

Idealism and Dystopia in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*

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The erstwhile narrator of Borges's dense and raveled fiction, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," concludes: "Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men."¹ Labyrinth indeed! There's the rub, for many men will "decipher" it (as is their wont) in many different ways. *Quot homines, tot sententiae*. But some won't decipher it at all. Even Borges himself admits that the story is one of his best, but that it was too complex and too involved to be included in his personal anthology.² André Maurois evades the issue entirely by confessing that the tale "gives food for endless thought,"³ but he does not find it necessary to produce a single instance of such thinking. Others believe it to be an innocent, simple, autobiographical tale: "Oppressed by physical reality and . . . the turmoil of Europe . . . Borges sought to create a coherent fictional world of the intelligence. This world is . . . adumbrated in 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.' Tlön is no 'irresponsible figment of the imagination' The [final section is] projected as a kind of tentative utopia."⁴ At the opposite extreme, it has been perceived as an exemplary postmodern metafiction,⁵ and even as trenchant satire.⁶

Borges surely knew well enough that he would stimulate such various responses: throughout the tale, he gives us glimpses of the scholars and the media; everywhere they conjecture, quarrel, postulate new hypotheses, and disagree amongst themselves. Exhibit A is the narrator himself—after all, the entire story (or "history") has been one that he has transmitted: he has reported every phase of the unfolding of information and hypothecation about Tlön, and he has been a chief sleuth and scholar-adventurer in this particular quest. Yet, at the close, he announces that he has voluntarily withdrawn, and he finally treats the whole affair with indifference or resignation; he has turned aside, and now translates Sir Thomas Browne into archaic Spanish. Even the "garden" he elects "to cultivate" (like *Candide*'s) differs from time to time. Indeed, the very conjectured "conspiracy" that created Tlön in the first place alters and changes. The original enclave (including Berkeley and Dalgarno) appear to consist of disinterested scientists and philosophers (15). That does not prevent this secret society from mysteriously

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964) 17-18. Subsequent references are to this edition. The story originally appeared in Borges's *Ficciones* (1945).

² Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Avon, 1970) 65.

³ André Maurois, "Preface," trans. Sherry Mangan, in *Labyrinths* xiii.

⁴ James E. Irby, "Introduction," in *Labyrinths* xvii.

⁵ Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre. Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 135-36.

⁶ Frank Palmeri, *Satire in Narrative* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) 127-29. He believes the story to be "dystopian," but "dialogic," that is, "leaving the reader suspended between unacceptable choices."

being "persecuted."⁷ But in the nineteenth century, an American millionaire is differently motivated; as an atheist at war with Christianity, he wants to ensure that the "movement" he now funds will be helpful in denigrating religion. And, in our own century, who can guess at the diverse motives of modern devotees of this curious and ill-defined "sect"?

Furthermore, even *Tlön* itself is inconsistent. The narrator mentions "the apparent contradictions" within the Eleventh Volume of the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* (7). Elsewhere, we learn that one language on that planet has no nouns, but that in the other hemisphere, strings of monosyllabic adjectives serve as nouns. Evidently, the inhabitants are idealists and do not believe that the spacial persists in time, and therefore profess a disbelief in objects. They reject materialism, yet *hrönir*, the duplication of lost (even imaginary) objects, are commonplace, the production of such *hrönir* even being turned into a thriving industry. All things are supposedly the same on their planet, yet we learn that their world is filled with "theological and metaphysical controversy" (7). Clearly, one of Borges's seminal points is that man is inconsistent, changeable, and untidy.

This fiction itself amply demonstrates the same disorderliness in its own form and content. It commences as a detective-sleuth fiction, featuring a quest for a mysterious book, a mysterious country, and so forth. The tale soon metamorphoses into the search for an elusive planet and, on earth, an investigation into the existence of a possible international conspiracy. Clue after clue surfaces or is slowly uncovered. Then, abruptly, in the middle of the story, the very fictionality and texture of this fiction seems to disappear, and the author becomes himself involved in "explaining," expounding, and lecturing upon *Tlön* and *Tlönic* conceptions. From being immersed in a thriller and a whodunit, we are suddenly displaced into an expository article that sounds suspiciously akin to the dry discourses to be found in an honest-to-God *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia!* Then, the final section of this tale shifts once more, and we find ourselves immersed in an apocalyptic fiction: slowly, implacably, all of planet Earth itself is being conquered by, and converted into, the realm of *Tlön*. As in the most absurd and far-fetched of science fiction stories, we witness an infectious disease from outer space spreading until it takes over our own world.

Needless to say, all of these shifts, from one kind of fiction to another, are disruptive and provide the reader with a bumpy ride. Catherine Belsay terms such quixotic and protean fictions "interrogative":⁸ instead of adhering to the formula of an established pattern or genre—such as the whodunit, the scholarly treatise, science fiction, dystopia—this Borges text veers erratically from one kind to another without apparent rhyme or reason, casting the reader repeatedly upon unexpected ground and unfamiliar soil. The security of anticipated literary cues and the formulae of familiar passageways and our almost Pavlovian responses have been eliminated, leaving the reader stranded and unsure.

⁷ On the twentieth-century paranoid genre of secret conspiracies, see John R. Clark, "Gaming in Modern Literature: Some Causes and Effects," *Modernist Studies* 4 (1982): 146-59.

⁸ *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), esp. 90-95.

We don't know what to make of this fictional nonfiction, or even what to make of an existent/nonexistent Tlön. Nonetheless, there are in the story certain qualities about this imagined world that we seem to be invited to admire. What is attractive to many of us is the lure of the unknown, the adventure of discovering "another world," even though it is an "anti-world." In addition, we are fascinated by and enamored of man's power and his God-like ability to be a "creator"—the maker of a new world and its civilizations. We are quite as gamesome as the *Tlönistas*, and it is tempting for us to "read into" this fable the allegory of, say, art and the imagination itself—themselves often idealistic, infinitely creative,⁹ and (we like to hope) capable, as are our daydreams, of influencing the real world by a kind of glorious wish-fulfillment and osmosis, as if merely dreaming something will make it so. Indeed, we are powerfully attracted by the idea that our imaginings can subsequently become a reality, just as the fiction here tells of one Johannes Valentinus Andrea, "a German theologian who, in the early seventeenth century, described the imaginary community of Rosae Crucis—a community that others founded later, in imitation of what he had figured" (5).

Nevertheless, behind all of the playfulness, creativity, and fantasy in this story, there is cause enough for dis-ease. After all, we are told that some mysterious "plot" is afoot and, ominously, a world of "fiction" appears to become unhinged from its confines, loosened from its moorings, until it invades and overruns the real world. The "idealism" of the *Tlönistas*, after all, is "monistic," and it spreads like a pestilential inflammation.

Bishop Berkeley's name is significantly associated in this tale with the origins of the Tlönistic movement. We should recollect that, in the real world, the doubts about reality originally propagated by Berkeley led, through Hume and Kant, to Hegel and to the German idealism in the nineteenth century. This stream also led to ideas of a fatal force and a universal will driving man toward progress and perfection, which in turn sparked the radical system of Marx and of many zealous revolutionary groups that have impinged so disastrously upon twentieth-century history and life.

In the tale, a heresiarch on Tlön purportedly postulates a sophism about nine copper coins and their existence and continuity, which would allow one to conceive of and accept the existence of "materialism." "*On Tuesday*," he proposes, "*X crosses a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds in the road four coins, somewhat rusted . . . On Friday, Z discovers three coins in the road. On Friday, morning, X finds two coins in the corridor of his house*" (11). Accordingly, the heresiarch deduces from this information the material existence and the persistence in time of these nine coins.

All of this is rather hilarious nonsense. On the one hand, of course, as already convinced pragmatists and materialists, we are predisposed to agree that such coins do indeed have a persistent and continuous life of their own, a unique identity. (Indeed, we believe further that said coins are possessions, subject to ownership.) Therefore, it is rather surprising to us when the heresiarch's account,

⁹ Neil D. Isaacs, "The Labyrinth of Art in Four *Ficciones* of Jorge Luis Borges," *SSF* 6 (1969): 383-94, argues that it is an allegory about art.

far from being very convincing, raises more questions than it puts to rest. Like Jonathan Swift, Borges loves to compound ambiguities by introducing distorted data and faulty mathematics. In the heresiarch's account, rain astonishingly manages to rust four coins (but only four!) in the span of a mere forty-eight hours. (Clearly a chemical impossibility.) And what of the other five? How are they exempted? In addition, the heresiarch's own timetable is unaccountably askew: Friday afternoon comes before Friday morning. Furthermore, these overlapping sets of time periods (Tuesday to Thursday, Tuesday to Friday afternoon, Tuesday to Friday morning) are counted *three times*, each treated as being a distinctly different "period." Lastly, two of the coins show up in someone's house—clearly undermining the argument being propounded that the coins retain a continuous identity. For these last two could very well be *different* coins, in which case, some of the original coins are still missing (or have vanished); or (and this is the more amusing possibility), someone has *stolen* these coins, has picked them up off the road and placed them in a house. At a single stroke, the heresiarch, instead of resolving difficulties, generates a hotbed of paradoxes about the nature of existence, temporality, possession, loss, and theft.

Back in the 1920s, the shrewd philosopher, George Santayana, mocked all Hegelians for their egoism, optimism, and intransigent idealism. Indeed, Santayana considers the Hegelians a group of sophists who will utilize specious logic and rhetoric to prove almost anything. But worse than that, he suggests that they not only honor obfuscating abstractions, but they also utilize such obscurantism to conceal their inclination to rob and steal. Hence Santayana satirically contends that Hegel will even employ abstractions to condemn abstraction—anything, in short, to advance his curious brand of materialism. In the midst of this coy diatribe, Santayana utilizes the example of coins in a way strikingly similar to that found in Borges's story. The philosopher's comments prove to be apt and relevant to the very question of coins that we have been considering.

"Suppose," Santayana begins, "I abstract a coin from another man's pocket: it is easily proved by Hegel's logic that such an abstraction is a mere appearance. Coins cannot exist as coins except as pocketed and owned; at the same time they imply an essential tendency to pass into the pockets of other men: for a coin that could not issue from the pocket would be a coin in name only, and not in function."¹⁰ Hence, by elaborate and fuzzy distortion and verbiage, coins are demonstrated to be created to be pocketed, and man, being defined as a pocket-like animal, is thereby entitled to confiscate coins at will. Of course, in Santayana's hands, this is a wonderful *reductio ad absurdum*. Anyone wanting to believe such cryptic ratiocinations will need to possess an incredible naiveté and an overwhelming secular faith in modern systems of "thought."

Yet that is precisely the point. For it was just such naiveté that led to the great heretical and secular "religions" of our own century—Hitler's National Socialism and Stalin's Communism—that elevate the abstract State *über alles*. And it is exactly such modern politics that are so important to Borges's story—important for their almost *total absence* from the scene! Let us recall that the key dates during the

¹⁰ "The British Hegelians," *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923) 206.

story's time sequences include 1935, 1940, and 1942. What has to be remarkable is the total absence of any reference to World War II, which was looming in the 1930s and then, after 1939, raging throughout most of Europe and Asia.¹¹ Tlönist idealism not only crowds reality off the stage, it is itself also a species of that self-same reality. The same absence of frame-of-reference is remarkable, for example, when the amoral Robinson Crusoe, keeping a diary on his desert island, merely records for December 25th: "Rain all day."¹² What Crusoe omits (i.e., the vacuity of his Christianity) tells the whole story.

So it is in this tale of Tlön. But, in the last section, Borges finally makes a small, passing allusion to diseased modern political and military events. Tlön, he reports to us, and the idea of Tlön, was appealing to all the peoples in our world; they were more than ready to embrace such an idealizing system, eager to accept and to endorse the absolutist ideals of Tlön: "Almost immediately, reality yielded on more than one account. The truth is that it longed to yield. 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?" (17). At this instant, the reader should be tumbled rudely to earth with a resounding *splat*: our games and our whimsies and our fancies of which fulfillment are of no help to us, alas—not when they lead us to Hitler and the Holocaust. Romantic man, yearning for exotic systems, might have just gotten what he deserved—but it was decidedly more than he had bargained for!

Ironically, Tlön commences to displace the known world; Tlön itself becomes an *hrönir*—a terrible new reality produced by wish-fulfillment! The progression in Borges's story is insidious and grotesque: the First World, Uqbar, imagines a fictitious Tlön, or Second World; then Tlön supplants Uqbar entirely; now, irony of ironies, this Second World has invaded our own planet, or Third World, and superseded it.¹³ The bitterest irony is that Borges's fiction insists that planet Earth is slowly becoming "idealistic" because of a steady and implacable infiltration into our world of alien ideas from the planet Tlön. Indeed, the Nazi and Bolshevik triumphs in the 1930s and 1940s demonstrate only too baldly that planet Earth does not need a Tlön to captivate us or to induce the spread of dangerous Hegelian and Marxist concepts: we are doing very well, thank you, all by ourselves!

On the other hand, the whole myth concerning Tlön and its insidious beliefs has been a home-grown conspiracy of our own all along—devised and promulgated by an invidious (if anomalous) secret society. Either way, and regardless of the source, Earth is portrayed as eagerly receptive to the wildest (and most dangerous) ideas and notions. In short, the worst-case scenario of the science fiction imagination—that aliens and monsters might invade and take over our planet—is not as scary as the prospect of our own ability to nurture and devise native-grown ideas that will destroy us equally well.

¹¹ Although the story itself was written in 1940 (including the "Postscript, 1947"), the imminence of the war was obvious enough.

¹² Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963) 79.

¹³ This is the progression that unfolds in the story's plot-line. Something of this sort is suggested by Didier T. Jaen, "The Esoteric Tradition in Borges' Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," *SSF* 21 (1984) 29.

At the outset of this satiric story, Borges explains that the narrator and Bioy Casares had planned "the composition of a novel in the first person, whose narrator would omit or disfigure the facts and indulge in various contradictions which would permit a few readers—a very few readers—to perceive an atrocious or banal reality" (3). Such fanciful idealism that our century has indulged itself in might be banal indeed, but the results it led to, our modern inheritance, has proved particularly deadly and "atrocious." Of that there can be no doubt.