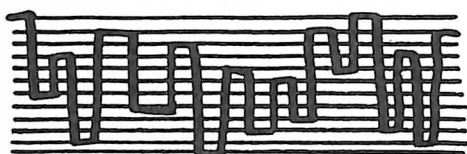
Proust seems to me an unwinding spool of unbeginning and unending memories:



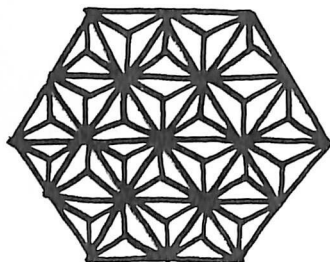
Joyce is a multilinear story flowing at the same time on many levels like a super-Bach fugue:



Updike tells a story in a linear way, but his line constantly zig-zags among the Joycean levels:

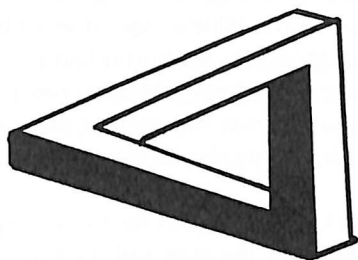


Borges' 'forma mentis' I see as a huge and beautiful (both ancient and modern) city, in which every avenue branches out into many directions, thus each one is connected with all the rest:

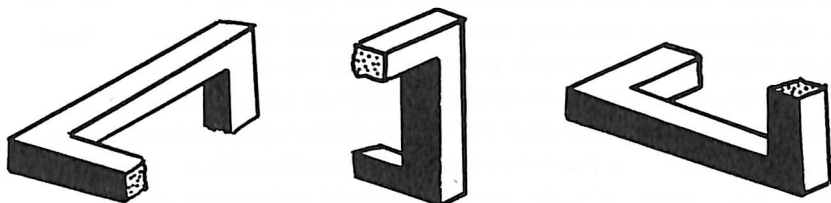


After I hung up the receiver, realizing that what I wanted to write is not the story entitled "The Key", it isn't even the story of the conception of the story entitled "The Key", but it is the story of the conception of the story of the conception of the story, entitled "The Key", I suddenly visualized Escher's three-dimensional triangle, the optical

illusion of which can dazzle only on two-dimensional paper (it is impossible to sculpt it):



Cover with your finger any of the angles, there is nothing wrong with the other two:



only the third (no matter which) angle makes the other two impossible:



And this was the form into which I attempted to translate the *form* of my originally linear story, entitled "The Key", in this present (third) version.

FOOTNOTE ON FOOTNOTES.

Writing footnotes as organic parts of a fiction is not my innovation, I am merely imitating Jorge Luis Borges who imitates DeQuincey who

probably also . . . Borges openly imitates innumerable writers innumerable times since he doesn't believe in originality — everything was said and done before, he thinks. This is quite an original philosophy of writing, at least nowadays: in the Middle Ages it wouldn't have been. Thus, although writing footnotes on footnotes had been done, yet writing footnotes following a blank page had not been done, and I consider this to be my innovation in this present piece of writing: however, it is possible that I do so only due to my lack of cultural awareness.

Beside the two reasons I brought up so far for leaving the original story unwritten (the slowness of the mail and the Editor's disinterest in it), the third and deeper reason is that, although Borges and I invented it together and he encouraged me to write it alone and did not object to our writing it together, still, the hard fact is that our common story *is* unwritten as yet, so consequently, the only proper way of writing it as a collaboration is unwriting it as a collaboration, which idea is respectfully expressed by the blank space following our names.

My fourth reason for writing a story by not writing a story — and this became clear to me after the writing, so it must have been unconscious during it — is that I feel now, having written the story in this way, that I made the reader wander through/ and get lost in/ a Labyrinth, that of my style, thus he is forced to search for the key to understand what he is reading, and during this process he, himself, becomes the hero of the unwritten story, grasping its essence not by reading it, but by filling it in and identifying with it.

But my fifth — and main — unconscious reason for writing a story through a Labyrinth of footnotes was perhaps to practise the Borgesian style (so often compared to Escher's art), not to avoid it, but to live through it, for if I am under his influence now, as I am, it would be unhealthy and futile to deny it or to pretend not to be. The only honest and fruitful way to deal with this influence, it seems to me, is to go through it and absorb it and make it part of me and then go ahead. So, although this piece of writing seems to make a mockery or a caricature of a certain aspect of Borges' style, what it really amounts to is but a humble study of it, or a rather unsuccessful experiment in trying to dissolve my former self in his (as he dissolved his in others) and to do it openly. I have no reason whatsoever to hide it since I consider him one of my spiritual fathers not only after knowing his works, but even before that.

The shipment from Buenos Aires finally arrived! I've read through my beautiful notes and realize that I must abandon at once the Editor's plans for my story. That voice, independent from my will, is talking to me again and I cannot help but record its words:

THE KEY

By Robert Zend

Once upon a time there lived a man who

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