

Student: John Coetzee

Fantasizing Reality in Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbus Tertius"

In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbus Tertius," first published in 1941, Jorge Luis Borges displays his flair for labyrinthine narrative, challenges the reader's expectations, and indulges his penchant for metaphysics. A strange quote leads the speaker to search for an article on the nation of Uqbar in the Anglo-American Cyclopedia. He is unable to find it, but his friend's edition of the same encyclopedia, bought at a book sale years ago, does contain it. Strangely, Uqbar is not accounted for by the alphabetic cipher on the spine of the volume.

The speaker is troubled by the underlying vagueness of the article. Even Uqbar's location is ambiguous. Also, the article mentions that the literature of Uqbar is "fantastic, and never refers to reality, but to the two imaginary regions of Tlön and Mlejnan." Further research uncovers nothing.

Soon after, the death of an old friend, Herbert Ashe, leads to the speaker's discovery of A First Encyclopedia of Tlön, which contains highly detailed descriptions of the imaginary world referred to by the Uqbar article. The speaker becomes part of an international society of Tlönists who work, unsuccessfully, to uncover the mysterious origins of the book. The speaker then devotes several pages to describing the curious languages, cultures, and philosophies of Tlön, which seem extremely idealistic.

Another letter addressed to the deceased Ashe is discovered, and it tells that Tlön was created by a "benevolent secret society" and funded by an American "millionaire ascetic" named Ezra Buckley. "Orbis Tertius" is the provisional name given to the project. Then the imaginary world of Tlön begins to "intrude" into the real world. A Tlönian compass and a small, heavy cone made of Tlönian metal are discovered. Soon afterwards, the full 40 volumes of the Tlön encyclopedia are found. This leads to a far-reaching enthusiasm for Tlön, causing people all over the world to abandon their own cultures, which they replace with a fervent study of Tlön. In the end, the speaker observes that "contact with Tlön and the ways of Tlön have disintegrated this world."

In a most general way, the story is about the conflict between imagination and reality. This is constantly addressed, from the speaker's mistrust of Bioy's story, to the dubiousness of the Uqbar article, to the philosophies of Tlön, to the characterization of Ashe, and culminates in the "conquest" of humanity by Tlön. All these details become the foundation of the story's theme that imagination and fantasy are stronger than reality.

This reading of the story is supported by the speaker's emotions, the culture of Tlön, Tlön's physical intrusion into our world, and Tlön's eventual triumph over earthly culture. First, there is the speaker's own reaction to Uqbar and Tlön. When he first hears about Uqbar, he displays only mild curiosity and a mistrust of his friend, "I supposed that this undocumented country and its anonymous heresiarch had been deliberately invented by Bioy out of modesty, to substantiate a phrase". But as the mystery deepens, his fascination grows. When he discovers the First Encyclopedia of Tlön, his reaction is one of almost religious rapture, saying, "in the Islamic world, there is one night, called the Night of Nights, on which the secret gates of the sky open wide and the water in the jugs tastes sweeter; if those gates were to open, I would not feel

what I felt that afternoon." Soon afterwards he joins (or forms) an international society of Tlön enthusiasts, and the study of this imaginary planet becomes the center of his life.

Then, there is the culture and philosophy of Tlön itself. With its lack of nouns, its dismissal of materialism, and its emphasis on idealism, the "association of ideas," and poetry, Tlön strongly favors imagination over conventional western concepts of reality, and seems to derive much of its attraction from this trait. As the speaker says, "this monism, or extreme idealism, completely invalidates science...the metaphysicians of Tlön are not looking for truth, nor even for an approximation of it; they are after a kind of amazement."

Perhaps the strangest moment of the story is when the world of Tlön begins to "intrude" upon the actual world. The two incidents are the discovery of a Tlönian compass by the Princess of Faucigny Lucinge, and of a heavy metal cone by the speaker. At first it seems that these objects may have simply been constructed by Tlön enthusiasts, but the speaker states that the heavy cone is "made of a metal which does not exist in this world." This suggests that the Tlön fantasy is so powerful that it can even overcome the physical laws of our universe!

But Tlön's real victory is in the hearts and minds of the people. As fascination with the meticulously crafted world of Tlön spreads, it causes people to lose interest in the cultures, histories, and philosophies of their own world, and refocuses all attention on itself. As the speaker says, "contact with Tlön and the ways of Tlön have disintegrated this world." In essence, Tlön conquers the known world.

Borges embodies his themes in a distinctive style. Let us look at his use of unfollowed references and caricature. The story seems to be written in a very dense, ornate manner. Much of this effect is due to the frequent dropping of references to objects or events within the story which are never further elaborated on, as if the author is constantly starting off in ten directions at once. For example, after the Princess of Faucigny Lucinge finds the Tlönian compass, she is never referred to again. It is never explained what her relation is to the speaker, or to anything else in the story, nor even where "Faucigny Lucinge" is. The same is true of the "etymology of the word gaucho," and of Herbert Ashe's "sundial and some oak trees."

Borges' characters are very spare and undeveloped. Not merely flat, we could say they are caricatures, for what little information we are given seems more concerned with emphasizing the unusualness of the character than with creating a believable person. For example, Herbert Ashe visits England and photographs only sundials and oak trees, and spends his days playing chess in total silence. Ezra Buckley is a millionaire ascetic, an apologist for slavery, and a freethinking nihilist who devotes his fortune to the creation of an imaginary world simply to "demonstrate to the nonexistent God that mortal men were capable of conceiving a world." This way of writing is consistent with the Latin American literary style known as magical realism.

Borges' primary insight is about western civilization itself. He seems to be saying that the kind of dry rational thought preferred by western civilization is deeply unsatisfying to the human imagination, which hungers for the fantastic and will jump at it if given the chance. This is evident in the enthusiastic way that the peoples of earth abandon their own cultures to study the imaginary world of Tlön, in which fantasy and amazement, instead of truth, are considered the superior values.

To my mind, this is a great story because it stimulates my imagination, challenges my intellect, upsets my preconceptions, and yet retains a sense of playfulness about the strange images that it creates.

