

READING THE SHORT STORIES: FICTIONS

Borges spoke often of the distinctive power he attributed to fiction. As a reader, he wrote of the transformative effect certain books had on his own life. As a critic, he championed a select, slightly out-of-date group of authors he particularly admired (Chesterton, Stevenson, Kipling, Wells). And as a writer, he admitted that he could not finish, let alone attempt to emulate, the work of many of the great early modernists (James Joyce, Ezra Pound). All of this gives us some clue as to the kind of fiction that Borges sought to produce himself: the tale, the short story, what the French call the *récit* and the Spanish call the *cuento*. It is not a record of psychological development, in which the subject's character is revealed through a series of dramatic incidents. It is not an account that plays on narrative distance, the subtle shifting relationship between the writer and their characters. To this extent, Borges' fictions would be the antithesis of the 'realism' of Émile Zola and Gustave Flaubert. But they also could not be understood as one of the experiments in authorial voice inaugurated by such writers as Henry James and E.M. Forster. On the contrary, as opposed to the slow, controlled development and sense of inevitability in those authors, as though the end of the story is reached in fulfilment of some objective social law or moral or literary truth, Borges constantly emphasizes the element of surprise, of unexplained narrative reversal, in his fiction. At once everything in his stories is directed towards the end; but this end when it arrives opens up an entirely different reading of everything that came before, which remained hidden until that moment. The model here is not the 'realism' or 'naturalism' of the nineteenth-century French *roman* or the internal psychological drama of the twentieth-century English novel, but the conceptual wit and brevity of the eighteenth-century French *conte* and the self-enclosed artificiality of the twentieth-century American detective story. As Borges writes in

his essay 'Narrative Art and Magic', contrasting these two different approaches to fiction:

I have described two causal procedures: the natural or incessant result of endless, uncontrollable causes and effects; and magic, in which every lucid and determined detail is a prophecy. In the novel, I think the only possible integrity lies in the latter. Let the former be left to psychological simulations. (TL, 82)

It is for this reason that Borges' own fictions became the founding case for the critical category of 'metafiction' and were seen to pioneer the literary genre of 'magical realism'. Metafiction in its most general terms could be defined as the exploration of 'the relationship between the world *of* the fiction and the world *outside* the fiction'.¹ Magical realism in its turn could be said to be characterized by 'the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings'.² Certainly, throughout his writings Borges was conscious of the constructedness of the worlds he was creating and interested in exploring the conventions that defined fictional as opposed to other kinds of writing. As we have seen already in 'The Garden of Forking Paths', 'The Immortal', 'Pierre Menard' and 'The Library of Babel', Borges in his stories frequently incorporates actually existing books, documentary facts and himself and his friends as characters in the attempt to confuse fictional and non-fictional writing. Similarly, in such stories as 'The Zahir' and 'The Aleph', we have seen an element of the fantastic enter and corrupt quotidian reality without it being explained in terms of dream or hallucination or any other supernatural rationalization. It becomes unclear in Borges' stories – and, as we have seen, this is one of their deepest subjects – what is real and what is unreal. As David William Foster says of this metafictional aspect of Borges' work: '[It] is metaphorical of the process of fiction, both on the external level of man's creation of systems as well as on the internal level of man's creation of literary artifices'.³ And as Suzanne Jill Levine says of Borges' role as the progenitor of Latin American magic realism: 'Borges drew the line between the old and the new . . . by inventing a new – soon to be labelled 'postmodern' – concept of fiction'.⁴

These are undoubtedly important insights into Borges' work, but we can be more specific still in elaborating what Borges means by fiction and the particular power he attributes to it. There is more at stake here than the simple collapse of the distinction between reality and fiction or the intrusion of the fantastic into the everyday. In fact, if we look carefully at the Borges stories we have examined so far, we notice a very specific narrative economy. What we read is at once the effect and delay of the phenomenon of which it speaks. We might give just one example of this. 'The Zahir' begins with the narrator describing an obsession he knows will eventually consume him so that he will be unable to think of anything else. How the story will end is evident in almost the opening words of the story. And yet the narrative – which in a way *is* the very obsession the narrator speaks of – is also the endless deferral of this inevitability. As long as the narrator can continue to speak of the Zahir, we know that he has not completely fallen under its spell. And we see the same thing in each of the Borges narratives we have looked at: in 'Forking Paths', everything exists as only one of the infinitely many possibilities produced by the labyrinth, except for the narrative that speaks of this; in 'The Library of Babel', everything is subject to the rules of the Library, except for the story in which we read about it; in 'The Aleph', the entire world is contained within the Aleph, except for the point of view that allows us to see this. Because of this 'contradiction', the narratives of Borges' stories have a very specific temporality: neither the linear unwinding of events from the beginning to the end nor even the retrospective re-reading of events from the end back to the beginning, but the infinite deferral of an event that has already occurred. Of course, we return here to the narrative logic of something like *1001 Nights*, an absolute touchstone for Borges; and beyond that to his particular understanding of Zeno's paradox, in which similarly the end can be endlessly deferred, but only because we have already reached it. It is something Lisa Block de Behar speaks of as the temporality of 'retrospective anticipation' that marks Borges' fictions, and Sylvia Molloy as the 'interpolation' that makes them up, in which something 'opens the text up in the middle' between two points.⁵ In this sense, the event Borges' fictions narrate never actually occurs, but the narration itself is proof that it already has. And it is this, finally, that Borges means

by fiction: not the collapse of reality into fiction but the awareness that reality is possible only insofar as it stands in for a fiction. It would be a fiction that precedes and will eventually take over reality, but that can be narrated and made conscious only insofar as reality persists. We take up in more detail what Borges means by 'fiction' through a close reading of two texts here: 'The Lottery in Babylon' and 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'.

'TLÖN, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS'

The last story of Borges we consider here is 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', which was originally published in *Sur* in May 1940, and subsequently went on to become the first story in *The Garden of Forking Paths* when it appeared in 1941. It is undoubtedly one of the stories for which Borges is best known. It has been widely reprinted in literary and science-fiction anthologies, and it is the story that Mick Jagger reads a section aloud from in the bath when he plays a gangster in the film *Performance*. It is one of the stories, along with 'The Garden of Forking Paths', 'Pierre Menard' and 'The Aleph', that has inspired the most admiration and commentary from Borges' critics. For example, the critic

Martin Stabb in his survey of Borges' stories describes 'Tlön' as a 'tour de force of literary gamesmanship';⁸ and biographer James Woodall speaks of Borges in 'Tlön' 'deploying astonishing narrative forces . . . an elaborate intellectual conceit, existential fear and numerous, teasing autobiographical reference points'.⁹ As Woodall implies here, 'Tlön' is frequently seen as the most autobiographical or at least 'Borgesian' of Borges' stories, the one in which he comes closest to outlining his genuine literary and philosophical beliefs. The idealism of the imaginary land of Tlön, as outlined in the *Encyclopaedia* devoted to it in the story, is said to represent Borges' own idealism. And the notorious remark in the 'Postscript' to the story expressing a certain distance towards both 'Nazism' and 'dialectical materialism' is also said to represent Borges' own quietist liberalism, a lack of political commitment for which he has often been criticized. However, in both of these regards, the text is not quite so straightforward as it might appear. If Borges *does* put forward his own beliefs in 'Tlön', it is only – and this is exactly one of the powers he attributes to fiction – to question them, suspend them, show that they are possible only because of what is opposed to them. Equally, if Borges is understood to reject both Marxism and dialectical materialism because of their ideological extremism, the logic of fiction Borges advocates in their place is revealed to be far more extreme in its ambition to take over the world.

As we say, 'Tlön', perhaps for the very reason that it is seen to be close to Borges' own personal beliefs, has inspired more academic commentary than virtually any other Borges story. 'Tlön' is inevitably read in terms of the philosophical doctrine of idealism, which is specifically featured at several points in the story. Indeed, the eighteenth-century English philosopher George Berkeley is even named as one of the members of the conspiracy that gives birth to Tlön. Commentators also detect traces of a pantheism – the idea that a single God or spirit infuses every part of the world – that was associated with the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who is one of the thinkers that Borges has said was most important to him. Beyond this, the subject of a secret society dedicated to inventing or discovering a higher or hidden truth behind appearances has allowed some to interpret Borges' story as an expression of his 'esotericism', his belief in a mystical or occult explanation

of the world that can be known only to a group of initiates. The critic Didier Jaén, in a book devoted to the topic, puts this most acutely when he wonders whether the story is ‘a parodic history of the transformation of the world under the influence of [the seventeenth-century secret society] the Rosicrucians’.¹⁰ Along similar lines, critics have seen the imaginary world of *Tlön*, which Borges elaborates in great detail in the story, as indicating a certain ‘utopian’ impulse in Borges’ work. This has been viewed positively by such critics as James Irby as exercising a ‘process of ‘negative thinking’ that keeps us ‘aware of the conjectural character of all knowledge and all representation’.¹¹ However, it has also been viewed negatively by such post-colonial critics as Beatriz Sarlo as a ‘conservative’ attempt to produce a pure and unmixed world of the imagination in the face of the heterogeneous racial and social mix of the region in reality.¹² ‘*Tlön*’ has even been described by critics as a ‘parody’ of the regional novel, in effect, of magic realism, before the genre as such was invented.¹³ Equally contradictorily, the novel has been read both as a not-so-subtle metaphor for the potential takeover of the world by the Axis forces, which at the time were making great advances across Europe, and a highly deliberate and self-conscious reflection on the operation of fiction itself. At the same time, that is, Borges could say a few months after the publication of the story and perhaps by way of explanation, ‘each morning, reality resembled more and more a nightmare’,¹⁴ and the story can be understood as a ‘partial allegory of the emergence of Borges’ fiction over the years’.¹⁵ Nevertheless, with regard to the latter interpretation, it would be too much to argue, as some critics have, that it is in ‘*Tlön*’ that Borges ‘exhibits most forcefully the contention that reality cannot be distinguished from fiction’.¹⁶ In fact, as we will see, the true argument of the story is that fiction can never entirely become identical with reality; that if reality is possible only because of a certain fiction, this fiction for its part can never definitively be realized.

The story starts off, in a much-cited beginning, with the narrator, whom we take to be Borges, having dinner with his old friend Bioy Casares (Adolfo Bioy Casares, as we know, was a real person, a lifelong friend and literary collaborator of Borges). During their conversation, Bioy repeats a saying he remembers from one of the ‘heresiarchs of *Uqbar*’ to the effect that ‘mirrors

and copulation are abominable, for they multiply the number of mankind' (*CF*, 68). When challenged by the narrator as to the source of this epigram, Bioy says that it comes from the entry on Uqbar in his 1917 edition of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, which is a 'literal reprint' of the earlier 1902 edition of the better-known *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. A copy of the *Cyclopaedia* is found in the house in which the narrator is staying, but a search of it fails to turn up the reference, or indeed any mention of Uqbar itself. The next day Bioy rings Borges up to tell him he has found the reference to Uqbar in his copy of the *Cyclopaedia*, although he had misremembered the original quotation, which is slightly longer. The narrator then says that he would like to see Bioy's copy, which is discovered to be exactly the same as the narrator's, except for the extra pages at the end of one volume that are devoted to Uqbar. Together the narrator and Biyoys read the entry. It strikes them as very much like a typical encyclopaedia entry, covering the various aspects of the region's geography, history and literature, although it is marked by a certain vagueness regarding specifics. The only memorable aspect of the entry regards Uqbar's literature, which it notes is one of fantasy, insofar as it never refers to reality but rather to the two imaginary realms of Mle'khnas and Tlön. The bibliography for the entry lists four references, which cannot be found, although one does figure in another catalogue, and the narrator later finds the author of another referred to by Thomas De Quincey as a theologian who described an imaginary community named 'Rosy Cross', which others then founded in imitation of it (*CF*, 70). Further enquiries by the narrator fail to turn up any similarly altered copies of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* or any further mention of Uqbar.

There the matter rests, until two years later when the narrator returns to the hotel at Androgué at which his family used to stay and finds in the bar a book originally sent to Herbert Ashe, an old friend of his father who had recently passed away. When he opens the book, he is astonished to find that it is a volume of 1001 pages written in English, entitled *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön. Vol. XI: Hlaer to Jangr*. In this volume – seemingly just one of many – there is described in vast and exhaustive detail the life, beliefs and culture of one of those two imaginary realms, Tlön, that was mentioned in the original entry on Uqbar in Bioy's copy

of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. It is the exposition of the content of this volume that the narrator undertakes in the second half of the story (and it is the narrator's summary of the contents of this volume that critics claim to be an expression of Borges' personal beliefs). The narrator begins by noting that the various nations that make up the planet of Tlön are, 'congenitally, idealistic' (*CF*, 72). Their languages, religions and metaphysics all presuppose idealism. Thus for the citizens of Tlön the world is made up not of objects in space that persist over time, but of a series of successive and temporally independent acts, with no necessary relationship to each other. There are thus no nouns in the various languages of Tlön. In the southern hemisphere, there are verbs modified by adverbs, so that instead of 'The moon rose above the river' we have 'Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned' (*CF*, 73). In the northern hemisphere, by contrast, we have a series of adjectives strung together to form momentary unions made up of two or more terms, such as the colour of the sun and the distant cry of a bird or the feeling of sun and water against our chest while swimming, together with the pink we see when our eyelids are closed and the sense of being caught up by a river and by sleep. These unions can be put together with others to form longer combinations. Indeed, there are in the northern hemisphere of Tlön whole poems made up of a single, unbroken word.

There are therefore in Tlön, insofar as there is no subsisting empirical reality, no sciences but only psychology. The causal explanation of an event or the linking of one action to another is seen to be merely a retrospective reconstruction by the subject and not to have anything to do with the actual event being explained. For example, the successive perception of a cloud of smoke, the countryside on fire and a half-extinguished cigarette is understood not to imply any necessary causal connection, but to be an instance merely of the association of ideas. Similarly, every attempt to give any of these mental states a name is considered to introduce a 'distortion', a 'slant' or 'bias' (*CF*, 74) into them. The paradoxical result of this absence of objective truth is not so much the absence of metaphysical systems as their overwhelming proliferation. But, again, the aim of these various systems of thought is not to discover the truth, but rather to amaze, astound or produce something beautiful. As the narrator

puts it: 'In their [Tlönian philosophers'] view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy. They know that a system is naught but the subordination of all the aspects of the universe to one of those aspects – *any* one of them' (*CF*, 74) – although, as he immediately notes, the phrase 'all the aspects' here should be avoided, to the extent it implies a continuity between the past and the present that would otherwise not be allowed. Perhaps of all the Tlönian thought-experiments none more amazed or astounded than the doctrine of materialism. In one particularly provocative example – intended as a contradictory demonstration of something self-evidently impossible – it is proposed that on Tuesday X loses nine copper coins along a deserted road. On Thursday Y finds four coins on the road, on Friday Z finds three on the road, and on Friday morning X finds two on the veranda of his house. This sequence of events caused a scandal in idealist Tlön because it implied that the same coins somehow persisted throughout the period when they were lost and were therefore no longer perceived. Various solutions to the enigma were proposed, including the argument that the very words 'lost' and 'found' as used in the problem were inadequate, insofar they assumed they were the same coins, the very issue that was in contention. Fortunately, a solution more fitting to Tlön's pantheism was eventually found: that the universe is but a single subject and the various objects in it are its masks or organs. Thus Y and Z find the coins because they remember that X has previously lost them, and X for his part finds two coins on his veranda because he remembers that the other coins had already been found.

Along the same lines, the narrator speaks of the way that this doctrine of a single, all-encompassing subject plays itself out in literature (again, this aspect of the story is invariably read as a statement of Borges' own beliefs, with commentators drawing a connection particularly to 'Pierre Menard' and 'The Garden of Forking Paths'). In Tlönian culture, it is decided that all books are the work of a single author, so that critics will often take two dissimilar books – say, the *Tao Te Ching* and *1001 Nights* – and attribute them to the same author. In the same way, literature is understood to have but a single plot, although it is given with every possible permutation. For similar reasons, every book also comes with its own refutation, and any book that does not

contain its own counter-argument is considered incomplete. Finally, the narrator outlines, in one of the most discussed aspects of the story, the Tlönian notion of *hröñir*: objects that appear in reality as a result of people's expectations and preconceptions. In the ancient regions of Tlön, two people might be looking for the same pencil. The first person finds it, but does not tell the other. The other finds a second pencil, no less real than the first, but more in keeping with his expectations, and differing from the first only in being slightly longer than it. Now these *hröñir* are sought to be deliberately produced in Tlön. In one early experiment, prisoners were shown a photograph of what they were going to find on an archaeological dig, with the promise that whoever found what was in the photograph would be set free. Of course, all that was found after a week's excavation was a rusty wheel dated from some time *after* the experiment. But a later experiment involving the students of a high school was successful, with them finding – or producing – a gold mask, an ancient sword, two or three clay pots and the mutilated torso of a king. This synthetic production of *hröñir* is of great benefit to Tlönian archaeology, insofar as it enables researchers not only to investigate the past but also to modify it. However, as opposed to the *hröñir*, which are produced by expectation, there is also the phenomenon in Tlön that objects tend to vanish when they are no longer seen or thought about. An example of this – Borges here is paraphrasing Kafka's famous parable 'Before the Law', which he had translated some two years before – is a doorway that was lost when the beggar who frequented it died, and sometimes an entire amphitheatre has been kept present through the perception or recollection of a few birds or horses.

Thus the narrator's tale ends with this long disquisition on Tlönian life, as outlined in the eleventh volume of *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*. The narrator had previously canvassed the debate that occurred between scholars as to whether this eleventh volume was in fact the only one. Certainly, up until the point at which the story ends, it is the only one discovered. It is even suggested by some scholars that they should themselves complete the remaining volumes of the *Encyclopaedia*, based on the hints provided by the volume they know of. But in a postscript said to be added in 1947 – impossibly, seven years *after* the original story was published in *Sur* – the narrator goes on to

reveal that in March 1941 a letter was found in a book once belonging to Ashe, in which the truth about Tlön was revealed. In the early seventeenth century, a secret society (one of whose members was George Berkeley) was founded with the aim of inventing a country, along with all of its customs, philosophical systems and religious beliefs. After several years of work, its members realized that one generation would not be enough to accomplish the task. In 1924, in Memphis, Tennessee, one of them met the reclusive millionaire Ezra Buckley, who told him that, if the society decided to invent not a mere country but an entire planet, he would leave it his fortune. In 1914, the final volume of the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* was complete. But this undertaking, astonishing as it was, was itself understood to be the basis for another, even more comprehensive work, this time to be written not in English but in one of the languages of Tlön, to be entitled *Orbis Tertius* (it is 'Orbis Tertius' that was stamped on the frontispiece of the volume that was discovered at the hotel, as though it were already a product of this as yet non-existent stage). After the discovery of this letter sent to Ashe, events proceeded quickly. In 1942, a Princess who was unpacking her tea service that had been sent from France discovered a strange compass stamped with letters from one of Tlön's alphabets. Some months later, a young *gaucho* who died on the Brazil-Uruguay border was discovered with a strange cone-shaped object, made out of a metal no one could identify, which was in the image of one of the Tlonian deities. Then in 1944 all forty volumes of *The First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* were discovered in a Memphis Library. Some of the more outlandish features of the original volume eleven had been modified – particularly the idea of deliberately bringing about *hrönir* – and the *Encyclopaedia* made a huge impact. Translations, summaries and commentaries soon spread throughout the world in great numbers. This, along with the continued appearance of Tlonian objects, meant that human reality soon 'caved in' (CF, 81). Now, as the narrator writes, the original Tlonian language is taught in schools and Tlonian history has replaced the earthly one. The human sciences have been transformed by their contact with Tlön, and even mathematics and biology await their transformation. In one hundred years from now, when *The Second Encyclopaedia of Tlön* appears in its own language, the narrator

speculates, all the other languages of the world will disappear. The world will become *Tlön*. The narrator himself, in the haunting last lines of the story, indicates that he has returned to the hotel in which he originally found the eleventh volume of the *First Encyclopaedia* and works on a translation, which he intends never to publish, of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urne Buriall*.

As we say, one of the first questions to put to 'Tlön' is, to what extent does the world proposed in the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* represent Borges' own beliefs? It is undoubtedly true that Borges often spoke of idealism, and throughout his writings praised the great philosophers of the idealist tradition, a number of whom are specifically mentioned or alluded to in 'Tlön': Plato, Berkeley, Kant, Schopenhauer, Spinoza. Indeed, the influence of a number of minor figures in the tradition can also be detected there: Hans Vaihinger, Fritz Mauthner, Macedonio Fernández. But, as the story itself suggests, no book in *Tlön* – including presumably the *Encyclopaedia* – is complete without its opposite or counter-book. And, as we have ourselves argued, this 'dialectic' has been Borges' own preferred method throughout his career, if we can indeed attribute anything of 'Tlön' to Borges' own beliefs. Accordingly, if the world of *Tlön* is one of 'congenital idealism', Borges also shows that this idealism would not be possible without its corresponding materialism. We see this, to begin with, in *Tlonian* poetry, in which in both southern and northern hemispheres, despite the notion that there are only successive states of being, objects are seen as being simultaneous or otherwise in relation with each other. In the southern hemisphere, the adverbial qualification of verbs creates a situation in which two things are seen as connected with each other, as in 'Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned'; in the northern hemisphere, the putting together of adjectives produces *metaphor*, a state of likeness between two, as in the comparison between the colour of the rising sun and the cry of a bird or the feeling of the sun and water on a swimmer's chest, the pink produced when we close our eyes and the sense of being swept along by a river and by sleep. We see the same thing with the famous coin experiment, in which in order to sustain the argument that the same coin does not remain between being lost and found, we need to suppose either a single substance that the coins are modifications of or a pantheistic spirit that the various finders

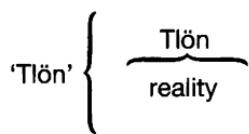
of the coins are the earthly avatars of. It is this necessity for an underlying, but never accessible, reality that is also implied by the Tlönian insistence that the naming of such things as mental states inevitably introduces a ‘distortion’, ‘slant’ or ‘bias’. For, although this reality is never available insofar as every naming of it would be to distort it, we nevertheless could not even say that it *was* a distortion unless this reality existed somewhere. We see the same thing, finally, in the argument that the aim of every intellectual system in Tlön is the subordination of ‘all the aspects’ of the universe to any *one* of those aspects. Not only, as the narrator remarks, does this assume the very thing that this metaphysics seeks to disprove – namely, a subsisting reality outside of these metaphysical hypotheses – but, as we have seen throughout Borges, it opens up the thought that this hypothesis is itself ‘one of these aspects’, and that an infinite regress would be implied insofar as another hypothesis would be required to subordinate *this* hypothesis, and so on.

We can see this ‘contradiction’ – a certain materiality allowing idealism – also in the *transmission* of Tlön, the series of events that leads to this secret society’s imaginings taking over the world. It is said in the *First Encyclopaedia*, consistent with classic Berkeleyan idealism, that things exist only insofar as they are perceived. This is what the verbs and adjectives of the various Tlönian languages attempt to capture; it is why causal explanation is understood as an example of the association of ideas; it is why there is no linear, successive time in Tlön; and it is why Tlönian objects lose detail and even cease to exist when there is no one to perceive or remember them. And yet, as certain critics have pointed out, the conspiracy that ends up producing Tlön proceeds underground unnoticed from its first meetings in the early seventeenth century until the meeting with Ezra Buckley in 1824, and then again from this meeting until the narrator first notices that aberrant encyclopaedia entry. Similarly, against a metaphysics that would argue that the world is not a joining of objects in space but a series of independent and successive acts with no connection between them, it is notable that the very generation of Tlön relies on the ‘conjunction’ of a mirror and an encyclopaedia; and that, later in the story, the second intrusion of Tlönian reality in the form of a cone-shaped object that slips from a gaucho’s belt arises from a ‘coincidence’ (*CF*, 80).

More profoundly, the very possibility of *hröñir* themselves – objects that arise out of expectations – also requires a certain persistence in time, a holding in mind of past events in order to produce something in the future. Indeed, even the ability, as the narrator says, of *hröñir* to ‘modify the past’ (*CF*, 77) through the production of archaeological artefacts seems to violate Tlön’s injunction against temporal succession. More than this, in the idea that *hröñir* can either prospectively appear in the future or retrospectively modify the past there is implied not only the idea of a future and past but a future and past in themselves that are not merely the effect of *hröñir*. In order to assert the idealist notion that the future and past are only effects of the *hröñir*, there must necessarily remain a future and past to which we can compare them. Finally, at the conclusion of the narrator’s story, when he tells us that the world has become Tlön, he says that ‘the rest lies in every reader’s memory (if not his hope and fear)’ (*CF*, 80), again necessarily assuming both the reality and temporality that Tlön would do away with.

It is at this point that we come to the complex question of the narration of ‘Tlön’, and how this relates to the general problematic of fiction in Borges’ work. Like ‘The Lottery in Babylon’, ‘Tlön’ is often seen as a masterfully narrated story of the slow taking-over of reality by the alternative principle of Tlön. Critics speak of ‘the feeling of a slowly growing nightmare, of accumulating unrealities that become all-embracing’,¹⁷ as at first an encyclopaedia entry, then a volume of an encyclopaedia, then several objects, then an entire encyclopaedia appear from this other place, until at last reality gives way and the world becomes Tlön. But, of course, in another way, like ‘The Lottery in Babylon’, once we reach the end of the story, we realize that the true point being made is that the world is *already* like Tlön; that for the story to be told at all the conspiracy has been in place from the outset, pulling the strings and ensuring that Tlön will be realized. As the narrator himself suggests, it is perfectly possible that the discovery of the full Tlonian *Encyclopaedia* in Memphis in 1944 was not accidental but brought about by the mysterious directors of ‘Orbis Tertius’; and the fact that the frontispiece of the single volume originally discovered was stamped with the words ‘Orbis Tertius’ indicates that this third and final stage of the conspiracy was already present on earth.

But, indeed, as more perspicacious critics have pointed out, even from the beginning of the story the Tlönian principle of *hrönir* is at play, insofar as it could be understood that when Bioy finds that quote in the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* (revealingly, a little 'longer' than the original) it is exactly in expectation of finding evidence for his witticism after first coming up with it at the dinner table. And, of course – it is this the narrator aims at when he writes that scholars at one point considered finishing the Tlönian *Encyclopaedia* based on the single volume discovered so far – our world *is* like Tlön, to the extent that the human knowledge that makes it up proceeds like a giant conspiracy fabricating a world from scratch. The earthly arts and sciences proceed also through the imagining of a world, the finding of *hrönir*-like objects that match their hopes and expectations. And, moreover, in any attempt to think this Tlön-like process in which objects come to match a prior expectation, there is always an expectation before *that*. We can never get to the bottom of the Tlönian conspiracy because it precedes and makes possible all attempts to investigate how it came about. And yet, as we have seen in 'The Lottery in Babylon' and other Borges stories, we nevertheless *can* think the Tlönian conspiracy. We *do* become aware of it, which is indeed the only reason why we can also think how we cannot think how it came about. We might attempt to represent this diagrammatically:



The enigma of Tlön might be put this way: Tlön is what the world stands in for. The story is about a certain *hrönir* or conspiracy that precedes the world and brings it about. In this sense, we might say that the story is an allegory of representation and the idealist notion that the world is its own representation. Fundamentally, the world is unreal, takes the place of something we cannot name – not even as 'representation' – because every attempt to name it is preceded by it, arises as an effect of it. And yet this very insight of Borges at his most esoteric, mystical, religious and idealist would not be possible without a certain

thinking of *this*. Tlön exists only within the world, and when we say that Tlön has taken over the world this can be said only from a position outside of it, from some other reality that is *not* Tlön. This is the material converse to Borges' idealism: that this single unchanging substance for which everything stands in can be seen only through the infinitely heterogeneous things of this world. We have then the same infinite regress that we saw in the idea that Tlönian metaphysics is the subordination of 'all the aspects' of reality to 'one of those aspects', in that this 'one aspect', insofar as it is part of reality, must be subordinated to yet another, and so on. It is to suggest at once that there is one aspect to which the rest of reality is subordinate and that the process of finding it will go on forever, insofar as there must always be another from which it is seen or narrated.¹⁸ The miracle of fiction, then, is its ability, at least for a moment, to single out one of these aspects. Even though what will be revealed is that this single thing stands in only for another and that it can be seen only from reality, for a moment it can operate as the hidden explanation of the world, that through which everything else must be understood. Fiction is neither the simple statement of facts from which an explanation can be generated nor even the re-reading of those facts in the light of a new explanation, but the sudden invention of a *name*, after which both the facts and their explanation exist as though for the first time.¹⁹ Labyrinth, immortality, Kafka, copy, Library, Zahir, Aleph, Lottery, Tlön: all of these are miraculous *doublings* of the world. After them, we can think only in terms of them. The world can be conceived only in light of them. And yet they themselves in their commonality only stand in for something else, some 'logic' that we have tried to trace throughout here and that makes them possible. This 'logic' is both what precedes all representation and exists only in representation. It is at once utterly transcendental and entirely worldly. It at the same time comes before all narrative and is strictly equivalent to the exact words of Borges' stories. This most abstract andunnarratable of logics can be seen only in Borges' choice of words, selection of theme and organization of material. It is what we meant by saying in our first chapter that we would attempt to read this logic through the details of Borges' stories and that these details would become visible only through the following of this logic. This logic certainly existed

before Borges – it is the profound meaning of Borges' insistence on his 'unoriginality' – but it also reaches its purest and most concentrated expression in his work, which makes Borges perhaps the most singular and original author of the twentieth century, if not the entire history of literature.