

Jonathan Basile

T A R
F O R
M O R
T A R

The Library of Babel
and the Dream of Totality

TAR FOR MORTAR

BEFORE YOU START TO READ THIS BOOK, take this moment to think about making a donation to punctum books, an independent non-profit press,

@ <https://punctumbooks.com/support/>

If you're reading the e-book, you can click on the image below to go directly to our donations site. Any amount, no matter the size, is appreciated and will help us to keep our ship of fools afloat. Contributions from dedicated readers will also help us to keep our commons open and to cultivate new work that can't find a welcoming port elsewhere. Our adventure is not possible without your support.

Vive la open-access.



Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

TAR FOR MORTAR: "THE LIBRARY OF BABEL" AND THE DREAM OF TOTALITY.
Copyright © 2018 by Jonathan Basile. This work carries a Creative Commons
BY-NC-SA 4.0 International license, which means that you are free to copy and
redistribute the material in any medium or format, and you may also remix,
transform and build upon the material, as long as you clearly attribute the work
to the authors (but not in a way that suggests the authors or punctum books en-
dorses you and your work), you do not use this work for commercial gain in any
form whatsoever, and that for any remixing and transformation, you distribute
your rebuild under the same license. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

First published in 2018 by dead letter office, BABEL Working Group
an imprint of punctum books, Earth, Milky Way.
<https://punctumbooks.com>

The BABEL Working Group is a collective and desiring-assemblage of scholar-
gypsies with no leaders or followers, no top and no bottom, and only a middle.
BABEL roams and stalks the ruins of the post-historical university as a multiplicity,
a pack, looking for other roaming packs with which to cohabit and build
temporary shelters for intellectual vagabonds. We also take in strays.

ISBN-13: 978-1-947447-50-9 (print)
ISBN-13: 978-1-947447-51-6 (ePDF)

LCCN: 2018932399

Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Book design: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei



HIC SVNT MONSTRA

TAR FOR MORTAR

The Library of Babel
and the Dream of Totality

Jonathan Basile



*For my parents. Without their support through my illness,
this project would not have been possible.*

they used brick for stone... they used tar for mortar

Genesis 11:3

Contents

Introduction · 17

1

The Library of Babel · 21

2

Non-Fiction? · 65

3

In Which It Is Argued, Despite Popular Opinion to the Contrary, That Borges Did Not Invent the Internet · 87

Bibliography · 93

Acknowledgments

I would never have begun writing this book, or even dreamed of its possibility, had Eileen Joy not placed a strange amount of faith in me by saying she would publish it. It owes its existence first of all to her, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, and the creative risk taking of punctum books.

Its ideas have branched from too many diffuse roots for me to be able to trace them all or thank everyone by name. At the very least, I would like to thank Scott Goodman, Matt Howard, Rotem Linial, and everyone who joined the conversation at “Fictional Archives, Archival Fictions” at Good Work Gallery, Maia Murphy and everyone who made possible and took part in “Uninventional” at Recess Gallery, and the unique and fertile intellectual community of the BABEL Working Group.

Nor would it be possible to thank individually everyone who has shared a brief encounter and lingering insight with me through a visit to libraryofbabel.info. It has been the site of so many chance crossings, each of which has left its trace on the writing here.



Introduction

I came to realize, after facing several difficulties in the construction of libraryofbabel.info, that I was attempting to make a faithful recreation of an impossible dream. The website is an online version of Borges's "The Library of Babel," which I hope to show was imagined by its author as self-contradictory in every aspect, from its architecture to its pretense of housing all possible expression. I have not resolved these tensions, and so my project resembles Borges's library only by mirroring its failure. The Library of Babel was imagined as containing every possible permutation of a basic character set (22 letters, space, comma, and period) over 410 pages. This much is certainly possible computationally—the website now contains every possible page of 3200 characters from a similar set—but the dream of a universal library is still elusive. Beyond the contingent limits of its small set of Roman characters, the length of its books, and its medium, there are essential reasons why no amount of writing can exhaust the possibilities of meaning. A text exists in what Borges calls an infinite dialogue with its recipients, and its endless recontextualization guarantees that even without a mark of difference every book, page, and even letter can differ from themselves. Our libraries do not fall short of universality because of a character we've left out, but because totality itself is essentially incomplete.

In all its forms, the library should lead us to think differently about the possibility of originality or novelty. It was self-evident to the librarians in the Library of Babel that they could never

create an original work; instead they hoped to discover the truth in the prefabricated texts they considered divine. But this feeling that possibility has been exhausted shouldn't depend on any actualization (such as printing out or publishing online an entire combinatoric set). Because language communicates itself as a structured set of differences, its basic units (in this case, letters and punctuation) will always be permutable. This permutability is universalizable: every form of expression and experience is dependent on signs or marks and a conceptual structure whose intelligibility precedes it. That is, even the most unpredicted or unpredictable event is intelligible to us only by means of conforming to pre-existing concepts and forms of experience. We are bricoleurs cobbling together and recombining found texts, without the possibility of immediate spontaneity. Even if our deployment of these signs is motivated by a momentary context, the library offers an overwhelming reminder of the indifference of all expression to these intentions. Borges himself played with the originality of his act of authorship, placing a disclaimer in the foreword to *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*: "Nor am I the first author of the tale 'The Library of Babel'; anyone curious as to its history and prehistory may consult certain pages of the magazine *Sur*, Number 59, which records names as diverse as Leucippus and Lasswitz, Lewis Carroll and Aristotle" (*Branching Paths* 5). Nonetheless, we will come to recognize just as much continuity as perfidy in his act of supposed non-authorship, which may be a universalizable condition of our relationship to history or tradition. There is no novelty, for the same reason that there can be no repetition.

A pure repetition, as Borges often pointed out, would disappear completely, lacking even a mark by which to distinguish it from its predecessors. We would not be able to recognize its existence or write these words contemplating it if there were no difference between our universal library and its predecessors. The lack of self-identity of our forms of expression guarantees that something resembling novelty will always take place, even if there is no mark by which to recognize it, and even if it is caused by nothing resembling our own agency or spontaneity. It

may even be the very principle that undermines the sovereignty of the supposedly self-present subject. As a result of the deconstruction of invention and discovery, we will find something like repetition in every “new” experience, and something like novelty in every supposed repetition.

Borges treats the relentless emphasis on totality in “The Library of Babel,” the narrator’s claims that the library is infinite in space and time, that it contains not only every possible permutation of its character set but all possible meaning, with a gentle irony. Similarly, in his non-fiction he will assert at times that combinatorics could saturate literature or that repetition is the only reality, while at other times arguing that a single text differs from itself and that nothing ever purely repeats. Such irony and self-contradiction are the very forces that undermine the possibility of totalization. Their function in Borges’s fiction and non-fiction will be the subjects of the first and second chapters (though we will quickly see that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is difficult to maintain). The third chapter focuses on an ideologically motivated strain of literary criticism, which compares the internet to a universal library. These critics take for granted the completeness of Borges’s Library of Babel; they both ignore his ironic undermining of totality, and exaggerate the power of our contemporary technology. Borges’s writing pre-programs its technological progeny, not by containing a totality of all past and future possibility, but by playing with the gap that disrupts all identity.



The Library of Babel

The narrator of “The Library of Babel,” a librarian living within its stacks, relentlessly asserts its totality and infinity. It contains all possible permutations of its character set, all possible meaning; it has existed always, will continue forever, and extends infinitely in space as well. Of course, none of these propositions could ever be verified by a creature conditioned by finitude, limited in space and time. Our narrator takes them on faith. There are several indications that Borges takes these claims ironically, not in order to denigrate the library (as though it could house all possible expression but falls short), but to show that totalizing expression is an impossible ideal. This irony mirrors a recurring gesture from his “non-fiction,” where Borges frequently asserts a principle with a romantic or mystical appeal, one of unity or transcendence, while affirming elsewhere the premises of a deconstruction of that same assertion.

Despite the immense amount of literature about Borges, it is rare to find critics who question the veracity of his narrators. Much more frequently, the totalizing conceptions of his narrators are taken as expressions of Borges’s own mystical inclinations. Whether among specialists, theorists who cite Borges as part of broader philosophical projects, or among more popular literature, one finds authors from Barrenechea to Foucault to Bloch committing this same oversight and incorporating into

their texts the ideological illusions of Borges's narrator.¹ A more careful reading can identify an ironic narrative position in every story from *The Garden of Forking Paths*. The Borges who emerges from this web of textual self-contradictions is not the exuberant celebrant of mystical union but one who dances over the no less mysterious abyss that complicates the passage from finitude to infinity.

Architecture and Anarchitecture

The story opens with a vast vision of what may be an endless structure, a blueprint for an architecture that could, like the library's texts, iterate indefinitely, perhaps infinitely. This framework, of hexagonal rooms with four or five walls of bookshelves, with one or two passages to adjacent hexagons, with a vast pit either within or between them, is developed in one of the most textually complex sections of the story. Every one of the revisions and ambiguities of this paragraph, which seems to introduce us to the spatiality of the library, renders uncertain the form and consistency of its structure. Borges creates a text whose most intimate identity is a difference or conflict with itself—the readers who attempt with greatest dedication to be true to his design inevitably imagine structures that either contain gaps in themselves or create gaps in his story.

The textual uncertainties begin in the first sentence, which describes hexagonal galleries “*con vastos pozos de ventilación en el medio*.” The four English translators of this story are divided on how to interpret this phrase—either as “with vast airshafts

1 See, for example, Barrenechea's *Borges: the Labyrinth Maker*, Foucault's “Language to Infinity,” or Bloch's *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges' Library of Babel*. From all the criticism I reviewed in the course of this study, the only explicit doubt of the narrator of “The Library of Babel” comes from Kane X. Faucher's “The Effect of the Atomist Clinamen in the Constitution of Borges's ‘Library of Babel’” and Neil Badmington's “Babelation.” The most insightful interpretation I have come across of ironic narrative position in Borges's stories, focusing on “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” and “The Garden of Forking Paths,” is Efraín Kristal's UCLA 118th Faculty Research Lecture.

between,” according to James E. Irby, in other words, between some number of hexagonal galleries is an empty external space, or “each with a vast central ventilation shaft” (di Giovanni)² and “In the center of each gallery is a ventilation shaft” (Hurley). While there is no literal textual basis for the appearance of the word “each” in both of these translations, the phrase “*en el medio*” admits either interpretation. Though these three translators opt to disambiguate the opening sentence, the only one who maintains the uncertainty of Borges’s phrase is Kerrigan: “hexagonal galleries, with enormous ventilation shafts in the middle.” Here we see, in its very first sentence, an abyss opening on the infinite or what exceeds our capacities to the point of

-
- 2 Though Norman Thomas di Giovanni’s translation of this story has never appeared in print, I consider it an important facet of the English-language reception of Borges. The majority of the English translations of Borges’s work published in the author’s lifetime were collaborations with di Giovanni. The pair worked together on much of Borges’s poetry and his later prose works, but were unable to publish translations of some of his most important fiction, including stories from *El Aleph* and *Ficciones*, because the translation rights were still held by the publishers of an earlier English edition.

Borges’s collaborations with di Giovanni are strange, loose translations that demonstrate more about the pair’s theory of translation than they do about the original work. Borges was notorious, when translating other authors, for his creative infidelity, and was no more faithful to his own writing (on this theme, see Efraín Kristal’s *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation*). Still, they clearly represented Borges’s wishes, and it is unfortunate that after Borges’s death, his widow and executor of his literary estate María Kodoma, in collaboration with Viking-Penguin, let the di Giovanni translations go out of print and commissioned the Hurley translations in order to circumvent di Giovanni’s contracts (di Giovanni, “The Borges Papers”). Their likely goal was securing more profits for themselves from the English versions of the work by bypassing the 50/50 agreement Borges had made with his friend.

Di Giovanni has been barred from disseminating his (that is to say, also Borges’s) translations, even being forced to remove them from his website. I stumbled across his otherwise unpublished translation of “The Library of Babel” on the internet’s Wayback Machine; at the time of publication, it was accessible at <https://web.archive.org/web/20130212202907/http://www.digiovanni.co.uk/borges/the-garden-of-branching-paths/the-library-of-babel.htm>. I have salvaged whatever I could and made it available on my website, along with his out-of-print translations, at <https://libraryofbabel.info/Borges/BorgesDiGiovanniTranslations.zip>.

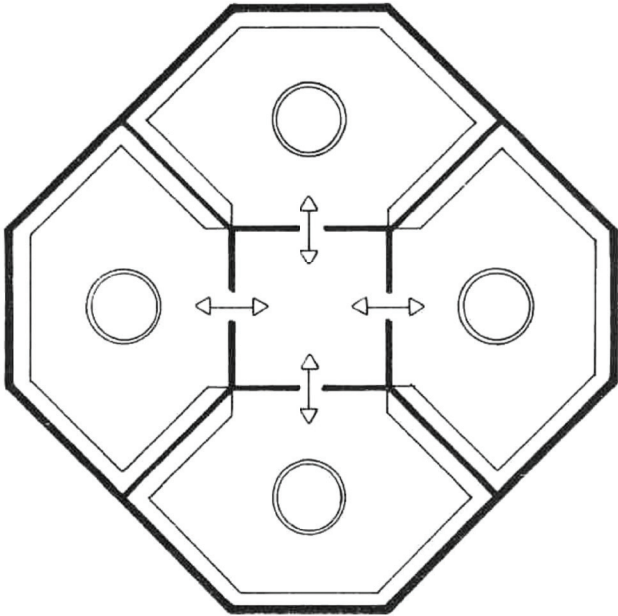


Fig. 1 — A node of the Library of Babel if only one of each hexagon's faces opened on an adjacent hexagon, as drawn by Cristina Grau in *Borges y La Arquitectura* (66).

suggesting infinity (the sublime), shifting across the border or shifting the border itself of the internal and external.

What follows is no easier to interpret or translate. The first edition of the story, published in *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* in 1941 or 1942,³ read as follows: “*Veinticinco anaqueles, a cinco largos anaqueles por lado, cubren todos los lados menos uno [...]. La cara libre da a un angosto zaguán, que desemboca en otra galería, idéntica a la primera y a todas.*” Though there are other passages from Borges’s 1956 revision that di Giovanni incorporates, here he relies on the first edition: “Twenty-five long shelves, five on each side, fill all the sides but one [...]. From the unshelved side, a narrow passageway leads off to another gallery, which is identical to the first and to all the others.” Borges recognized an error in this text whose exact nature we will have to consider further, and made three changes, the substance of which was to free another of the hexagon’s sides for passage to other galleries: “*Veinticinco*” became “*Veinte*,” “*menos uno*” became “*menos dos*,” and, somewhat strangely, “*la cara libre*” became “*Una de las caras libres*”—much of the controversy will rest on what became of this second shelfless wall. The other translators follow the revised edition, as Irby has it: “Twenty shelves, five long shelves per side, cover all the sides except two [...]. One of the free sides leads to a narrow hallway” (51). Resolving the uncertainties of this revision involves us necessarily in the physical uncertainty of the position of the ventilation pit, and the ontological uncertainty of the infinite and the finite.

Christina Grau, in her work *Borges y la Arquitectura*, explains the problem his revision was addressing and offers one possible interpretation of the envisioned structure (66). Though

3 The first printing of what is perhaps Borges’s most influential collection is dated 1941 according to its colophon, but 1942 according to its copyright. The end of 1941 was the cut-off date for a national prize that Borges and his publisher hoped to win; the printing was either hurried to meet the deadline, or the date was falsified. Regardless, Borges’s innovative work was passed over in favor of more recognizably Argentinian prose (see Jarkowski, “Cuando Borges Perdió Por Mayoría De Votos”). My thanks to Fernando Sdrigotti for his help in finding this explanation.

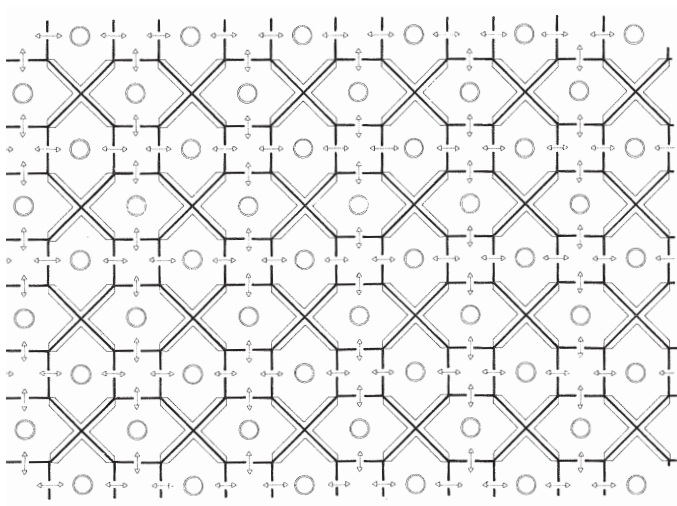


Fig. 2 — A floor-plan of the Library of Babel with two openings in each hexagon, as drawn by Cristina Grau in *Borges y La Arquitectura* (68).

the story frequently summons endless, labyrinthine expanses traveled by lonely librarians, a structure of hexagons with only a single opening would necessarily terminate at its first juncture (see Fig. 1). Such a structure is not capable of any expansion in the horizontal dimension, though it could repeat as endless, self-contained vertical shafts. If lateral movement were barred, it would be impossible to understand the first half of the narrator's melancholy recollections of traveling "for many nights through corridors and along polished stairways" (*Labyrinths* 54). Clearly, Borges meant to correct this design flaw when he revised his story in 1956. But the addition of a second passageway does not by any means resolve the textual problems in his opening paragraph. Grau still allows, in her diagram of the revised edition (68), for the problematic central square chamber (see Fig. 2). It seems, based on the circles in her diagram, that she opts for the interpretation that the air shafts will be inside each hexagon, and thus the central square chamber is an addition without a basis in Borges's text. Not only that, but "the idealists" among the librarians "argue that the hexagonal rooms are a necessary form of absolute space or, at least, of our intuition of space" (*Labyrinths* 52). While this seems to preclude the addition of a square room, it is at least not as explicitly forbidden as a room with one side more, or one fewer: "They reason that a triangular or pentagonal room is inconceivable" (52). If this square antechamber is meant to be the aforementioned narrow passage, we need to note that there are two for every hexagon and return to the third of Borges's revisions.

Antonio Toca Fernández, who responds to Grau's model in "La biblioteca de babel: Una modesta propuesta," suggests that Borges's revision is incomplete. Why remove the books from one wall of each hexagon, only to leave that wall closed off as a passage? He devises a minimal correction: what was *La cara libre* (the free side) in the first edition, and became *Una de las caras libres* (one of the free sides) in the second, should have been *Cada una de las caras libres* — each one of the free sides. This emendation justifies the dual openings in Grau's model, but her quadrilateral *zaguane*s still bother him. He recognizes that

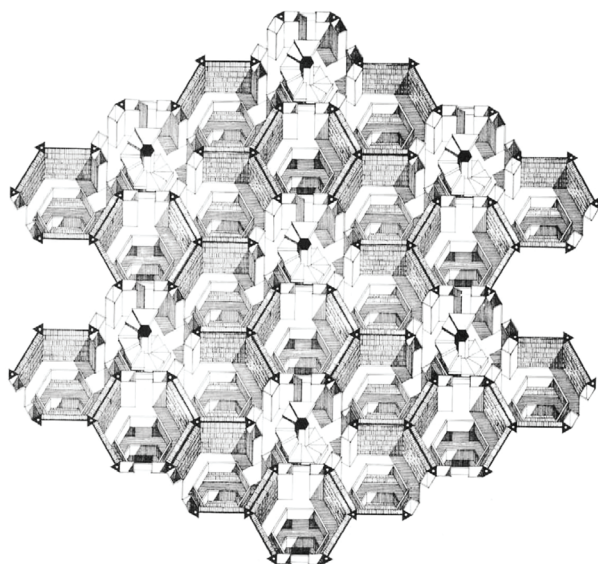


Fig. 3 — A floor-plan of the Library of Babel with two openings in each hexagon and a separate hexagon for each spiral staircase, as drawn by Antonio Toca Fernández in “La biblioteca de babel: una modesta propuesta” (79).

Borges wanted a structure that could saturate space with geometric uniformity and expands Grau's squares into hexagons (see Fig. 3). This model still contradicts several parts of Borges's text. The narrow passageways described by Borges open onto "another gallery, identical to the first and to all the rest." That is, they should provide communication between two hexagons, not six as in Fernandez' model, or four as in Grau's. And there's nothing narrow (*angosto*) about this passageway that seems to be swelling from one architect to the next, accreting new openings and disrupting the symmetry of the identical galleries.

A visitor to libraryofbabel.info, who identified himself as WillH, offered a clever solution that resolves some of these spatial and textual quandaries. It reinterprets the ventilation shaft "in the middle" of the hexagon(s), in order to evade the need to re-revise Borges's second edition. A single circular pit absorbs one wall of six hexagons, thus requiring only a single passageway per hexagon, and remaining true to Borges's "One of the free sides" (See Fig. 4). His vision almost reconciles the textual conundrums, with one very significant *gap*. In an interview with Christina Grau in *Borges y la Arquitectura*, Borges explained his motivation for comprising his library of hexagons:

I thought in the beginning of a series of circles, because the circle produces the sensation of the lack of orientation [...] but the circles leave spaces between them that disturbed me. Later I decided on hexagons because they fit together with each other without needing other figures. (73, my translation)

The elegant star created by WillH, though it is the only design that accepts all of Borges's emendations, and is the only one to read "*en el medio*" with Irby, leaves six spaces, each in the form of an empty or inaccessible hexagon, if we compress the passageways or thicken the walls.

Should we accept only the evidence of the second edition, and claim that Borges's interview is extrinsic? But if he is being deceptive or dishonest, we should still reckon with his propen-

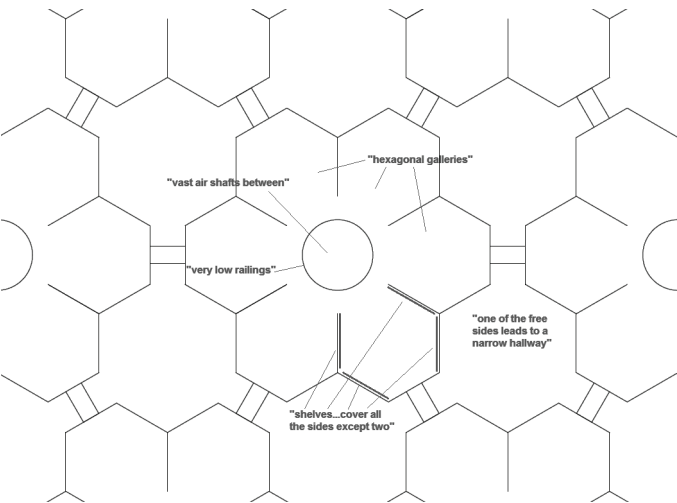


Fig. 4— A floor-plan of the Library of Babel with one opening in each hexagon and the ventilation pit between a cluster of hexagons, as drawn by libraryofbabel.info user WillH.

sity for creating inextricable textual webs, labyrinths of revision and commentary that, like birdlime, trap the most careful readers the more we struggle for a coherent interpretation. I thought at one time that I could balance these tensions by accepting Fernandez's addition of a second passageway, and condensing the passageways into thicker walls (see Fig. 5).⁴

But I no longer long for a solution — I'd much rather marvel at a text that manages, seemingly with as much intention as accident, to allow for so many elegant solutions while always leaving a remainder of irreconcilability. My ultimate disagreement would be with Fernandez's claim that:

Borges' story is not a murky [*desdibujado* — sketchy, adumbrated] dream; on the contrary, his lucid nightmare describes the library with the precision of an expert... of an architect. [...]. What surprises and disquiets with respect to Borges is that, in his blindness, he imagined a universe that could be built. (79, my translation)

It's rather the opposite — Borges has an imagination that surpasses lucidity to its dark hinter-side, the mind of what I would prefer to call an anarchitect, whose great vision was an ability to lead us into blindness. We will run up against this limit continually, for example, when we come to Borges's irony; the creation of a text in conflict with itself disrupts or deconstructs the task of criticism understood as the selection from among possible meanings, to open us to the possibility of the impossibility of meaning or decision.

4 Led astray by my desire to reconcile the text's difficulties, I altered the text according to Fernandez' emendation and unthinkingly ignored the demand that the hexagonal galleries be "identical." Varying the position of the entrance and exit passageways clearly violates this symmetry. This image was created by my sister, Sarah Basile, according to my specifications; I give her full credit for its elegance, and take full responsibility for its errors.

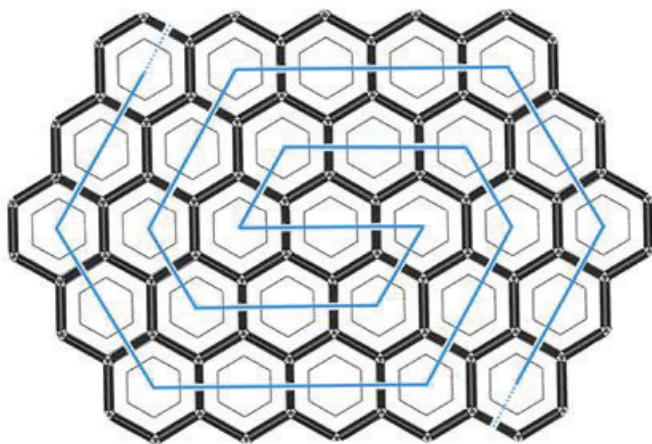


Fig. 5 — A floor-plan of the Library of Babel I imagined in a deluded attempt to reconcile the textual contradictions of Borges's revisions.