

WORLDS APART, WORLDS ENTANGLED: MIHAIL GRĂMESCU, BORGES AND QUANTUM PHYSICS

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Abstract: Mihail Grămescu's name will only strike a chord in the limited circle of Romanian science fiction literati. Needless to say, the genius behind his stories, the analytical mind and his intuitive flair remain confined to this particular group. However, thanks to the new lines of analysis – inter and transdisciplinarity, his work is finally revealing the mastermind behind. The present paper will analyse several of Grămescu's short stories in Aporisticon highlighting Borges's influence, as well as the writer's visionary mind in anticipating some of the new theories in quantum physics.

Keywords: multiverse, speculative fiction, quantum physics, new physics, imagined worlds

If Jorge Luis Borges's name needs no introduction, as he benefits from worldwide recognition, Mihail Grămescu's name is less fortunate as it only strikes a chord among a handful of Romanian science-fiction enthusiasts. The fairy godmothers that attended his birth made sure to endow him with everything but luck... He set sail among the stars at an early age, rather destitute and not famous enough.

Grămescu was born in a family of intellectuals as the son of Haralambie Grămescu (poet and translator) and Alexandra Beatrice Kiseleff (linguist and translator). He studied Physics and Chemistry, was an avid chess player and performed various odd jobs before becoming an established writer. His first volume of short stories, *Aporisticon*, published in 1981 was, of course, adjusted by the communist censorship committee who discarded several stories. Even so, the volume was well received by critics and readers and sold in a whopping 150,000 copies. The stories are not an easy lecture or leisure time alternative. The output of careful planning, brimming with references to Greek philosophy, New Physics and worldwide literature, the stories only unveil themselves to the readers trained in the referenced philosophies or authors.

The very few scholars and critics that turned their eye towards Grămescu noticed Jorge Luis Borges's (Argentinian writer) influence on the obscure Grămescu. (Aurel Cărașel mentions this). However, the influence was no secret at all, since Grămescu quotes the Argentinian writer in his stories: *Farmacopiedie pentru inițiați (Calambur)* – (Trans.) *Enchantopaedia for the Cognoscenti (A Pun)* and uses the motif of the labyrinth quite a lot, the labyrinth being the trademark associated with the Argentinian writer.

If Grămescu's fame cannot be fully restored, it can, at least, be rekindled, and this is what the present paper aims at. By analysing some stories against the borgesian background and with reference to the New Physics concepts, we will eventually prove that there is no nationality when it comes to literary geniuses, that the modest Romanian literature does match the accredited universal one, and that what lies behind the stories is a sage and brilliant writer.

In the Introduction to Borges's *The Aleph and Other Stories*, Andrew Hurley appreciates that: "... in June of 1949 Borges brought out *The Aleph*, a collection of stories in the "fantastic genre", as Borges described it. But his dismissive, almost trivializing description of the stories – of the *treatment* of the stories, their membership in a sub-literary genre – failed to notice the seriousness of their themes: time and history, personal identity, human versus divine morality (or at least human ethics), "reality" versus "subjectivity", and the ground and role of literature itself."

(Borges: X). We do feel that the same could be said about Grămescu's short stories – he, too, deals with time and history, reality versus subjectivity or the crisis of personal identity. Given the historical and social background, the forceful implementation of a system that erases individuality and promotes uniformity, it is no wonder that visionary spirits like those of Grămescu's will struggle to preserve their sharpness. They are prone to collapse. Paradoxically, but tragically, we can say that communism itself functions like the wave function collapse in quantum physics: before communism all worlds and all possibilities exist; once it gains control, an individual's freedom, his possibilities of becoming and evolving collapse too.

There is one more common theory or concept that bridges the two authors and that is the multiverse one. Developed by Hugh Everett in 1957, the theory postulates that all possible past, present or future variations are real and are happening in other universes that coexist with ours. Everett's theory may sound similar to that of Heisenberg's (the one more easily accepted and embraced), but there are some major differences between the two. According to Heisenberg and the Copenhagen interpretation, all states of an object exist and are possible until an observer's acts of measurement interrupt the wave function. Everett's vision is different since he discards the measuring and includes the observer in the equation. In "The Many Worlds of Hugh Everett", Peter Byrne explains the physicist's vision:

Breaking with Bohr and Heisenberg, he dispensed with the need for the discontinuity of a wave-function collapse (...) Everett saw that under those assumptions, the wave function of an observer would, in effect, bifurcate at each interaction of the observer with a superposed object. The universal wave function would contain branches for every alternative making up the object's superposition. Each branch has its own copy of the observer, a copy that perceived one of those alternatives as the outcome. According to a fundamental mathematical property of the Schrödinger equation, once formed, the branches do not influence one another. Thus, each branch embarks on a different future, independently of the others. (Scientific American, web).

Borges published *The Garden of Forking Paths* in 1941, way before Everett made his theory known to the public. Grămescu's access to the New Physics concepts is sure to have been restricted due to the imposed communist censorship. And yet the works of the two authors make permanent reference to the scenario in which reality is not finite, or singular, nor is it what our senses perceive, hence their remarkable sense of anticipation and visionary spirit. Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths* has extensively been analysed by scholars following the quantum physics path – the multiverse or multi-worlds theory. Despite this, the story continues to amaze and each new reading forks either into a better, or a different understanding of the story: "We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us." (*Labyrinths*: 53). Grămescu too is a believer in the existence of worlds that evolve simultaneously – however, such worlds only unravel in front of a limited number of individuals, the educated ones "...Viitorul este deschis tuturor reprezentanților speciei, selecția care se face fiind pur individuală, și aceia care nu sunt apti nu au acces la lumea Viitorului și nimic mai mult."¹ It is this particular short story – *Simfonia viitorului* (*Trans. The Symphony of the Future*) that is a clear indicator of Grămescu's interest and knowledge of the New Physics and its concepts: "... dacă am înțeles eu cum vine treaba aia cu Fizica Nelineară. Dealtfel am mai auzit ceva de genul ăsta: înțelegi, este foarte simplu, vom glisa pur și simplu în acel nivel care ne caracterizează ca persoane, iar pentru cei din fabrică, de exemplu, noi nu am existat niciodată, sau poate am fost un vis..." (Grămescu 2015: 379).²

1 (Trans.) The Future is open to all the representatives of the species, the process of selection being purely individual; those who do not qualify are not granted access to the world of the Future and that's about it.

2 (Trans.) ... if I understood what the Non-linear Physics is all about. Anyway, I have heard of similar things before: you see, it's very easy, we'll simply glide into that universe that characterises us as individuals, and to those in the plant for instance, we either never existed or were mere a dream.

The first story in *Aporisticon* is *Apeironie* (*înșiruirea de noduri*) (Trans.) (*Apeiron*) (*The Sequence of Knots*). With a title borrowed from Greek (the philosopher Anaximander) and meaning infinite, the story details the curious case of the novel of all novels that bemuses all scientific and literary communities with its impossibility of being translated. It is the narrator that eventually solves the mystery posed by the novel: “Întocmai precum diverși specialiști au observat, textul nu era compus într-o limbă oarecare și, din acest motiv, el poate avea câte o interpretare în oricare dintre limbile existente, materializări efemere ale esenței pe care Romanul Paradigmatic le conține integral în forma sa inițială.” (Grănescu 2015: 19).³ (...) “Acesta este textul tradus al Romanului Paradigmatic, care poate fi tradus de altfel oricum, cu condiția să se caute un sens inteligent oricărei fraze a textului unic comun.” (*ibidem*: 20).⁴ We are thus reminded of Borges’s *Garden of Forking Paths* and the book which was initially perceived as a heap of contradictions and turned out to be an image of the universe. Just as all possibilities of time exist simultaneously, so do all possibilities of translations and interpretations assigned to the book in *Apeironie* exist: “He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time.” (*Labyrinths*: 53).

The book in *The Garden of Forking Paths* throbs with life as it constantly creates and recreates the universe – all alternatives and all possibilities exist simultaneously. In Grănescu’s *Feeria semantică a îndrăgostitului de stăpâna tainică a melopeelor* (*Mister orphic*) - (Trans.) *The Semantic Feerie of the One in Love with the Mysterious Lady of the Chants* (*Orphic Mystery*) language is a creator of worlds too: “Astfel, un text putea fi citit în mai multe feluri (...) limbajul nu reflectă doar, ci și construiește lumi paralele...” (Grănescu 2015: 146).⁵

Borges’s *The Library of Babel* is another short story in which we come across the same idea of a book that comprises all possible books, and of an unlimited library: “On some shelf in some hexagon (men reasoned) there must exist a book which is the formula and perfect compendium of all the rest (...) *The Library is unlimited and cyclical.*” (*Labyrinths*: 83; 85).

According to Grănescu, not only does language create new universes, but so does an individual’s own perception, his subjectivity: “Noi cunoaștem astăzi că Universul poate fi pătrat, sferic, plat ca o farfurie, sau spiralat, în funcție de credința subiectului care îl cercetează” (Grănescu 2015: 216).⁶ But this is in fact in line with Everett’s multiverse since what the subject, the individual believes, becomes reality in a different universe.

We did mention that Grănescu uses the theme of the bourgeois labyrinth quite a lot. Here are some of the stories in which we come across it: *Programul* – (Trans.) *The Programme*; *Babilonia* (*Palierale*) - (Trans.) *Babilonia* (*The Levels*); *Helicon*; *Formula* – (Trans.) *The Formula*. In Borges’s fiction, the labyrinth has more visual strength and seems to weigh down, whereas Grănescu uses rather the idea of a labyrinth, a mental trap the subject self-imposes and which can be overcome: “I dreamed, unbearably, of a small and orderly labyrinth at whose center lay a well; my hands could almost touch it, my eyes see it, but so bewildering and entangled were the turns that I knew I would die before I reached it. (...) Nine doors opened into that cellar-like place; eight led to a maze that returned, deceitfully, to the same chamber; the ninth led through another maze to a second circular chamber identical to the first.” (*The Aleph and Other Stories*: 6, 8). Grănescu’s labyrinth is liberating and a portal towards a new dimension: “Rămâneau în urmă luminile orașului,

3 (Trans.) Just as various specialists have noticed, the text was not written in a particular language, reason for which it can be interpreted in any of the existing languages, ephemeral materializations of the essence that the Paradigmatic Novel fully contains in its initial form.

4 (Trans.) This is the translated text of the Paradigmatic Novel, which can actually be translated in any possible way, as long as an intelligent meaning is given to each sentence belonging to the common singular text.

5 (Trans.) Therefore, a text could be read in various ways (...) not only does language reflect, it builds worlds too.

6 (Trans.) We know today that the Universe can be square, spherical, flat like a plate, or coiled, depending on the belief of the one who looks at it.

apoi scrierile sistemului solar și ale Galaxiei. Ne afundam fără întoarcere în Labirint.”⁷ Surely, the detail that Grămescu uses capitals (the Labyrinth) to describe what is normally a trap or a test of intelligence strengthens the idea that indeed, the interpretation of the maze in his fiction differs quite radically from that of Borges’s. Or, here is an example of the labyrinth as a mental state which has to be overpassed: “Un ins robust și congestionat se apropie de clădirea în fomă de labirint (...) - Palieretele astea au exact același sens și acea importanță pe care tu, ca spectator, ești dispus să le-o acorzi.” (Grămescu 2015: 51, 53).⁸ Here the forking takes place within, and there will be as many levels and universes as the individual chooses to. However, when characterising Grămescu’s fiction there should be no forking, no alternative versions, but one single reality in which his sharp mind and insight should be valued more. An inter and transdisciplinary approach is sure to provide a much needed new and fresh perspective on the Romanian author’s work.

There is yet one more major theme (which can in itself constitute the topic of detailed analysis) that bridges the two authors, the two worlds apart, and that is space. From global, it expanded to the virtual space of internationally interfaced computers, to the 3D projection of bidimensional designs through technological devices operating like the magic formulas of the once amazing folk tales. Edward T. Hall became famous with his studies of spatial arrangements engaging the individual’s perception of the increasing distance interposing between private, intimate environment and social, public space (proxemics). Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*) focused on the space that is not given but created through human intervention. Edward Soja made a very interesting distinction among three categories of space: real, space of representation and representation of space. Is not his notion of third space an elaboration upon Borges’s *Orbis Tertius*? Real and yet constructed? We are going to focus on this third category of space, paradoxical as it is an unseemly cross of the labyrinth and of paradigmatic display, which becomes possible in the context of the hypothetical quantum multiverse.

Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius leaves the reader in awe through the extravaganza of its title. In this story which opens the collection called *Labyrinths* we learn of the nebulous world of Uqbar documented in Encyclopaedia Britannica. Coming across a particular article and edition of Encyclopaedia is no easy task, nor is the finding of the bibliography that the article on Uqbar refers to: “it noted that the literature of Uqbar was one of fantasy and that its epics and legends never referred to reality, but to the two imaginary regions of Mlejnas and Tlön.” (*Labyrinths*: 29). The world of fantasy coexists with the real world; they are intermingled and that is because the invented country is so minutely described that it cannot possibly betray its made-up scaffolding: “Such was the first intrusion of this fantastic world into the world of reality.” (*ibidem*: 41). Indeed, if we are to consider Soja’s definition of the Thirdspace, Tlön fits the shoes perfectly: “everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history.” (*Wikipedia*).

Other scholars (John R. Clark, for instance in “Idealism and Dystopia in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*”) have analysed the story in connection with its clear anti-nazism message: Tlön invades the real world the same way the philosophy of hatred and supremacy of a few has gained momentum in a surreal Germany: “Ten years ago any symmetry with a semblance of order – dialectical materialism, anti-semitism, Nazism – was sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön...” (*Labyrinths*: 42).

The Thirdspace as described by Soja is present in Grămescu’s short stories as well. We did mention earlier that *Farmacopedie pentru inițiați* (*Trans – Enchantopaedia for the Cognoscenti*) is a clear indicator of the Romanian writer’s familiarity with the borgesian fiction since he starts off by

7 (Trans.) We left behind the lights of the city, then the sparkling of the solar system and the Galaxy. We were slowly stepping into the Labyrinth and not returning.

8 (Trans.) A short and bloodshot chap approaches the building resembling a labyrinth (...) - These levels have the exact meaning and importance that you yourself, as spectator, are willing to assign.

quoting the story *Theme of the Hero and the Traitor*: “Că istoria ar fi copiat istoria era un lucru uluitor; ca istoria să copieze literatura era un lucru de neconceput...”⁹ The “real and the imagined” are thus present here as well, discreetly marking the borders of the Thirdspace: “Spațiul *farmecului*, la care mă refer acum, era un univers vrăjit, aparent însă cât se poate de banal.”¹⁰ The use of the phrase “spațiul *farmecului*” (the space of the *charm*) sets the story on a positive trajectory – but just as in Borges’s case (in which Tlön takes over the world), so does the enchanting universe prove to be a fabricated reality meant to mislead the humble individuals that populate this reality. This may well be an allusion to communism and the infiltrated informers since, in the end, the narrator reveals his own status of an Architect in a universe made of (and made by) Architects and manipulated actors: “... ei bine, pamfletul acesta demascator și sensul lui discret sunt cele mai certe dovezi că eu sunt un *Arhitect*, dragii mei.”¹¹ (Grămescu 2015: 142). Not only are the Architects the informers, but the main creators of the socialist utopia too – a world taken for granted by the manipulated mass of people. And how is this manipulation done? Well, through repetition and inoculation – these are the exact two notions used by Grămescu: “... prin repetiție permanentă și programată spectatorii au fost inoculați cu ideea acestor obiecte...” (*ibidem*: 139).¹² Moreover, Borges’s *Theme of the Hero and the Traitor* matches the communist context in which reality is always adjusted (fantasy may well become reality) to match the Supreme Leader’s vision, and what is at first seen as a reputable individual (hero) may well turn out to be a marred one (traitor).

Whether it is Borges’s or Grămescu’s fiction, one thing is for certain: reality is not always what it seems, there are layers over layers, hidden meanings or worlds, universes that we are unaware of or universes that function as refuge for individuals confronting with various dramas or traumas. Quantum physics and the multiverse has opened up new possibilities and new literary interpretations refreshing the old ones and inspiring the ones to come. This is something that we are actually looking into at the moment in a more extensive research for a doctoral paper, Borges and Grămescu taking up a significant chunk of our analysis.

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9 (Trans.) That history may have copied history was rather bewildering; that history can well copy literature is unconceivable...

10 (Trans.) The space of the *charm* that I am now alluding to, was an enchanting universe, apparently however, as dull as it can be.

11 (Trans.) ... well, this unveiling pamphlet and its discreet sense are the clearest proof that I myself am an *Architect*, my dear ones.

12 (Trans.) ... the spectators have been inoculated with the idea of these objects through permanent and programmed repetition...

I.Boldea, C. Sigmirean, D.-M.Buda

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