some discrepancy between each of the edition's copies. Scribes take a secret oath to omit, interpolate, alter. *Indirect falsehood* is also practiced.

The Company, with godlike modesty, shuns all publicity. Its agents, of course, are secret; the orders it constantly (perhaps continually) imparts are no different from those spread wholesale by impostors. Besides—who will boast of being a mere impostor? The drunken man who blurts out an absurd command, the sleeping man who suddenly awakes and turns and chokes to death the woman sleeping at his side—are they not, perhaps, implementing one of the Company's secret decisions? That silent functioning, like God's, inspires all manner of conjectures. One scurrilously suggests that the Company ceased to exist hundreds of years ago, and that the sacred disorder of our lives is purely hereditary, traditional; another believes that the Company is eternal, and teaches that it shall endure until the last night, when the last god shall annihilate the earth. Yet another declares that the Company is omnipotent, but affects only small things: the cry of a bird, the shades of rust and dust, the half dreams that come at dawn. Another, whispered by masked heresiarchs, says that *the Company has never existed, and never will.* Another, no less despicable, argues that it makes no difference whether one affirms or denies the reality of the shadowy corporation, because Babylon is nothing but an infinite game of chance.

A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain

Herbert Quain died recently in Roscommon. I see with no great surprise that the *Times Literary Supplement* devoted to him a scant half column of necrological pieties in which there is not a single laudatory epithet that is not set straight (or firmly reprimanded) by an adverb. The *Spectator,* in its corresponding number, is less concise, no doubt, and perhaps somewhat more cordial, but it compares Quain's first book, *The God of the Labyrinth,* with one by Mrs. Agatha Christie, and others to works by Gertrude Stein. These are comparisons that no one would have thought to be inevitable, and that would have given no pleasure to the deceased. Not that Quain ever considered himself "a man of genius"—even on those peripatetic nights of literary conversation when the man who by that time had fagged many a printing press invariably played at being M. Teste or Dr. Samuel Johnson.... Indeed, he saw with absolute clarity the experimental nature of his works, which might be admirable for their innovativeness and a certain laconic integrity, but hardly for their strength of passion. "I am like Cowley's odes," he said in a letter to me from Longford on March 6, 1939. "I belong not to art but to the history of art." (In his view, there was no lower discipline than history.)

I have quoted Quain's modest opinion of himself; naturally, that modesty did not define the boundaries of his thinking. Flaubert and Henry James have managed to persuade us that works of art are few and far between, and maddeningly difficult to compose, but the sixteenth century (we should recall the *Voyage to Parnassus,* we should recall the career of Shakespeare) did not share that disconsolate opinion. Nor did Herbert Quain. He believed that "great literature" is the commonest thing in the world, and that there was hardly a conversation in the street that did not attain those "heights." He also believed that the aesthetic act must contain some element of surprise, shock, astonishment—and that being astonished by rote is difficult, so he deplored with smiling sincerity "the servile, stubborn preservation of past and bygone books." ... I do not know whether that vague theory of his is justifiable or not; I do know that his books strive too greatly to astonish.

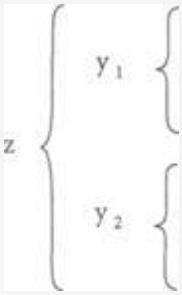
I deeply regret having lent to a certain lady, irrecoverably, the first book that Quain published. I have said that it was a detective story—*The God of the Labyrinth;* what a brilliant idea the publisher had, bringing it out in late November, 1933. In early December, the pleasant yet arduous convolutions of *The Siamese Twin Mystery** gave London and New York a good deal of "gumshoe" work to do—in my view, the failure of our friend's work can be laid to that ruinous coincidence. (Though there is also the question—I wish to be totally honest—of its somewhat careless plotting and the hollow, frigid stiltedness of certain descriptions of the sea.) Seven years later, I cannot for the life of me recall the details of the plot, but this is the general scheme of it, impoverished (or purified) by my forgetfulness: There is an

incomprehensible murder in the early pages of the book, a slow discussion in the middle, and a solution of the crime toward the end. Once the mystery has been cleared up, there is a long retrospective paragraph that contains the following sentence: *Everyone believed that the chessplayers had met accidentally.* That phrase allows one to infer that the solution is in fact in error, and so, uneasy, the reader looks back over the pertinent chapters and discovers *another* solution, which is the correct one. The reader of this remarkable book, then, is more perspicacious than the detective.

An even more heterodox work is the "regressive, ramifying fiction" *April March,* whose third (and single) section is dated 1936. No one, in assaying this novel, can fail to discover that it is a kind of game; it is legitimate, I should think, to recall that the author himself never saw it in any other light. "I have reclaimed for this novel," I once heard him say, "the essential features of every game: the symmetry, the arbitrary laws, the tedium." Even the name is a feeble pun: it is not someone's name, does not mean "a march [taken] in April," but literally April-March. Someone once noted that there is an echo of the doctrines of Dunne in the pages of this book; Quain's foreword prefers instead to allude to that backward-running world posited by Bradley, in which death precedes birth, the scar precedes the wound, and the wound precedes the blow *(Appearance and Reality,* 1897, p. 215).[1]

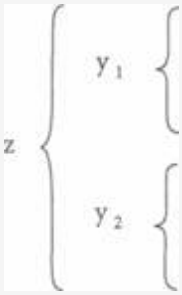
[1] So much for Herbert Quain's erudition, so much for page 215 of a book published in 1897. The interlocutor of Plato's *Politicus,* the unnamed "Eleatic Stranger," had described, over two thousand years earlier, a similar regression, that of the Children of Terra, the Autochthons, who, under the influence of a reverse rotation of the cosmos, grow from old age to maturity, from maturity to childhood, from childhood to extinction and nothingness. Theopompus, too, in his *Philippics,* speaks of certain northern fruits which produce in the person who eats them the same retrograde growth___Even more interesting than these images is imagining an inversion of Time itself—a condition in which we would remember the Future and know nothing, or perhaps have only the barest inkling, of the Past. *Cf. Inferno,* Canto X, II. 97-105» in which the prophetic vision is compared to farsightedness.

But it is not the worlds proposed by *April March* that are regressive, it is the way the stories are told—regressively and ramifying, as I have said. The book is composed of thirteen chapters. The first reports an ambiguous conversation between several unknown persons on a railway station platform. The second tells of the events of the evening that precedes the first. The third, likewise retrograde, tells of the events of *another,* different, possible evening before the first; the fourth chapter relates the events of yet a third different possible evening. Each of these (mutually exclusive) "evenings-before" ramifies into three further "evenings-before," all quite different. The work in its entirety consists, then, of nine novels; each novel, of three long chapters. (The first chapter is common to all, of course.) Of those novels, one is symbolic; another, supernatural; another, a detective novel; another, psychological; another, a Communist novel; an other, anti-Communist; and so on. Perhaps the following symbolic representation will help the reader understand the novel's structure:



With regard to this structure, it may be apposite to say once again what Schopenhauer said about Kant's twelve categories: "He sacrifices everything to his rage for symmetry." Predictably, one and another of the nine tales is unworthy of Quain; the best is not the one that Quain first conceived, x_4; it is, rather, x_9, a tale of fantasy. Others are marred by pallid jokes and instances of pointless pseudoexactitude. Those who read the tales in chronological order *(e.g., x_3, y» z)* will miss the strange book's peculiar flavor. Two stories—x_7 and x_8—have no particular individual value; it is their *juxtaposition* that makes them effective.... I am not certain whether I should remind the reader that after *April March* was published,

Quain had second thoughts about the triune order of the book and predicted that the mortals who imitated it would opt instead for a binary scheme—



while the gods and demiurges had chosen an infinite one: infinite stories, infinitely branching.

Quite unlike *April March,* yet similarly retrospective, is the heroic two-act comedy *The Secret Mirror.* In the works we have looked at so far, a formal complexity hobbles the author's imagination; in *The Secret Mirror,* that imagination is given freer rein. The play's first (and longer) act takes place in the country home of General Thrale, C.I.E., near Melton Mowbray. The unseen center around which the plot revolves is Miss Ulrica Thrale, the general's elder daughter. Snatches of dialog give us glimpses of this young woman, a haughty Amazon-like creature; we are led to suspect that she seldom journeys to the realms of literature. The newspapers have announced her engagement to the duke of Rutland; the newspapers then report that the engagement is off. Miss Thrale is adored by a playwright, one Wilfred Quarles; once or twice in the past, she has bestowed a distracted kiss upon this young man. The characters possess vast fortunes and ancient bloodlines; their affections are noble though vehement; the dialog seems to swing between the extremes of a hollow grandiloquence worthy of Bulwer-Lytton and the epigrams of Wilde or Philip Guedalla. There is a nightingale and a night; there is a secret duel on the terrace. (Though almost entirely imperceptible, there are occasional curious contradictions, and there are sordid details.) The characters of the first act reappear in the second— under different names. The "playwright" Wilfred Quarles is a traveling salesman from Liverpool; his real name is John William Quigley. Miss Thrale does exist, though Quigley has never seen her; he morbidly clips pictures of her out of the *Tatler* or the *Sketch.* Quigley is the author of the first act; the implausible or improbable "country house" is the Jewish-Irish rooming house he lives in, transformed and magnified by his imagination. ... The plot of the two acts is parallel, though in the second everything is slightly menacing—everything is put off, or frustrated. When *The Secret Mirror* first opened, critics spoke the names "Freud" and "Julian Green." In my view, the mention of the first of those is entirely unjustified. Report had it that *The Secret Mirror was* a Freudian comedy; that favorable (though fallacious) reading decided the play's success. Unfortunately, Quain was over forty; he had grown used to failure, and could not go gently into that change of state. He resolved to have his revenge. In late 1939 he published *Statements,* perhaps the most original of his works—certainly the least praised and most secret of them. Quain would often argue that readers were an extinct species. "There is no European man or woman," he would sputter, "that's not a writer, potentially or in fact." He would also declare that of the many kinds of pleasure literature can minister, the highest is the pleasure of the imagination. Since not everyone is capable of experiencing that pleasure, many will have to content themselves with simulacra. For those "writers *manques"* whose name is legion, Quain wrote the eight stories of *Statements.* Each of them prefigures, or promises, a good plot, which is then intentionally frustrated by the author. One of the stories (not the best) hints at *two* plots; the reader, blinded by vanity, believes that he himself has come up with them. From the third story, titled "The Rose of Yesterday," I was ingenuous enough to extract "The Circular Ruins," which is one of the stories in my book *The Garden of Forking Paths.*

1941

The Library of Babel