Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius: The intrusion of a not-so-fantastic world

TLON, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS: THE INTRUSION OF A NOT-SO-FANTASTIC WORLD

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The fantasy genre has been one that readers have explored for generations, entering epic worlds (as in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy), or time and space far, far away (as in the *Star Wars* series). The key word here is 'enter'—one steps out of one's world and enters into another. However, the step one takes is not always very far.

These fantasy worlds are not entirely different from our own. If they were too alien, foreign or fantastic, then we would find little reason to enter into them. In the case of the *Lord of the Rings*, one recognizes the very human themes of war and good versus evil, even though these themes are explored within the context of wizards, hobbits, elves and dwarves. In *Star Wars,* the hero Luke Skywalker, though he is not from earth, is still human, and even the anti-hero Darth Vader (part man, part machine) is discovered to retain a human heart. Nevertheless, both forms of fantasy, and the majority that fit into this genre, are set in times long past or far into the distant future. While we enter these worlds, for the most part they retain their attributes of fantasy, and so we keep one foot in our own world so to speak. In Jorge Luis Borges's unique brand of fantasy, *Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,* one discovers a world that is not so fantastic, and rather than simply entering, the reader's world is intruded upon by this strange world. We discover the world of Tlon through the eyes of a human being with no special powers—a writer who discovers first a fake country (Uqbar) and then the imaginary world, Tlon. The setting for his investigation is the late 1930s through early 40s, and the place is Buenos Aires, a world in time and space not "long ago, in a galaxy far, far away." Let us first look at some of the humanistic features of Tlon.

To begin with, Tlon takes up the space of an encyclopedic record, a very common, familiar form: "I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia" (Borges 68). The discovery of this undocumented country, Uqbar, eventually leads to the discovery of Tlon. Now, a report on an encyclopedic entry is not

otherworldly or unusual. Further, we are informed in the postscript that the records of the imaginary world Tlon grew into forty volumes, so that "some of the unbelievable features of Volume Eleven" had to be eliminated in order to "set forth a world that is not too incompatible with the real world" (81). This clever turn in the narrative comes too late, since the reader has by this point, already been exposed to these baffling features (such as "the multiplication of *hronir*," which along with other elements will be closely examined shortly). The ironic effect is that our attention is drawn even more so to these attributes, and we find them more and more compatible with our own world than we ever imagined.

What is it about these characteristics of Tlon that make them not so incompatible with our world? There are the references made to those familiar and famous names in philosophy, such as Berkeley and Schopenhauer, related to philosophical ideologies and questions which parallel those in our own minds—questions of knowledge, existence, God, and so on. The territories of Tlon, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius may be "essayistic commentaries on imaginary, non existent countries, authors, or books…deserving of the fantastic label" (Menton 417), but the end result is the depiction of worlds with which we are readily acquainted.

Another way the narrative proves more realistic is that the narrator is a human with no special powers, such as wielding a light saber or moving objects with only the force of his mind, but is rather, an everyday human being, like the reader. That is why it is easy to follow the voice of this narrator as he reports his findings, step-by-step, until we reach the same final conclusions that he does. Interestingly, even though he is initially doubtful of the reality of the undocumented country, Uqbar, and recognizes that Tlon is an imaginary realm, the leap he makes from unreality to reality is so smooth we barely notice it. After asking who invented Tlon, he surmises that the original conjecture that said it was invented by a secret society of "astronomers, biologists, engineers," is implausible; few are capable of such imagination and "fewer still capable of subordinating imagination to a rigorous and systematic plan" (Borges 72). In the next phrase he decides that although at first Tlon was thought of as "a mere chaos, an irresponsible act of imaginative license, today we know that it is a cosmos, and that the innermost laws that govern it have been formulated, however provisionally so" (72). The lines between fantastic and real blur, and we are swept right along.

Our human reporter, in effect, holds Tlon up as a mirror to our world (a world that we share with him) as he reflects on its resonant themes, philosophies and ideals and compares them with ours.

However, while Tlon often reflects our world in many ways (as we shall see), it often distorts it. It is just what takes place for the narrator of "Covered Mirrors," another of Borges' stories: "the constant, infallible functioning of mirrors, the way they followed my every movement, their cosmic pantomime…I feared sometimes that they would begin to veer off from reality" (Borges 297). The mirrors began to intrude upon him—pantomiming his movements but also distorting them. In a similar way, we find the Tlon mirror intruding upon us, and we cannot easily escape, so that the unreal begins to replace the actual.

We can examine the ways in which Tlon intrudes upon our world, both reflecting and distorting it, by taking a look at Tlon's so-called "unbelievable features," its "architectures and its playing cards, the horror of its mythologies and the murmur of its tongues, its emperors and its seas, its minerals and its birds and fishes, its algebra and its fire, its theological and metaphysical controversies" (71-72). By doing so, we find ourselves both amazed and perplexed at the accuracies and fallacies of the Tlon mirror.

We can begin with its conception of the universe: "Hume declared for all time that while Berkeley's arguments admit not the slightest refutation, they inspire not the slightest conviction. That pronouncement is entirely true with respect to the earth, entirely false with respect to Tlon" (Borges 72). Here we are informed that the people of Tlon are, like our own Berkeley, idealists. Berkeley's idealist doctrine says that objects do not have any existence outside of the minds or thinking things, which perceive them. Similarly, for Tlon, "the world is not an amalgam of *objects* in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent *acts"* (73). Echoing the idealist notion, in the language of Tlon there are no nouns, but a series of verbs and adverbs: our "moon" becomes for them "to moonate" or "to enmoon." These linguistic rules hold for the southern hemisphere; in the northern, the primary unit is the monosyllabic adjective—nouns are formed by stringing adjectives together so that instead of "moon" one says "aerial-bright above dark-round" or some such string (73). While this philosophy of language may at first seem ridiculous, it springs from a mutual desire to use language to order, shape and construct our realities. Borges himself discussed this precise need in his nonfiction essay, "Verbiage for Poems." He recognizes that "language is an efficient ordering of the world's enigmatic abundance" and that "we invent nouns to fit reality" (21). He also uses the example of the moon:

> The moon itself is a fiction. Outside of astronomical conventions, which should not concern us here, there is no similarity whatsoever between the yellow sphere now rising clearly over the wall of the Recoleta

> cemetery and the pink slice I saw in the sky above the Plaza de Mayo many nights ago. All nouns are abbreviations. Instead of saying cold, sharp, burning, unbreakable, shining, pointy, we utter "dagger." (21)

He says we lie to ourselves, as when we "touch a sphere, see a small heap of dawn-colored light," and when "our mouths enjoy a tingling sensation" calling these three disparate things only one thing, an orange." However, the point is the "inventive character of any language," or language to construct realities (Borges 21). We need to do this in order to make sense of our world. Similarly, though the people of Tlon construct their reality through language far differently than we do, their purpose reflects our own. It is *not* entirely true, then, that Berkeley's idealist notions are without conviction here on earth. Many of us—especially poets—would rather (and perhaps do) string along verbs or adjectives rather than confine ourselves to the use of nouns in our attempt to define the array of objects in our universe.

Another aspect of Tlon to investigate is its psychology. The conception of the universe as "a series of mental processes that occur not in space but rather successively, in time" (73) is not a novel idea to one familiar with Berkeley and Hume. Berkeley is the source of *esse est percipi* (to exist is to be perceived). For Hume, each man is "a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity" (Borges 320), as noted by Borges in his nonfiction essay, "A New Refutation of Time." Both Berkeley and Hume, like Tlonists, affirmed the existence of time. But Tlon takes it a step further. Their idealism "renders science null" (Borges 74). How so? Our narrator tells us that "to explain (or pass judgment on) an event is to link it to another; on Tlon, that joining-together is a posterior state of the *subject,* and can neither affect nor illuminate the prior state" (74). This is perhaps where we begin to see Tlon's distortion of idealism into a rejection of the scientific method, which does link events together and which is a time-honored field in our world. Further, the "metaphysicians of Tlon seek not truth, or even plausibility—they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy" (74). To reduce the philosophy of the mind into a form of fantasy is to offend centuries of deep human thought and study into it, as well as fervor for its discoveries.

Nevertheless, while distorting our conception of idealism, science and metaphysics, the anxiety stirred by their philosophical views resembles those aroused by controversies in our own branches of philosophy. This leads to the next branch of philosophy of Tlon, one having to do with the existence of time.

One of these schools of philosophy "goes so far as to deny the existence of time; it argues that the present is undefined and indefi-

nite, the future has no reality except as present hope, and the past has no reality except as present recollection" (Borges 74). Does this not sound familiar? If it does, it is because Borges similarly refuted the continuity of time. He respected both Berkeley and Hume, who—while agreeing on the existence of time—disagreed on their views of the existence of objects. But Borges took them both to task by refuting the existence of time itself. He backs his argument up from sources such as Marcus Aurelius, Schopenhauer, and even from Buddhist concepts.

A passage from Marcus Aurelius says that, "No one loses the past or the future, because no man can be deprived of what he does not have" (Borges 227). As much as any of us talk about the past or future as if we own them, none of us have either in our grasp. For Schopenhauer, "No man has lived in the past, and none will ever live in the future; the *present* alone is the form of all life" (227). The fifth-century Buddhist treatise, *Visuddhimagga* or *The Path to Purity*, says: "The man of a past moment has lived, but he does not live nor will he live; the man of a future moment will live, but he has not lived nor does he now live; the man of the present moment lives, but he has not lived nor will he live" (Borges 331). If these concepts of time are baffling—and they are for many—then the Tlonists' denial of time is not necessarily surprising. For them, present, past, and future are unreliable; for Borges, time does not exist outside each present moment.

So far then, this particular school of thought on time from Tlon's perspective is very much reflective of schools of thought in our own world. But notice the alternative views of other schools on Tlon, each one equally intriguing:

> Another school posits that all time has already passed, so that our life is but the crepuscular memory, or crepuscular reflection, doubtlessly distorted and mutilated, of an irrevocable process. Yet another claims that the history of the universe—and in it, our lives and every faintest detail of our lives—is the handwriting of a subordinate god trying to communicate with a demon. Another, that the universe might be compared to those cryptograms in which not all the symbols count, and only what happens every three hundred nights is actually real. Another, that while we sleep here, we are awake somewhere else, so that every man is in fact two men. (74)

Is the Tlon mirror here serving as a cosmic pantomime, or veering off from reality? Do these various choices in schools of thought amaze or frustrate? Perhaps the array of possibilities borders on the ridiculous or unfathomable. Regardless, the answer relies on our view of what reality is, and as we've seen from just the previous examples among our own world philosophers, the matter is clearly debatable.

In our literary experiences, one of the joys of owning a library

is having books signed by our favorite authors. On Tlon, "books are rarely signed" (Borges 76). In fact, neither "does the concept of plagiarism exist: It has been decided that all books are the work of a single author who is timeless and anonymous" (77). There goes the ego and vanity of the aspiring writer who wants to stand out from all the rest. Does this concept of one anonymous author seem absurd? Think of the reverse; for example, the claim that has been made that Shakespeare was not really one man or author, but several. These individual identities then become obscured or narrowed down into a single subject. The same possibility has been claimed for Homer. Looking into the mirror of Tlon in this case, we see not a distortion but a reversal.

Let us now move on to what can be considered the most peculiar feature of Tlon—the *hronir.* There are three things to note about the nature of the *hronir*: (1) They are secondary objects, or duplicates, and are found or perceived because they are expected; (2) They are slightly longer than the primary or original object; (3) The first attempts to produce them were unsuccessful. Looking at the experiment performed by the warden on his prison inmates helps explain why these first attempts failed, and thus further enlightens the nature of the *hronir.*

The inmates were told that if they brought in an important find from among ancient tombs, they would be set free from prison. They proved unsuccessful because they were overreaching in their greed to find the objects. This experiment on how to produce more of the *hronir* was repeated at four high schools. When the project was spontaneous at one of these schools (where the principal died early in the excavations), the results were better; in other words, it was better when people were not aware of the experimental nature of the search. They (the Tlonists) perceived objects into being when totally unaware that they were doing so—in other words, naturally. But at the same time they would have to expect to find what they were looking for; the rules, then, in the production of *hronir* are that they can only see something that they have something to connect it to—in this case, an image in their heads of what they want to find. Another example to elucidate this notion is where two people are looking for a pencil–one finding it, but the other finding it too because he expects to do so.

The *hronir* is a prime example of this fact on Tlon: "Century upon century of idealism could hardly have failed to influence reality" (Borges 77). And this idealism is rooted in Berkeley's notion of *esse est percipi*. Or did Tlon come up with idealism first? The narrator is never clear and by this time neither are we. What he does right before the postscript is say that the "systematic production of *hronir* (says

Volume Eleven) has been of invaluable aid to archaeologists, making it possible not only to interrogate but even to modify the past, which is now no less plastic, no less malleable than the future" (77-78). If objects only exist because they are perceived by minds, then the past and the future can be modified through mind perception; an example of this on Tlon: "the only *hron* unearthed…dated some time *later* than the date of the experiment" (77).

What about idealism's influence upon our reality? We owe much of the empiricist way of thinking—a form of idealism—to Berkeley, one of the three philosophers (the other two being Locke and Hume) whose notion "demands that all knowledge, except for certain logical truths and principles of mathematics, comes from experience" (Solomon 244). This school of thought endured into the 20th century through the philosophy of Bertrand Russell and the logical empiricists or positivists (244). Berkeley's thesis of subjective idealism falls under epistemology, "the study of human knowledge—how we get it, what it is, whether we have it, or why we don't" (185). And for us, as for Tlon, subjective idealism is "the doctrine that there are no material substances, no physical objects, only minds and ideas in mind" (214). Therefore, Tlon and our world reflect each other when it comes to idealism. The questions to consider are: Is it possible for us as humans to take our idealism and modify the past or the future? If so, how? We can arrive at the answer by looking at the postscript to Tlon.

Here the 'truth' about Tlon begins to unravel. We learn that since 1940, all forty volumes of the history of Tlon have been found. It is confirmed that it has its roots in the early seventeenth century with a secret society in London (including George Berkeley, not surprisingly), with the simple mission of inventing a country. Eventually, "the members of the society realized that one generation would not suffice for creating and giving full expression to a country" (Borges 78). They decided to pass the work on to the next generation and the next, until two hundred years later, a reclusive millionaire named Ezra Buckley decided that "it was nonsense to invent a country—what they ought to do was invent a planet" (79).

Most interestingly, our narrator reveals "the first intrusion of the fantastic world of Tlon into the real world" when the Princess Faucigny Lucinge discovers a compass in a crate amidst her silver table service with one of the letters of the alphabets of Tlon (Borges 79-80). The encyclopedic volumes of Tlon are thus supported in their reality by discovered objects from Tlon such as gleaming metal cones—unbearably heavy, which the narrator says left him with an "unpleasant aftertaste of fear and revulsion" (80). What is it he fears? The spread of the Tlonian objects through various countries expands the Tlon

reality to the point that "handbooks, anthologies, surveys, 'literal translations,' authorized and pirated reprints of Mankind's Greatest Masterpiece filled the world, and still do" (81). What he fears is what has already taken place—"Contact with Tlon, the *habit* of Tlon, has disintegrated this world. Spellbound by Tlon's rigor, humanity has forgotten, and continues to forget, that it is the rigor of chess masters, not of angels" (81). He goes on to list the intrusion or infiltration of Tlon—into schools with its history obliterating the history he knew, into pharmacology and archaeology, into biology and mathematics.

Our disillusioned narrator plunges us with him into despair, as he predicts that by the time "the hundred volumes of *The Second Encyclopedia of Tlon"* are discovered*, "*French and English and mere Spanish will disappear from the earth. The world will be Tlon" (Borges 81).

Like our disillusioned narrator, the narrator of the "Covered Mirrors" feared that these mirrors "would begin to veer off from reality" (Borges 297). And by the end of his story, he learns that his companion, Julia, went insane because she saw his reflection in the mirrors in her room—"usurping her own" (298). He defines this experience as "dreadful bondage" (298). Before the postscript, we reveled, sometimes amazed, sometimes perplexed, at the discovery of Tlon's philosophies, ideas and way of living. It was the novelty of this discovery that prompted us to read on, at times seeing reflections of our own world, at other times distortions or reversals. Nevertheless, we learn from our discovery of the cultures of Tlon that our own worldview is not necessarily universal, and we are moved to be accepting of alternative views of the world. But by the end of the postscript, we sympathize with the despair of our narrator that this world of Tlon, despite having been fake, has the power to usurp our own reflection and replace our world. This postscript serves as a warning: Do not let the Other take over and supplant your own identity and culture.

Roberto González Echevarría says in his *Myth and Archive* that "what the new discourse seeks is not so much knowledge about the Other as much as knowledge about the Other's knowledge" (González Echevarría 150). Learning about other cultures and their viewpoints can indeed prove enlightening, but on the other hand it can prove dangerous if we allow such knowledge of these other cultures to erase our own. Then we lose ourselves. And by the end of the Tlon adventure, we face the horror of the real world being swallowed up by the imaginary one. Yes, the horror lies not just with the possibility of our personal identity being usurped by the individual 'Other,' but by an 'Other' entire world.

This warning has currency in our contemporary lives, when more than ever the virtual world (broadly defined as any kind of perceptual illusion) intrudes on the real. When watching a movie in a theater such as the recent blockbuster *Avatar*, for example, we go into it knowing it is just fantasy, and yet for some of us the illusion continues to exist even after we exit the theater. We find ourselves envying the otherworldly powers of the big-screen heroes, dissatisfied with our comparably mundane lives. Perhaps we snap out of such fantasy once the film is over. However, a constant bombardment of similar virtualities on the Internet and television can make it difficult to discern the pressing matters of our world. To paraphrase Noam Chomsky (*Noam Chomsky on the World*), there are two elements of television—content and fill. The content is the advertising, and "the fill is the car chase to keep you watching until the next ad comes on." Humor aside, Chomsky turns to the very serious matter of how the inundation of advertisements to buy this or that turns people into passive consumers who max out their credit cards in pursuit of their personal fantasies rather than citizens who pay attention to what's going on in the world. He points out the shameful fact that most Americans don't know anything about the outside world. Not only are people ignorant in terms of geography and politics, but of the oppression of fellow human beings in other parts of the world, and of impending dangers that threaten to disintegrate the world at large. In effect, we become victims of ignorance not only of the 'Other' but also of our immediate world and the powers that be. Ultimately, the virtual world dominates.

The Tlon anthropological report ends with the narrator giving up, and giving in to the disintegration of the world, his only useful action being to revise "an indecisive translation in the style of Quevedo of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urne Buriall"* (Borges 81). As we too exit this not-so-fantastic world, let us put our knowledge of its concepts and perplexities to use by taking with us, among other things, the *hronir* and its idealistic nature. González Echevarría further muses: "Anthropological knowledge could correct the errors of the conquest, atone for the crimes of the past, and make for a new history" (150), thus turning our cultural knowledge of the 'Other' and of ourselves into something positive and useful, rather than controlling and oppressive. In a sense, this hopefulness is idealistic; he is saying that knowledge can prove to be an active force for atonement. How can knowledge be turned into reality? As the systematic production of *hronir* made it possible for archaeologists to interrogate and modify the malleable past, so too can we interrogate our past and make for a new history. We can do this by first actively acquiring knowledge

of our (entire) world, including the ways in which we suppress and abuse both ourselves and the 'Other,' and secondly, by preventing such damaging occurrences from occurring in the first place—thus molding the future. Ideally, it will not, as it did for Tlon, take century upon century to do so.

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