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Signals From Babel: The Influence of Jorge Luis Borges on Metafiction of the Late Twentieth Century

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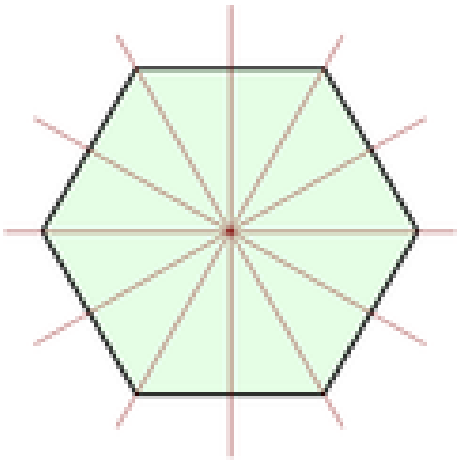

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This project is dedicated to all readers who love the craft of writing, and all writers who love the art of reading.

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Introduction: A Single Thread from a Writer of Infinities

I began this project with an interest in exploring the fictional works of Jorge Luis Borges as a means to reach a deeper understanding and awareness of the reasons for his continued presence and influence over writers of the later twentieth century. At some point in my engagement with Borges texts, it occurred to me that his works constituted a shift toward a specific style of writing that at once lent greater creative agency to the reader and devalued the concept of the author or single critical perspective as wielding authority over the meaning or experience of reading a text. Throughout the course of the paper, I read a great deal of twentieth century critical theory that sought to explain this phenomenon by revealing its structural machinations: what, exactly, is happening inside of a story like "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" that makes it a perpetually compelling riddle – a virtual Gordian knot for which no single stroke of genius might suffice to sever? One answer might reflect a general critical consensus with regards to "Pierre Menard," which is that the story is profoundly philosophical, placing theoretical concerns with the meaning of writing and literary historicity at the forefront of the narrative without ever answering them. In her review of the book *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco*, literary critic Heather Dubnik writes of the opinion of another critic with regards to this situation:

> Having concluded, not surprisingly, that Borges's *ficciones* are indeed literature or literary, Irwin poses a more challenging problem: are Borges's stories philosophy? Focusing primarily on "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" Irwin decides that the story is indeed philosophical "in that it raises issues and asks questions that are of concerns to philosophers." He then asks whether "Menard" is "an instance of philosophy" and concludes that although "Menard" "raises

> interesting and important philosophical issues, but it neither argues for, nor provides answers" the story is *philosophical*, though not *philosophy* per se. (Dubnik 1144)

The story ends, but the issues it raises remains; unlike a philosophical argument that would seek to resolve or, at the very least, constitute progress in relation to a specific concern or problem, the story merely plays with philosophical excursions, taking them as narrative fodder without "working" on them. By its conclusion, the reader is left on unstable theoretical grounds, and it is left to him or her to decide whether to contend with "Menard" further – and, if so, how they might go about building on the philosophy of reading proposed, but barely elucidated, by the titular character. It seems that the story is doing something different from more traditional narratives – it is asking more attention and creativity from the reader. Herein lies what distinguishes Borges from other writers who contend with philosophical problems: his particular concerns are germane to the practice of reading itself. He places his readers in a position where they are compelled to reflect on situations that exactly mirror their own; in engaging with his texts, they are forced to question the nature of their reading, which catalyzes a self-reflectiveness that is, arguably, central to the Borgesian project. Because the philosophical background of "Menard" calls for a radical re-conception of reading, it is up to the actual reader to decide whether Pierre Menard is simply a character in a short story or if he is a voice for some truth that applies beyond the world circumscribed by its pages. Like the reality of the world of Tlön, which might indeed be disturbing the reality of Earth, the issues of Borges's fictions seem capable of consequences that overturn the very nature of literature and reading, effects that extend well beyond the stories which explore them.

The power of Borges's stories to extend beyond themselves in this way is compounded by the fact that so many of Borges's characters are defined by their reading: they are, above and beyond all other definitive qualities, readers. This is where I began the genealogy that is the basis for this project. Like the garden of forking paths which confounds the main character of one his most famous stories, the number of ways in which a genealogy of Borgesian influence could be traced seems infinite. What I have sought is a lineage that connects Borges's engagement with philosophy to one of the technical ways in which he manifested his philosophical excursions, which is through the use of the figures of a reader and a read text. The reader figure becomes the seeker of a certain knowledge or reality that compels them on an epistemological quest; he or she reflects the situation of the actual reader of the text, and together they are pulled forward in the hopes of resolving complex mysteries with roots in the mysterious and metaphysical, mysteries which, throughout the course of their seeking, become pertinent to their own lives.

A great deal of work on this project went into discerning what texts, specifically, to use as demonstrations of this highly specific literary trope. Not all of Borges's stories are as profoundly philosophical as "Pierre Menard" or the other works included in this paper; certainly not all of them include the figures of a reader and a text. The stories and novels examined here represent a scenario that is instrumental towards some basic aims of metafiction, which include self-reflexivity and the signification of self-artifice as a means to ask greater questions about literature and reality, but which is not widely common in its application. I ultimately came to examine three novels commonly understood to be exemplary of metafiction: Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* (1979), and Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote (Which Was A Dream)* (1976). The first two are considered to be highly important within the metafictional canon; the structural experimentations of *Pale Fire*, in

particular, were remarkably innovative at the time of its publication in 1962, and it is consistently cited as being seminal in the development of twentieth century metafiction. What connects each of these works to the short stories of Borges is the shared ground on which they explore complex issues around reading and writing: each novel tells the story of a reader and a textual world which possesses them. The protagonists in each work are truth-seekers; it is revealed, ultimately, that they must create the meaning or truth they seek on their own terms, or perhaps to abandon the notion of truth and meaning entirely. This is reflected in the fact that questions of interpretation and meaning surrounding the novels seem to self-deconstruct upon analysis: what "actually" happens in *Pale Fire,* for example, is resigned to the realm of either mystery or mental phenomena that is not entirely accessible to any reader. It is in this mystification, however, that the philosophical background of Borges appears, and that – as I argue – the true significance of each of these works is evident.

My investigations into "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", "The Library of Babel", "The Aleph", and "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" led me to read the writings of eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher George Berkeley, whose epistemological position immediately struck me as having relevance to the subjectivity and personal relativism of meaning associated with postmodern philosophy and critical theory. Berkeley's argument, which calls for an understanding of the workings of human knowledge that places the experience of reality entirely within the individual mind, serves as the background for the exploration of unreal worlds and the descriptions of impossible situations that comprise the stories listed above. Borges applies this philosophy to reading, establishing a metaphoric situation in which the mind of a reader and the world of a text reflects the relationship Berkeley's human mind has to the universe seemingly outside of it, but which is, according to his position, individually and internally synthesized.

Borges's adoption of Berkeley's philosophy as a framework for some of his most widely anthologized and significant short stories is evident in each of the novels included in this paper. Through an examination of the various ways in which Acker, Calvino, and Nabokov utilize Borges's literary reworking of the theories first expounded in *A Treatise Concerning Principles Of Human Knowledge*, I believe I offer an important perspective on the influence Borges had over the development of metafiction in the later twentieth century. The edition of *Labyrinths* from which I read three of the four short stories of Borges considered in this work includes on its back cover a quotation from author David Foster Wallace that strikes me as relevant in explaining the magnitude of Borges's impact on later literature: "The truth, briefly stated, is that Borges is arguably the great bridge between modernism and postmodernism in world literature." Borges's connection to Berkeley, and the visibility of this connection in later novels, is an indispensable element of this bridge.

A word on the title of this project: the phrase "signals from Babel" is both an allusion to the story *The Library of Babel* and to the biblical narrative from which the story takes its name. The library contains every imaginable book; every grouping of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, in infinite iterations, is stored there. In the biblical tale, Babel is the name of a tower representative of a unified people and language. This tower comes to be struck down by God; subsequently, its language and people were also scattered. I imagine the signals that issue from Babel to be individual strains of a language, personhood, or reality that – far from the circumstance of unification symbolized by the standing tower – have meaning solely on the level of the individual. The remnants of Babel are an infinity of languages, of minds, and of meanings; an infinity of texts and readers. I use the word "signals" because I envision each of the texts considered in this project as extending from a post-destruction Babel, writing towards an

individual subjectivity and lack of unified meaning. The implications of this are manifold and continue to be visible in literature today; were this a longer project, I could trace the genealogy forward in time, including writers presently working. As it is, I believe I provide a wealth of evidence for a Borgesian phenomenon deserving of critical attention. The very nature of Borges's writings are such that I have no doubt that traces of his signature styles, motifs, and techniques will be observable in literature for generations to come, enriching texts in new ways with each passing era of authors and literatures. I hope to have provided one window onto the way his influence is apparent over one stretch of time; of course, by my own assessment of the limits of analyses of Borges, I understand that my reading of his works can be in no way complete, nor can it deal in absolutes or irrefutable statements. It merely illuminates a thread that I believe to be important in revealing the depth of a writer whose elusiveness and profundity will undoubtedly confound and dazzle for years to come. The mysteries of Borges seem to categorically resist a single or stable answer or explanation: I do not believe that I have provided one, but that I have honored the fundamental complexity that has placed Borges among the greatest figures of twentieth century world literature and which renews each individual story with each new reading. Borges continues to compel and delight me, as a reader; it is my hope that this paper duly recognizes him as both a major exponent of twentieth literary innovation and a writer of timeless genius.

Part One: Jorge Luis Borges and George Berkeley's *Treatise Concerning Principles of Human Knowledge*

The short stories of Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges had an undeniable influence on works by many famous writers from the 1950s onward. His brand of lyrical, tightly written prose, engagement with expansive philosophical themes, and invention of fantastical settings and landscapes are evident in novels and short stories across many genres in the second half of the twentieth century. His contributions to the type of literature known as metafiction are incontestable. True to the metafictional tradition, many of his most significant short stories (or *ficciones*, as he referred to them) self-consciously address the devices of fiction, and in doing so, call attention to their status as artifice.

The connections that can be drawn between Borges and later writers seem almost infinite. My specific interest is in tracing specific elements of his style of metafiction from his influences to his legacies. These are techniques he established in works such as "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote [Pierre menard, autor del quixote]," "The Library Of Babel" [La biblioteca de babel], and "The Aleph" [El aleph]. In examining these elements of his writing, I hope to establish a lineage between Borges and one of his primary influences, seventeenth-century Scottish philosopher George Berkeley. The particular genealogy I wish to trace extends to Italo Calvino, Vladimir Nabokov, and Kathy Acker, three writers working in the second half of the twentieth century. Taken at face value, the texts of Calvino, Nabokov, and Acker might not seem to have much in common. Their work comprises content that seems to have few obvious crossover points. It is my belief, however, that they share significant thematic, technical, and stylistic threads that can be traced back to Borges.

I would argue that the influence Borges had on Nabokov, Calvino, and Acker is, in essence, the same: his use of Berkeley's philosophy of idealism, as a point of literary reference and an overarching framework for his short stories, is manifested in specific works by all of these writers. In this paper, I will refer to Berkeley's specific brand of idealism as "immaterialism": this is because idealism is a school of epistemological thought ascribed to by many philosophers, and what is key about Berkeley's specific take on idealism with regards to this literature is that it locates human knowledge of reality as being based not in the external, material world, but within the mind. Hence, it stands against the idea that the knowable reality of the world exists within its material features – what humans understand as reality is entirely a construction of their mind, and that there exists no extant universe without a mind to perceive it. In his seminal work *A Treatise Concerning Principles of Human Knowledge*, published 1710, Berkeley writes: "For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that is to me perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi* [being is perception], nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them" (2). This is the crux of the argument he makes throughout the course of the book, using various example of the way sense perception works to support the basic thesis that nothing exists without the mind. Throughout this chapter, I will refer back to Berkeley as his theory relates to specific instances in the short stories of Borges founded around his philosophy.

It is my goal to demonstrate and elucidate Borges's engagement with Berkeleyan immaterialism, and to show, through examples, why I believe there is an important connection between Berkeley, Borges, Acker, Nabokov, and Calvino. Furthermore, I would argue that the way in which Berkeleyan immaterialism is manifested in the writings of these four authors

implies that the true meaning and reality of a text is located inside the mind of the reader, instead of something inherent to the text itself or to speculation about its writer or origin. I believe all of these works contain figures that act as a metaphor for foundational principles of Berkeley's philosophy; I hope to show why it is that I believe this implies that the meaning of a work is constructed by and exists within the reader's mind as opposed to something outside of him or her.

I have decided to use Borges's short stories "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "Pierre Menard, Author Of The Quixote," "The Library Of Babel," and "The Aleph" because I believe they contain the most apparent connections to the writings of Nabokov, Calvino, and Acker. This connection is founded on the fact that each of the selected Borges stories confront Berkeley's immaterialism in the same way: they each contain the figure of a reader, or group of readers, who has a meaningful relationship to a text or body of texts. In this paper, I posit that the reader's relationship to the text stands as a metaphor for Berkeley's explanation of the way in which the human mind has a relationship to the universe: each work confronted contains an analogy between the reader-text relationship and the mind-universe relationship of Berkeley's immaterialism. This is essence of the genealogy that will be traced.

In my interpretation these stories, "the reader" corresponds in Berkeleyan terms to the human whose reality exists entirely inside his mind, which is a reality based on sense impressions of the world of "real" objects that is created by the act of God's mind perceiving them. This world of real objects corresponds to the text: the reader's act of textual interpretation stands as metaphor for the human's act of reality-interpretation. The realities of both exist entirely inside the reader, or the human: they are subjective realities. In fact, the relationship between the reader and the text is the theme of all of these stories. Each story contains the figure

of a reader, usually the main character or a protagonist, who is on a quest to understand the text; this quest comprises the plot. This allows for each story to offer commentary on the situation of an actual reader and a text. In none of these short stories or novels is a stable truth about a text ever reached; and for the reader of these works, I believe there is no stable truth or truths to be garnered from them. For Calvino, Acker, and Nabokov, they are musings in the same vein as the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, whose conception of what it meant to be a reader (as demonstrated in his short stories) often reflected George Berkeley's theory of how humans understand the universe.

The basic premise of Berkeley's immaterialism is that the universe is created by human perception. Nothing exists outside the human mind, immaterialism posits; to be is to be perceived by a mind. In *A Treatise,* Berkeley writes

> That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by imagination, exist without the mind, is what everybody will allow. And to me it is no less evident that the various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever elements they compose), cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them (2).

Here Berkeley is arguing for the idea that what is commonly understood as reality – the real world of objects and materials into which man is born and out of which he exits upon death – is actually a product of the mind. His declaration that "everybody will allow" for his explanation of the origin of thoughts, passions, and ideas is preceded by a brief description of the workings of perception. He outlines, at the beginning of the Treatise, the channels through which various sensory perceptions are received: "Smelling furnishes me with odours, the palate with tastes, and hearing conveys sounds to the mind in all their variety of tone and composition" (1). The fact

that sense perceptions are the product of the individual body is the framework for his entire philosophy. *A Treatise Concerning Principles Of Human Knowledge* consists of examples that demonstrate the ways in which the human mind gives rise to sense perceptions, which in turn constitute reality.

It is my belief that the literary use of immaterialism that begins with Borges and extends to Nabokov, Calvino and Acker has come to a sort of terminal point. That is, because they place the true meaning or reality of a literary work within the mind of the reader, they problematize the possibility for future works to build on them. Because the relationship between the reader and the text is completely contingent on the individual reader's mind, there are as many "texts" as there are readers, and whatever a reader derives from his or her engagement with the work is the true work. Theoretically, then, any response or continuation of this genealogy could arguably be traced back to Borges, insofar as the link is the subjectivity of reality. Indeed, Borges was a precursor to a contemporary philosophy of reading that I believe is exemplified well in Kathy Acker's writings, but which could arguably be found in many later twentieth century novels. The nature of this terminality is such that the meaning of the book "stops", in a sense, with the individual reader, because they are active in creating its meaning. With each new generation of readers comes a new series of readings, each which has meaning only unto each individual mind.

A novel or short story that uses immaterialism as a framework contains no interpretive possibilities beyond that which falls within the text (either directly or indirectly). By this I mean that, because of the radical subjectivity of immaterialism, the meaning of literary works that utilize the theory to frame their narratives evolve directly as a result of their being created by a reader's mind – just as the world of material objects is secondary to the fact of their being perceived. Kathy Acker's works, which I would argue as very strongly influenced by Borges,

experiment radically with traditional notions of plot, character, narrative, and structure. They describe scenarios in which the fundamental isolation of every human mind is foregrounded, and the concept of objective reality is shown, ruthlessly, to be just a fantasy. Her main characters comment frequently on the fact that they believe themselves to be insane; the character of their assumed insanity is that they feel cut off from a human reality that extends beyond their minds.

Berkeleyan immaterialism is the root for these writings, and the way in which it is treated in the short stories of Borges served as a model for Nabokov, Calvino, and Acker. In each of these works, the use of immaterialism as a literary framework places the "reality" of the story inside the mind of the reader; whatever the reader derives from it is the correct understanding of the story. There are no normative features within the works that seem to signal one way in which to begin to understand them; no clues given as to what "should" be taken from it. What is significant for the works selected for this project is that this phenomenon has a direct basis in Borges's engagement with Berkeley's philosophies.

I have indicated that any understanding of the universe is "correct," according to the basic tenets of immaterialism – that the mind perceives and creates its own reality. I would claim that, in these stories, the act of perceiving the world is the same as the act of interpreting a text. "The reader" figure in these works has the same function as the immaterialist human, who synthesizes his reality based on his sense perceptions. Both human and reader serve to create a universe that has meaning relative to the mind of the universe-perceiver/text-interpreter. Because a novel or short story presents the reader with an already-created universe, the author of the novel or short story assumes the role of "the creator," or the perceiving/interpreting mind. "The reader" must submit themselves to the work as it is, with the understanding that because of its

subjectivity, there is no "right" or "wrong" way to understand it – to begin to talk about it, think about it, or write about it.

I would furthermore argue that the readers or critics who are looking to promulgate a theory or explain a personal message that they have derived from one of these texts faces an extreme challenge. This is due to the fact that the question of "deeper meaning" is, as noted before, rendered essentially pointless in these works – "deep meaning" in works like these is whatever any reader takes away from them. The use of immaterialism in these works makes it such that to offer any one take on it as the "correct" take would be to assume a position that is, fundamentally, against what the text is "about", in a sense – which, I think, is the creation of reality and meaning on the level of the individual.

Immaterialism expressly holds that the only absolute authority over reality is God; all other views of reality are small slices of the entirety of the universe, and no human can claim to understand reality in a way that extends beyond what he perceives. Berkeley writes

> The ideas imprinted on the Senses by the Author of nature [God] are called *real things*: and those excited in the imagination being less regular, vivid, and constant, are more properly termed *ideas*, or *images of things*. But then our sensations, be they never so vivid and distinct, are nevertheless ideas, that is, they exist in the mind, or are perceived by it, as truly as the ideas of its own framing. (15)

When Berkeley claims that "ideas imprinted on the Senses by the Author of nature" are "real things," he is saying that what is real in the world are sense impressions, and that these sense impressions are the result of God impressing sensory information on the human body. His claim that begins with"Those [ideas] excited in the imagination…" refers to the fact that ideas within

the mind (referred to by him as "the imagination") are not the same as "real things." The next claim – that "our sensations . . . exist in the mind, or are perceived by it, as truly as the ideas of its own framing" argues that God, as the one who creates all sense impressions, is the basis for all reality. For Berkeley, sense impressions occur within an individual mind, and arise as a result of God's existence, which has agency over the sense experience of every mind.

I am arguing that the selected works of Borges, Nabokov, Calvino, and Acker function as analogs for the immaterialist world; because of this, I believe that that the only absolute authority over these texts is their writers, and readers must understand that any interpretation of them only has relevance relative to them and them alone. Following this analogy, the writer is a sort of immaterialist God; his or her word is the final word on the text. What this means for readers is that they must take the novel or short story at face value. Any special meaning or message they derive from the text is not what is objectively "true" about it; it is only their take on it, just as sense impressions are individual experiences placed in the human mind by an omniscient God. The "author of nature" is Borges, Calvino, Acker, and Nabokov. This functions on a level inside the works, too: "the reader" figure of the selected short stories and novels is on a quest to understand the text. As fruitless as this quest inevitably turns out to be – for various reasons which will be demonstrated – I believe the quest itself is the subject of the plot, in every case.

Because it bears the most explicit and pervasive influence of Berkeleyan immaterialism, it is useful to begin with an analysis of Berkeley in conjunction with Borges's short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." "Tlön, Uqbar" posits a world in which the metaphysics of idealism are made physical – concretized in an actual, physical planet. This is demonstrated in various features of Tlön, the world that operates according to idealist precepts. The tale's protagonist is a narrator who is intrigued by a series of encyclopedias he discovers. This discovery is precipitated

by his inquiry into the origin of a quotation recounted to him during a conversation one night. He is informed that the *bon mot* came from an article in "The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia" about a territory named "Uqbar," a country which, upon due research, the narrator discovers is not an actual place (3).

As both reader and narrator find out, a "secret and benevolent society" of thinkers across time (including George Berkeley) met to fabricate literature from this planet in the form of encyclopedias (15). These texts were designed to be read as referring to a real place; in actuality, they were playful elaborations on a philosophy that locates the production of reality inside the human mind. This planet of this secret society's creation, Tlön, imagined Berkeleyan immaterialism as a phenomenon of place. The narrator gives a lengthy account of the various ways in which immaterialism manifests itself as the metaphysical backbone of Tlön before alluding to the idea that the world of the Tlön encyclopedia is, in fact, leaking into the reality of Earth.

The story begins with its narrator, a character named Jorge Luis Borges, recounting a meal he shared with a friend named Adolfo Bioy Casares. Jorge Luis Borges was, of course, a real person. Adolfo Bioy Casares was also a real person – an Argentinian writer whose friendship and working relationship with Borges is well known. Both writers were known for writing metafictional and experimental works; they wrote together under the pen name "H. Bustos Domecq" and were associated with the same groups of writers and intellectuals in the Argentinian literary scene. A dinner between Bioy Casares and Borges is a prime set-up for a story which directly addresses the power of novels to transform the world of the reader. The protagonist here is the reader" figure (Borges and Bioy Casares) who serves as a symbol for the

role the human mind plays in immaterialism. In this case, he is a reader who is impelled toward a line of research that serves as a statement about the ways that literature influences reality.

Many of Borges's non-fictional works confront what it means to engage in the practice of consuming literature. The personal essays of Borges reflect a reverence for the arts of letters; his image as a cultural figure is that of a man who not only voraciously wrote, but also consumed texts and expounded on the virtues of reading for pleasure. The fictional Borges of "Tlön Uqbar" reads like a reflection of Borges's image in popular culture. It seems almost as if Borges, as the archetypal reader, named the protagonist of "Tlön Uqbar" after himself to symbolize the reader whose reality is altered by a text. I would say that "Tlön Uqbar" makes the argument, grounded in Berkeleyan immaterialism, that novels and short fictions are created in the action of reading them. The act of reading is the act of text-creation.

What "Tlön Uqbar" specifically offers is a fleshed-out vision of a world in which Berkeley's theories are empirically provable. It establishes an analogy between the act of reading and the act of perception as creation. According to Berkeleyan idealism, to perceive is to create. Berkeley writes:

> Some truths there are so near and so obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes to see them. Such I take this important one to be, viz. that all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, that their *being* is to be perceived or known. (*A Treatise* 3-4)

Here Berkeley is arguing for the philosophical concept of *esse* is *percipi* – being is perception; to be is to be perceived. When he writes "Some truths there are so near and so obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes to see them", he is pointing out that perception is constitutive

of truth. This is supported by the statement which begins “in a word all those bodies” – there, Berkeley is saying that without a mind to perceive them, the “bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world” would simply not exist. The relationship Berkeley establishes between the human mind as perceiving, i.e., creating body to the perceived, i.e., created world is precisely the same as the relationship between “the reader” figure and the bodies of writing they read. For “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” this is the fictionalized Borges and the fabricated encyclopedias which compel him down the line of research, inquiry, and amazement that comprises the story’s plot.

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” is perhaps Borges’s most well-known and widely referenced short story. First published in 1940, its narrative is echoed in various works from the later twentieth century, most notably in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire.* Released in 1962, Pale Fire takes as a point of narrative departure the subject of the discussion between Borges and Casares that opens “Tlon Uqbar” and foreshadows the surreal trajectory it follows. This discussion involves the suggestion of a framework for a novel, which came to serve as the basis for *Pale Fire*. The entirety of the short story, however, contends with immaterialism in a great number of ways. The conversation between Casares and Borges unfolds as such: “Bioy Casares had dinner with me that evening and we became lengthily engaged in a vast polemic concerning 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--very few readers--to perceive an atrocious or banal reality” (3).

This passage is not only the guiding principle for what is recognized as one of Nabokov’s most well-renowned works and one of the twentieth century’s most unique and formally innovative novels, but also offers a good opening into the way in which “Tlön, Uqbar” contends

with immaterialism. Here, Borges explains that "a few readers" would be permitted "to perceive an atrocious or banal reality." This is the first indication of Berkeley's philosophy. The reader is notified that the main character is already familiar with the exact game of perception and creation of reality into which, just a few pages later, the plot places him. The writers – Casares and Borges – assume the role of the immaterialist God who "permit" the readers, or perceivers, to come into an understanding of an "atrocious or banal reality." As the assumed authors of the text they imagine, they hold absolute authority over the existence of the textual "universe." The readers who "perceive an atrocious or banal reality" are metaphors for all human beings, according to immaterialism, whose perception of the world is entirely relative to the impressions contained within their mind.

I would argue that the proposed work discussed by the two writers is meant to be read as a reflection of the way in which "Tlön Uqbar" functions for areader. The structure of the story mirrors the novel of which the fictional Borges and Bioy Casares talk: it is written in the first person, and its complexity seems to indicate that there are profound depths to the story, angles only hinted at by its surface content. However, I would argue that "Tlön Uqbar" is simply an account of the ways in which literature affects the world of the reader, demonstrated through the outlining of an unreal and fantastical universe. This universe is posited as an analog to immaterialism. The narrator imagined by Bioy and Borges "disfigures the facts and indulges in various contradictions" but ultimately rewards the careful "few readers" with the perception of "an atrocious or banal reality."

Casares and Borges here establish a novel for which careful and close reading pays off. I would argue, however, that this statement operates as a red herring for readers of"Tlön, Uqbar". It indicates, for the novel proposed by the two writers, that there is something special to be found

beneath the surface of the text: Borges appear to be suggesting that a close reading of "Tlön, Uqbar" will reveal some sort of grand mystery within it. Although, obviously "Tlön, Uqbar" is not the same as the proposed novel, the story *is* structured in such a way that it seems like a mystery which rewards a close reading with the discovery of a deep truth. However, it ultimately seems that there is no such grand truth, no ultimate payoff for a close reading of it. Because of this, I would make the case that the story can be viewed as an extended musing on the search for meaning within narrative. Whatever the reader takes away from "Tlön, Uqbar" is the "atrocious or banal reality" of the work imagined in the first paragraph; the truth that is perceived by a reader is the correct truth (be it atrocious, banal, both, or neither!).

To begin to understand how this contention relates to Berkeleyan immaterialism, I will indicate a few places in which immaterialism is seen within the text. For the most part, it is in features of Tlön. The planet features specific quirks that are, in essence, manifestations of immaterialist principles. For example, the planet features objects called Hronir. Hronir are the double of objects that have been misplaced. The narrator states that "centuries and centuries of idealism have not failed to influence reality. In the most ancient regions of Tlon, the duplication of lost objects is not infrequent. Two persons look for a pencil; the first finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but closer to his expectations" (13). This is a demonstration of immaterialism on the basis of the fact that the existence of the found pencils is contingent upon the expectations of the pencil-seekers. The object that is lost is duplicated because of what happens inside the mind of the object-loser: after the object has initially been misplaced, a new one is forged, since the object-loser must now confront the reality of a missing pencil. The internal confrontation with the reality of a lost pencil is what creates the second one.

The person who finds the second pencil is the person who initially lost it, because it is "closer to his expectations" – implying that he or she had expectations regarding the pencil to begin with. The first person, who "finds it and says nothing", has not actually lost a pencil. He or she never had expectations to which the pencil they found could or could not conform. The passage continues: "These secondary objects are called hronir and are, though awkward in form, somewhat longer. Until recently, the hronir were the accidental products of distraction and forgetfulness." (13). The awkward forms of the hronir are concretized symbols of the awkward mental states of distraction and forgetfulness.

Another specific element of Tlön that refers to immaterialism is its physical structure. Of the technical layout of Tlön, Borges writes: "The geometry of Tlön comprises two somewhat different disciplines: the visual and the tactile. The latter corresponds to our own geometry and is subordinated to the first. The basis of visual geometry is the surface, not the point" (12). This description functions as an excellent demonstration of a way in which immaterialism might be made real. The fact that the tactile discipline of Tlön's geometry is subordinated to the visual, which correspons to human geometry, is perfectly in line with the concept that the world's existence is a phenomenon of the mind. It makes sense, also, that the visual "discipline" is of primary importance here. Sight is the sense receptor most commonly associated with perception; Berkeley uses it frequently in his work to elucidate his epistemological argument:

> Now, why may we not as well argue that figure and extension are not patterns or resemblances of qualities existing in matter, because to the same eye at different stations, or eyes of a different texture at the same station, they appear various, and cannot therefore be the images of anything settled and determinate throughout the mind? (*A Treatise* 7)

The world of images, figures, and colors seems to be more active in creating human reality than, for example, the world of scents.

The narrator continues on the geometry of Tlön: "This geometry disregards parallel lines and declares that man in his movement modifies the forms which surround him. The basis of its arithmetic is the notion of indefinite numbers. They emphasize the importance of concepts of greater and lesser, which our mathematicians symbolize as > and <" (12). The fact that "man in his movement modifies the forms which surround him" corresponds perfectly to what immaterialism argues. According to its most elemental principles, my reading of Borges actually "creates" the text, or my sitting in a chair is what makes the chair real - because what is real to me is *only* real for me. This is the basis for the old philosophical question about a tree falling in the woods: Berkeley's argument is that because man has no way of knowing reality beyond what he might gather through his senses and then put together in a logical pattern within his mind, we have no choice but to believe we create the reality with which we engage.

The emphasis on "the importance of the concepts of greater or lesser" makes sense in this light because "greater" and "lesser" refer to relative ideas. Ultimately, immaterialism makes the case for relativity, reality grounded in the perceiver: all he or she understands as "real" is relative to him or her. I would argue that the importance of greater or lesser stands in contradiction to the concepts of "great" or "not-great," which are absolutes. Because immaterialism is fundamentally opposed to an absolute reality that is untouchable by human perception - a standard universe that operates outside of the mind – the only concepts that would logically fit in Tlön would be relative concepts. Because indefinite numbers have no end point, each number cannot be thought of as being an absolute representation of value. The number only symbolizes a value with regard to the numbers that come before and after it. Were Tlön's arithmetic based on definite numbers,

each numerical value could stand alone. However, the overall scope of math in Tlön is constituted by each individual number which operates outside of a system of absolutes.

The story continues with the outline of the geometry of Tlön: "They maintain that the operation of counting quantifies and converts them from indefinite into definite sums" (12). The fact that indefinite sums are transformed into definite sums via a mental operation is perfectly in line with immaterialism. What I believe is implied here is that the definites are only definite for the person counting. The next line remarks that "The fact that several individuals who count the same quantity should obtain the same result is, for the psychologists, an example of association of ideas or of a good exercise of memory" (13). In Tlön, there is no logical or provable reason that the same quantity counted should produce the same numerical result; the only explanation for this occurrence comes in the form of speculation and common convention.

One of the more distinctive features of many of Borges's most famous short stories is the lack of character development. Contrary to the way in which traditional fiction functions, most of these stories seem wholly unconcerned with the unfolding of a personality throughout the course of their text. For example, the protagonist of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" does not seem to have any real personality traits. The reader does not see his likes or dislikes, his flaws, misgivings, loves or internal conflicts. He only serves as an actor in the text; his role is not that of one who represents a real person. He is a character defined not by who he is, but what he does and what he says in relation to other characters. I would argue that this is an immaterialist feature of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" as well as several other works of Borges. The protagonist is enfolded fully within the world in which he finds himself, and is lost within this world. This world, and the worlds of the other stories to which I refer, are the product of their character's imagining; the distinction between the character and the world in which the characters act is only an illusion. I

would argue that, essentially, Tlön *is* the fictionalized Borges of "Tlön, Uqbar", just as the world in which we live is only an extension of our minds, according to immaterialism.

The existence of a world that exists entirely within the mind of its main character is a feature of the short story the "Library of Babel," as well. This story contends with immaterialism in ways that are both similar to and very different from those seen in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." The lack of character development is one example of these similarities. The first-person narrator of "The Library of Babel" does not have any real qualities. Personal relationships, clues as to the nature of his spirit or his emotions, all features that might identify him as an individual – these are left out of the text. His entire identity is that of one who tells the story of the library, as if he were the library. The critical similarity between "Library Of Babel" and ""Tlön, Uqbar" is that they both explore the relationship between a reader and a text. In the case of the former"the reader" is the narrator.The "text" that is read is not a fabricated or found text, but the library, which serves as a metaphor for the universe.

"The Library Of Babel" tells the story of a library that contains all possible books – every conceivable grouping of the letters in the alphabet is found in this library. The narrator of the story describes the physical structure of the library and tells of the lives of its librarians, who live inside of it. It is suggested throughout the story that the library is infinite, although it is also mentioned that many men doubt this fact. He expresses concern with this, and the story's end is a sort of call for the vindication of the notion that the library is infinite.

It is made clear from the first sentence of the story that the library is a metaphor for the universe: "The universe (which others call the library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings." (51) I believe that the librarians act as a symbol for all humans and the narrator's

assertion that the library contains an infinite number of books reflects a belief that the universe is infinite. I would furthermore argue that this story is founded on basic points of immaterialism.

The relationship between the narrator and the library is analogous to the relationship between the human mind and the universe as posited in *A Treatise Concerning Principles Of Human Knowledge*. The narrator interprets the universe as a library – a place filled with knowledge that extends far beyond what one man can learn in a lifetime. And as the library of this story is actually an overt symbol for the universe, the narrator functions as "the reader" figure: the one who is the universe-interpreting (and, therefore, universe-creating) human. The narrator's understanding of the universe as a library is relative to his way of seeing it. It follows that the universe created by "the reader" figure is a library. As a reader, the narrator sees the universe as a library for the senses. He also mentions that the library "can only be the work of a god" (54), and that after mankind becomes extinct, it will continue (58). I believe that this reflects the narrator's spiritual belief in a higher power behind his universe.

As noted, the beginning of the story names the library as the universe. Although it is not given much attention within the text, the fact that right at the outset, the titular figure is established as "the universe", is significant. Borges writes: "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings. From any of these hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors." (51)What I find particularly interesting here is the narrator's mention that *others* refer to the universe as the library. This begs the question: does the narrator, too, refer to the universe as the library? If so, why does he does he not identify with the "others" who call it that? He identifies himself, on the very next page, as "a man of the Library" (52). It seems that he is stating that he is a man of the universe; implicit here is the idea that the

story is meant to be read as a description of the way the narrator believes the universe functions. "The others" of this library are simply figures within the narrator's mind. The truth, I believe, is that he understands that his belief that the universe is a library is merely *his* understanding of it. This is why he begins the story by referring to the library first as the universe, and relegating its understanding as a "library" to the mysterious "others." Very quickly, he begins referring to the universe as the Library, too – he identifies himself as one among them.

Both "Tlön, Uqbar" and "The Library Of Babel" outline their narrator's journey to understand a body of texts (in the case of "Tlön, Uqbar", the "Anglo-American Cyclopaedias"; in "Library of Babel", the texts of the library). Whereas the narrator of "Tlön, Uqbar" is compelled by texts he discovers, the entire life of the narrator of "Library of Babel" consists of texts. Both stories are about the ways in which their lives are entirely dependent on their status as readers of texts. The reality of both characters is completely dependent upon books. From this, we could surmise that the underlying theme is that both characters are archetypal readers. Their lives are created within their minds, and consist of textual worlds – the worlds outlined in these stories.

One of the most important aspects of "Library of Babel" is its narrator's insistence on the fact that the library is infinite. In immaterialism, infinity is a deeply important concept, given that Berkeley believes that the human mind represents a slice of the infinite reality created by God. He writes: "hence, it follows there is an infinite number of parts in each particle of Matter which are not perceived by sense" (*A Treatise* 22). This relates directly to the following excerpt from "Library of Babel":

> The Library exists *ab aeterno*. This truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world, cannot be placed in doubt by any reasonable mind. Man, the

> imperfect librarian, may be the product of chance or of malevolent demiurgi; the universe, with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatical volumes, of inexhaustible stairways for the traveler and latrines for the seated librarian, can only be the work of a god (52).

Here, the narrator makes his first claim that the Library is eternal. By logical extension, the statement "this truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world" is a declaration that the future of the universe is eternal. The narrator is deeply impressed by the universe's formality and elegance; his allegiances are not to his fellow librarians, but to the place – universe and library – that they call home. He is also arguing for the ultimate mystery of the universe, which I believe is what Berkeley was suggesting in his observance of "an infinite number of parts in each particle of Matter which are unperceived by sense." What is implied there is that man is able to sense only a small fraction of the "parts in each particle'; the majority of each particle, and (by extension) the universe remains unknown to him. Thus, the narrator of "Library of Babel" and George Berkeley both seem to be arguing against the idea that man can understand all of reality.

Both Berkeley and the narrator of "Library of Babel" make a serious case for the existence of God in their respective universes. In "Library of Babel" God makes an appearance as a sort of uber-man of the Library: "We also know of another superstition of that time: that of the Man of the book. On some shelf in some hexagon (men reasoned) there must exist a book which is the formula and perfect compendium *of all the rest*: some librarian has gone through it and he is analogous to a God" (56). According to the description of the Library as a place containing an infinite number of books, this "formula and perfect compendium of all the rest" would be a formula for infinity. The librarian who understands this formula would be the closest

figure to a God the Library could ever know. The narrator, apparently, believes in this God. Toward the story's end, the narrator emotionally claims, "The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception" (57). He has already described God as one who would have read the "formula" for the Library, implying that the library has a form. Indeed, much of the story consists of descriptions of the library's neat, geometric layout. The narrator clearly believes in an order to the universe; much of the story is devoted to rich explanations of this geometry. The penultimate sentence confirms this: "If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order)(58). This claims that the library has an infinite structure.

This "order," I would argue, has the same function as Berkeley's God: It creates the conditions for all knowable things to exist. Just as one librarian cannot read all of the books, one mind cannot comprehend the entire universe; but there is an order to the library that is the foundation for its existence, and there is the mind of God which, in immaterialism, creates the universe. Berkeley takes care to note that the reality of the universe is not that which is perceived by one mind, but that which is perceived by any mind. Because God's mind perceives everything, everything that is real, i.e., perceived, exists as a result of him. He writes:

> Wherever bodies are said to have no existence without the mind, I would not be understood to mean this or that particular mind, but all minds whatsoever. It does not therefore follow from the foregoing principle that bodies are annihilated and created every moment, or exist not at all during the intervals between our perception of them. (*A Treatise* 23)

This passage suggests that he is saying that because God's mind is always present, the absence of a human mind does not mean that the objects (or "bodies," as he calls them) of the universe disappear in the moment they are no longer observed by a human being. The moment a librarian returns a book to a shelf, the book does not stop existing; the moment one of the Library's hexagonal rooms is vacated, it does not disappear.

It appears that the narrator of "The Library of Babel" needs the library to have a God, because he needs to believe in an order to the universe. This is because this "library" is actually his version of the universe; it is what is real for him, and I would make the claim that he seeks an order to the reality of his own crafting. The way in which he outlines the physical structure of the Library, recounts Library lore, and declares facts from the Library's history and about its current state seem to come not from any objective truth, but from a sort of tale he makes up. It is as if they are just figures in his mind. The only time he refers to another person by a title other than "explorer" (of the Library) or "librarian" is when he mentions a discovery made by his father. The overarching impression is that of someone weaving a tale.

The narrator begins the story by indicating that *others* refer to the universe as the Library – and then launches into stories from his past that are, by all accounts, plucked from firsthand experience with the Library. The stories absolutely indicate that he agrees with the "others"; it was noted before that he identifies with the "others"; I would say that the various sketches of and anecdotes about the library prove he agrees that, indeed, the universe *is* a library. This includes an encounter had by his father within it (53) and descriptions of the opinions of various people on various aspects of the library. It is implied that these "others" are other librarians; I believe, in actuality, that they are parts of the narrator's imagination.

The most telling evidence for the supposition that the narrator is only giving out his version of a personal reality – not one shared by anybody other than him – comes at the end of the story:

> The methodical task of writing distracts me from the present state of men. The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms . . . Perhaps my old age and fearfulness deceive me, but I suspect that the human species – the unique species – is about to be extinguished, but the Library will endure: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret. (58).

The narrator's suspicion that "the human species . . . is about to be extinguished" may actually be read as a fear of his own death. This is supported by other evidence within the story: at the beginning, he describes, in close details, what the conditions of his death will be like: "Once I am dead, there will be no lack of pious hands to throw me over the railing; my grave will be the fathomless air; my body will sink endlessly and decay and dissolve in the wind generated by the fall, which is infinite" (52). This description of death rites comes out of nowhere; I believe it hints at the fact that the narrator's life is almost up.

The story continues to the impassioned cry against those who hold a "certitude that everything has been written" (58). The rhetoric he uses to describe the library is that of reverence: it is referred to as "divine" (57). The descriptions of the library also issue from a place of deep respect for it; clearly the narrator has spent a great deal of time noting the particulars of the space so that he might write them down: "the methodical task of writing distracts me from the present state of men", he notes (58). This calls attention (in a metafictional twist) to the fact

that he is aware of his status of narrator of the story. It is almost as if he is trying to assume the role of the Library's creator, or author.

My argument, of course, is that he is the author – and his great fear is that with his death will come the end of his Library, or his universe. This is precisely why he needs the Library to have a God: the God will make it endure, just as the God of Berkeley's immaterialism makes all things endure. We might note here that, as a Christian philosopher, Berkeley believed in an afterlife; a literary working of immaterialism that contends with the possibility of life after death is perfectly fitting. The narrator of "Library of Babel" wants his universe to endure; he wants it to have an order and a God, but beyond those two things, he wants it to be infinite. The story ends with the narrator's final word on what he believes to be true of his Library:

> Those who imagine it to be without limit forget that the possible number of ancient books does have such a limit. I venture to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: *The Library is unlimited and cyclical.* If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope. (58)

This final sentence is a declaration of the narrator's conviction about the metaphysical aspects of his universe. The sentence which begins "If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction" reveals that what makes the Library infinite is what makes it ordered: the repetition of its disorder.

What seems to be really going on here, however, is actually not a case for why the universe/Library is infinite: these are the words of a dying man who is contemplating his entire world slipping away from him. The final sentence mentions his solitude. This is possibly his

state before dying. What is truly telling, though, is his hope that the Library is not only unlimited, but cyclical. As a part of the Library, if it were cyclical, this would indicate a life after death for the narrator. If the Library contains all possible books, a book that details his life is in there, too – just as the story of his life is part of the story of the universe. If the Library/universe is cyclical, it means his story will be repeated infinitely. This is the hope to which the narrator clings.

Whether this turns out to be the case is never offered; the story ends there. What is of greatest importance for the purposes of the present argument in "Library of Babel" is that its protagonist shapes his own reality with his mind. He happens to shape it into a library. Before his death, he writes the story of the library, which comprises the text of "Library of Babel" (it is, after all, a work of metafiction, calling attention to its status as text). His reality is the Library, and it is the only version of the universe offered within the text – there is never a point at which he mentions a universe beyond the library. Because this is of his creation, the story is essentially about him, or at least his perception; this is the essence of this story's connection to Berkeleyan immaterialism.

Borges contended with the concept of infinity in another one of his most well-know stories: "The Aleph". Both stories contain a figure which represents the entirety of the universe. In the case of "Library of Babel", it is the titular library; in "The Aleph", it is an Aleph, a Borgesian invention. An Aleph is a point in space which contains all other points. There is only one of it in the entire universe. To look into the Aleph is to see everything in existence all at once, quite literally. The use of an object or place to represent infinity is a similarity between the two stories that pertains to my argument.

There are notable differences among "The Library of Babel," "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "The Aleph". For instance, the narrator of "The Aleph" is a fairly well-developed character, by Borgesian standards (in fact, his account of his emotions and memories comprise a great deal of the narrative). Unlike "Library of Babel" and "Tlön, Uqbar," "The Aleph" does not create a fantastical world; it simply deals with uncanny events in the real one. What remains the same is the existence of the figure of "the reader", although in this case, it is not the narrator who is the reader, but an enemy of his. The reader and his text – which in this case, is a poem he writes – is the subject of the narrator's harsh critical evaluation.

"The Aleph" tells the story of a fictionalized version of Borges (as in "Tlön, Uqbar") who is mourning the death of a woman named Beatriz Viterbo. It is made clear that she and he had a romantic relationship; the name Beatriz is an obvious allusion to Dante's Beatrice. He stops by her house on her birthday for several years after her passing. When doing this, he pays respects to her cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri. Carlos seems to be his literary rival: he shows Borges one of his poems, which Borges scathingly critiques (to himself – it is part of a running inner dialogue that comprises the narrative). One day, Daneri mentions that his house is going to be torn down by a nearby bar looking to expand. This is a source of terrible anguish for him, as it contains an Aleph. Daneri explains what an Aleph is to Borges, who believes him to be mad. Daneri then offers Borges a look into it. Borges experiences the wonders of peering into infinity, but later claims that the Aleph is a false Aleph.

As mentioned, I believe Daneri's poem is the text with which he engages as "the reader". The fact that he is also its author does not negate the fact that this could be the text; in fact, because I am arguing for the analogy between the reader-text relationship of these stories and the mind- universe relationship of Berkeley's immaterialism, it follows that the reader would

literally create the text, because in immaterialism, the mind creates the universe. I would argue that that the Aleph represents here is infinite reality created by the immaterialist God. It has already been noted that God's mind is the ultimate mind, perceiving everything in existence forever. This is precisely the function of the Aleph.

The fact that Daneri owns an Aleph leads him to identify with God: through this object, he has the power to see everything. I would argue that Daneri actually *is* a God, functionally speaking, and that out of mortal spite (and, perhaps, jealousy of his literary prowess) Borges finishes the story by claiming that the Aleph is a fake Aleph. There are several clues within the text that demonstrate that Daneri's power, as provided by his Aleph, can be associated with the God of immaterialist philosophy. First of all, the epic poetic text he creates is called "The Earth": "First, he said, he opened the floodgates of his fancy; then, taking up hand tools, he resorted to the file. The poem was entitled *The Earth*; it consisted of a description of the planet, and, of course, lacked no amount of picturesque digressions and bold apostrophes." (17-18). Regardless of the narrator's distaste for Daneri's poem, the fact that Daneri is toiling toward a poetic description of the entire planet is remarkable. This is before he reveals the fact that he owns an Aleph; but it speaks to a certain quality of omniscience. Nowhere is it ever mentioned that Daneri would fabricate a detail of the planet, in all of its minute intricacies – only that he would give it the poetic treatment. Although the narrator believes the descriptions of the planet to be mere "picturesque digressions," they are presented in the story as the work of one with access to viewing infinity – to an Aleph. The narrator notes that he "had in mind to set to verse the face of an entire planet" and outlines his progress as such:

> By 1941, he had already dispatched a number of acres of the State of Queensland, nearly a mile of the course run by the River Ob, a gasworks to the north of

> Veracruz, the leading shops in the Buenos Aires parish of Concepcion, the villa of Mariana Cambaceres de Alvear in the Belgrano section of the Argentine Capital, and a Turkish baths establishment not far from the well-known Brighton Aquarium (19-20).

These things are not noted as fancies or digressions: within the text, there is no indication that Daneri has made up their existence. I believe that the reader of "The Aleph" is meant to assume that these places are real places, and Daneri is familiar with them. They are simply listed as what has already fallen under his pen. I also think it is significant that the act of writing is referred to as "dispatching a number of acres." This is an unusual way of describing poetry-writing; it is as if, in the act of writing, Daneri is actually "dispatching acres of land".

In spite of the narrator's distaste for *The Earth*, it winds up garnering great reviews. It is noted toward the story's end that it wins a prestigious award:

> It is redundant now to repeat what happened. Carlos Argentino Daneri won the Second National Prize for Literature [this is qualified by a footnote that recounts Daneri's pompous response to Borges's "pained congratulations on receiving this note]. First prize went to Dr. Aita; Third Prize, to Mario Bonafenti. My own book *The Sharper's Cards* did not get a single vote. Once again dullness and envy had their triumph! (29).

This constitutes further evidence for the fact that the narrator's dislike of Daneri is merely a projection of his own strife. Whereas his commentary on the poem is initially amusing, and the reader is inclined to side with the narrator against Daneri, by the end, it seems quite obvious that his grief and anger over losing Beatriz clouds his assessment of her cousin. While Daneri is portrayed as a self-important, arrogant writer, this "flaw" ultimately looks like a spiteful

portrayal by an envious and mournful acquaintance working in the same profession. This is what leads the character Borges to come to the conclusion that the Aleph is not actually what it seems.

It seems that this section actually outlines the surfacing of the narrator's anger at God and at the reality of an infinite universe, as those things have transpired to take his beloved Beatriz from him. He certainly dislikes the concept of the movement of time. While Daneri speaks excitedly of modern innovations that will allow for "the mountain" to come to "the modern Muhammad" (17) Borges sees these innovations as "foolish" and distasteful – fanciful in such a way that he "linked them at once to literature" (17). Borges also notes that the bar which is expanding into Daneri's property is "ruthlessly modern" ("Aleph" 20). The most significant clue that the passage of time causes him distress, however, is at the very beginning:

> On the burning February morning Beatriz Viterbo died, after braving an agony that never for a single moment gave way to self-pity or fear, I noticed that the sidewalk billboards around Constitution Plaza were advertising some new brand or other of American cigarettes. The fact pained me, for I realized that the wide and ceaseless universe was already slipping away from her and that this slight change was the first of an endless series. The universe may change but not me, I thought with a certain sad vanity. (15)

The narrator's pain never gives way to self-pity or fear, but it does give way to horror at the reality of time, which is that it will march forward without Beatriz. I believe it is critical for the story that this is related at the beginning: the fact of the narrator's anger at the passage of time, at reality, and at God, is what everything else is contingent upon. Something as seemingly insignificant as a sidewalk advertisement represents, for the narrator, something as large as the cruelty of time's passing. This is the most significant indicator of the narrator's anger at time,

because it is the first, but it is the first of a series. It seems that his grief over his loss, and his anger at the reality of the world is magnified over the years. His visits to Beatriz's family's house on her birthday get longer each year (16); the final sentence of the story also refers to Beatriz.

This offers an explanation for his distaste at Daneri and 'The Earth". As a family member, Daneri is already permanently associated with Beatriz; Beatriz is the only reason Borges and Daneri ever meet. I believe that Daneri's claims over infinity, via his ownership of the Aleph, are too much for Borges: Daneri is not only a relative of Beatriz, and therefore is associated with a great deal of pain, but the Aleph makes him a God-like figure. I would argue that Borges *has* to dislike him, and to doubt the truth of the Aleph, even in the face of his encounters with it.

What is particularly telling is that Borges initially accepts that the Aleph is, in fact, the true Aleph. He only rescinds this assessment after discovering that Daneri won a major literary prize for his poem. His rejection of the reality of Daneri's Aleph is because he believes he has found sources for another true Aleph, although the circumstances surrounding his research of the true Aleph are questionable. The story's ending outlines several possibilities for the existence of the Aleph elsewhere, although they all come from the manuscript of one "Captain Burton [who] held the post of British Consul in Brazil" in 1867 (30). This is an outright acceptance of secondhand evidence over empirical experience for the existence of the Aleph, and seems like a stretch made on the part of a man who has an emotional stake in not believing in it.

Borges does not wish to contend with the reality of mortal life, as he must live it without Beatriz Viterbo. More significantly, he rejects the idea of infinity and God. For him, they are cruel, as they represent change; he resolves not to change, as a statement against the reality of time's passing and the cruelty of an infinite universe. I might reiterate that due to the possession

of the Aleph, Daneri is a symbol for all that brings Borges pain: Daneri is Beatriz's relative, and has access to knowledge that makes him, functionally speaking, a sort of God and master of fate (at least, he is privy to understanding the future, as well as the perfect reality of the past). He comes to stand for a symbol for the immaterialist God, who perceives everything in existence, all at the same time. Borges, by contrast, is only a mortal man – defined in immaterialism as one who has a fractional understanding of the universe (he is also a less-accomplished author!). This perception is what creates it; hence Daneri fills the role of the immaterialist God.

Berkeley is very clear in his declaration that a higher power is necessary to create the universe. This is because human minds alone cannot possibly comprehend infinity; only God can. A passage from his book *Three Dialogues Between Hylas And Philonous* explains how this works:

> Now you must call imagination to your aid. The feeble narrow sense cannot descry innumerable worlds revolving round the central fires; and in those worlds the energy of an all-perfect Mind displayed in endless forms. But, neither sense nor imagination are big enough to comprehend the boundless extent, with all its glittering furniture. (63)

What I believe Berkeley is stating is that the human mind – or "the feeble narrow sense" that is "imagination"- cannot possibly have any working handle on infinity. This statement ends a reverent and heartfelt description of the glory of the totality of nature. The point of this description is to indicate that there is no way one person could absorb it all; it is infinitely old and vast, and the glories of life on Earth are an infinitesimal bit of the infinite universe. The speaker, Philonous, is trying to convince his acquaintance Hylas of the fact that reality exists within the mind – and that each individual's version of the universe is only his or her slice of

infinity, and is necessarily limited. The only being privy to all of it is the higher power. The text continues:

> Though the laboring mind exert and strain each power to its utmost reach, there still stands out ungrasped a surplusage inmeasurable. Yet all the vast bodies that compose this mighty frame, how distant and remote soever, are by some secret mechanism, some divine art and force, linked in a mutual dependence and intercourse with each other, even with this earth, which was almost slipt from my thoughts and lost in the crowd of worlds (63).

The "divine art and force", of course, is God – since Berkeley was a Christian philosopher, God was a necessary part of his worldview. Berkeley's basic argument that the reality of the universe exists within the mind stipulates that God is necessary. There needs to be a mind that exists when to perceive – i.e., create – the universe. No finite mortal being could ever do this. What *defines* God, according to immaterliast philosophy, therefore, is the ability to perceive infinity. In reality, no human could possibly do this; in the world of "The Aleph," this human is Daneri.

As "the reader" figure of this story, Daneri also "creates" the reality of the text with which he engages, which is his poem "The Earth". I believe this to be a significant clue to the fact that Daneri is meant to be understood as analogous to God. The reader-text relationship in this story is a metaphor for the role of God in immaterialism: God is the one who creates every object in the infinite universe by perceiving it. Daneri's writing of "The Earth" is a metaphor for God's "writing of the planet." This is supported by the way he uses language in the poem: his poetics are ornate and flowery, perhaps overwritten (Borges declares a deep distaste for it). I believe that his use of an expansive vocabulary reflects the fact that each word stands for

something slightly different. As a world author, the more words he uses, the larger and more diverse his world becomes. He even invents new words to fit specific situations. The story reads:

> He then reread me four or five different fragments of the poem. He had revised them following his pet principle of verbal ostentation: where at first "blue" had been good enough, he now wallowed in "azures," "ceruleans," and "ultramarines". The word "milky" was too easy for him; in the course of an impassioned description of a shed where wool was washed, he chose words such as "lacteal," "lactescent," and even made one up – "lactinacious"(20-21).

As the creator of both the planet and "The Earth", his "pet principle of verbal ostentation" is actually the principle by which he makes use of his raw creative materials: words. As each place on earth, and each experience on earth, is slightly different, so each one might – for its creator – necessitate the invention of new words. After all, "azure", "cerulean", and "ultramarine" all refer to different hues. This isn't to Borges's taste, and indeed would probably not make for the best poet by any standards. But as Daneri's role is not principally that of a poet, but one who has access to infinity, and is a symbol for God, it makes perfect sense.

One feature of the story that reflects the immaterialist conception of God is the name of the titular object: "The Aleph" is noted as being an important Hebrew letter, a fact that is revealed only toward the end of the story:

> I want to add two final observations: one, on the nature of the Aleph; the other, on its name. As is well known, the Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Its use for the strange sphere in my story may not be accidental. For the Kabbala, that letter stands for the *En Soph*, the pure and boundless godhead; it is also said that it

> takes the shape of a man pointing to both heaven and earth, in order to show that the lower world is a map and mirror of the higher (29).

I would argue that the use of the Hebrew alphabet's first letter as the name of the "strange sphere" is not accidental at all. This appears to reflect the fact that God is the primary constituent of the universe; the thing that comes before all other objects and experiences – God is first. The use of the name "aleph" in this story is identical to its use as a symbol in Kabbalah – the "strange sphere" contains infinity, and the symbol represents infinity. Although he indicates the connection, Borges wonders as to the origin of Daneri's "decision" to use the name Aleph – as if it were another one of his passing fancies and could be easily substituted by other words: "I wonder whether Carlos Argentino [Daneri] chose that name or whether he read it", he muses, directly before launching into his analysis of why he believes the Aleph to be false.

The reader-text relationship in "The Aleph" is definitely altered by the fact that the narrator has a strained relationship to the reader figure. Readers of "The Aleph" cannot be sure exactly what to make of Daneri and his Aleph. Of course, the point is not to understand the relationship between Borges and Daneri. What is significant about it in terms of the larger genealogy is the treatment of the reader/text relationship, the relationship also seen in "Library Of Babel" and "Tlön, Uqbar". In those stories, the reader is the narrator, a human figure whose texts (the Anglo-American Cyclopaedias and the texts of the Library) constituted his subjective, partial version of reality (following the immaterialist tenets). In this story, the "reader" is a God-like figure who creates the world (in the poem "The Earth") and has access to understanding everything within infinity.

The reader/text trope is further considered with in Borges's story "Pierre Menard, Author of The Quixote." As in "The Aleph," "the reader" of this story is not the narrator. It is the titular

character, a poet named Pierre Menard. Another similarity between "Pierre Menard" and "The Aleph" is that the reader's text, in the former case, is one he has actually written. What distinguishes "Pierre Menard" from the stories that have been discussed as well as from the greater body of literature that examines reader-text relationships is that the reader's relationship to the text is, by all accounts, technically impossible.

The narrator of "Pierre Menard" holds a deep reverence for Menard, who is identified as a deceased poet. The story consists of an account of Menard's attempt to rewrite Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. He does not mean to retell it or rework it in a more modern light: Menard quite literally wants to rewrite *Don Quixote*, that is, he hopes to reproduce it word for word. He commits himself to doing this completely from his own mind. The narrator sets out to explain why this mission, as magical and patently Quixotic as it seems, is not absurd for Menard. This explanation consists of ruminations on the nature of time and memory, and champions Menard as one who radically reconceived of the notion of reading. This new take on reading assumes that the "truth" or "reality" of a text depends at least as much on who wrote it as on its actual content:

> To be, in the twentieth century, a popular novelist of the seventeenth seemed to him a diminution. To be, in some way, Cervantes and reach the *Quixote* seemed less ardous to him – and, consequently, less interesting – than to go on being Pierre Menard and reach the *Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard. (This conviction, we might say in passing, made him omit the autobiographic prologue to the second part of *Don Quixote*. To include that prologue would have been to create another character – Cervantes – but it would also have meant

> presenting the *Quixote* in terms of that character and not of Menard. The latter, naturally, declined that facility.) (40)

This, of course, is immaterialist; it places the truth and reality of a novel, short story, or poem not in the actual content of the work, but inside its creator, just as the truth or reality of a situation is to be found inside the minds of those who perceive it (instead of in the events and particulars of the situation). Of course, what is significant here is that in reproducing the work, Menard assumes the role of its creator. In reproducing the text, he recreates its meaning for himself, instead of accessing it through the figure of Cervantes.

What is distinctive about this story is that it is essentially *about* the theory that reality is produced inside the human mind. Whereas "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "The Library of Babel," and "The Aleph" used basic immaterialist concepts as narrative points, the entire drive of "Pierre Menard" is toward an explanation grounded in Berkeley's philosophy. While "Tlön, Uqbar" imagines a place that operates according to immaterialist precepts, using specific aspects of a fantasy world as metaphors for elements of the Berkeley's argument, the "truth" of immaterialism is always in question. After all, Tlön is never confirmed to be a real place. Even when it seems to affect the reality of Earth, it is always suggested that Tlön might not actually exist, and the indicators of Tlön's existence in the real world are simply the products of the mind of a narrator who is devoting a great deal of time to uncovering the mystery of Tlön's origins. The effects Tlön has on earth do not constitute empirical evidence; they are merely uncanny events that may or may not have anything to do with Tlön, Uqbar, or Orbis Tertius.

In "Pierre Menard," however, the narrator believes strongly in the immaterialist philosophy: it is his rationalization for the seemingly supernatural powers of Menard. The fact that the narrator takes the philosophy of immaterialism as his personal belief and worldview

makes immaterialism the functional framework for the short story: the reader has no choice but to accept the narrator's account of the poet's work and his explanation for it. This, then, is the internal logic of the text. It stipulates that immaterialist occasions – i.e, the ability to create an exact replica of a text purely from one's mind – are factual events. Because of this, I would argue that "Pierre Menard" is the closest story, of the four, to containing magic. The reader has to suspend disbelief in something that he or she cannot know to be true: the philosophy of immaterialism

What is ironic about this, of course, is that the very thing the reader has to suspend disbelief is is the notion that reality is subjective – essentially, readers of "Pierre Menard" have to believe that they "believe" in everything they know to be reality, as opposed to "knowing" it to be true. The fantastical thing here is not a mythical creature or deity: it is everyday reality, because, like a story, it is fabricated by the mind. Immaterialism argues against the possible existence of factors outside one's mind that confirm one's sense impressions (God is the only factor outside one's mind that has anything to do with the reality of sense impressions). It is the ultimate "belief system," as it operates entirely on the idea that reality is a mental construct, entirely comprised of *beliefs* – or acts of faith in the unknowable- that arise from sense impressions (which come from God). Whereas other instances of magic in literature might ask the reader to suspend their disbelief the reality of mythical creatures, divine missions, ghosts, gods, or goddesses, "Pierre Menard" asks the reader to ascribe to a philosophy that questions the nature of knowable reality. The result is a story that poses complex philosophical questions, all in the name of an exploration into what it means to be a reader, and how (or if) the world of the text is different from the world *outside* the text.

Borges's choice of *Don Quixote* as the text that Menard reproduces reflects the fact that the story is a drive toward an immaterialist explanation of an otherwise unbelievable supernatural literary event. As noted before, Menard's undertaking is deeply quixotic: it is a highly idealistic and impracticable strive toward a goal founded around experiences with literature. I believe that Borges conceived of Menard as a sort of modern-day Don Quixote. The difference between Quixote and Menard is that what made others believe Quixote to be "mad" is what gives Menard his special powers: his unwavering belief that the way in which he views the world is the correct way. Belief in one's own reality as something that operates separately from the realities of others, or of the past, is exactly what allows for Menard to accomplish his feat. The fact that belief allows for what is believed-in to exist creates the situation of "Pierre Menard," in which immaterialism is made "real." As an act of the mind, belief serves to create the reality of the believer. Therefore, if Pierre Menard has managed to convince himself of the fact that he is able to reproduce *Don Quixote* word for word, he will be able to do it. The challenge here seems not to be the fact that this feat is absurd, but the fact that allowing oneself to believe that it is *not* absurd would be a very difficult obstacle to overcome. This radical act of belief in oneself would be called insanity by all standards; this textually based "insanity" is the subject of both Cervantes's novel and Borges's short story.

Another reason we can see Menard to be a modern-day Quixote is that his own re-conception of the reading process would very much allow him to be so; in fact, it would be fitting. This is the new approach to literature which the narrator passionately praises throughout the course of the narrative. Menard's literary approach gives no serious weight to chronology, authorship, or greater cultural setting of a work. It is about one's own belief in the world of the text. A pertinent passage reads as follows:

> Menard (perhaps without wanting to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution. This technique, whose applications are infinite, prompts us to go through the *Odyssey* as if it were posterior to the *Aeneid* and the book *Le jardin du Centaure* by Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the most placid works with adventure. To attribute the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce, is this not a sufficient renovation of its tenuous spiritual indications? (44)

The application of this logic of reading to the real world would mean that if Menard wanted to imagine himself as Don Quixote, or as Cervantes, that desire would be as good as declaring the fact true. I would argue that Borges wanted the reader of "Pierre Menard" to believe that the story's treatment of immaterialism implies that Menard's literary approach functions beyond the literary world, as well. This would imply that the ideas of immaterialism are active in the story in places beyond Menard's literary opinions. This activity might be seen, for example, in the idea that belief in oneself can give one powers that seem magical. Ultimately, Menard champions the magic in the power a text has over a reader beyond a rational or critical approach to engaging with literature. He strongly dislikes the fact that critical analysis is lauded as the traditionally "correct" way to begin to make sense of a work of literature. The following passage, which cites a letter from Menard to the narrator, demonstrates this:

> Thinking, analyzing, inventing (he also wrote me) are not anomalous acts; they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional performance of that function, to hoard ancient and alien thoughts, to recall with incredulous stupor that the *doctor universalis* thought, is to confess our laziness or

> our barbarity. Every man should be capable of all ideas and I understand that in the future this will be the case. (37)

Here, Menard is arguing against the over-glorification of thinking, analyzing, and inventing. He equates them with typical human functions – they are "the normal respiration of the intelligence"- and, because they are ordinary and commonplace, they should not be glorified. In stating that to venerate these functions is to "confess our laziness or our barbarity" I believe he is stating that the act of glorification of analysis implies that mental work is praiseworthy on the basis of how atypical it is. Analysis, here, is envisioned as a natural state of mind: Menard believes that thinking and analyzing are ordinary human functions. As such, they are not worthy of any special honors. His understanding of the act of reading reflects this.

His approach to reading gives little weight to historical analysis or the critical appraisal of others. It calls for a commitment to a text that does not refer to any bit of knowledge from the past, from literary criticism, or any source outside the text otherwise. It throws off the entire concept of textual interpretation, instead stating that what is contained inside the text is all there is to it – and that all that is there is what a reader reads "into" it. The text is thus "created" by a reader, just as the world is "created" by the human mind, according to Berkeley. The pages of history, Menard would argue, only mar the purity of a work, as a body of potential interpretations and new versions add up. These additions to the work only skew the pure impressions received by a reader's engagement with the original work, which has relevance entirely outside of any appraisal of its author, its culture, or historical reality otherwise. Ultimately, the relevance and meaning of a text is outside of time. Toward the end of the story, the narrator offers a window into Menard's ideas of what it means to read:

> There is no exercise of the intellect which is not, in the final analysis, useless. A philosophical doctrine begins as a plausible description of the universe; with the passage of the years it becomes a mere new chapter – if not a paragraph or a name – in the history of philosophy. In literature, this eventual caducity is even more notorious. The *Quixote* – Menard told me – was, above all, an entertaining book; now it is the occasion for patriotic toasts, grammatical insolence and obscene deluxe editions. Fame is a form of incomprehension, perhaps the worst. (43).

Menard's assessment of the passage of time is, in a sense, anti-time. The observation that "there is no exercise of the intellect which is not, in the final analysis, useless" indicates the fact that time renders all intellectual exercises outmoded at one point or another. The narrator indicates that Menard is familiar with the ways in which this has been manifested, and will continue to be manifested, throughout intellectual history. The fact that time diminishes the magnitude of importance of a work – novels, short stories, poems and essays can only be considered innovative for a limited amount of time – disturbs Menard greatly. I believe this disturbance is the point from where Menard drew inspiration for his undertaking. The narrator notes that Menard's frustration with time is not particularly unique; what is unique, he says, is what the frustration brought forth: "There is nothing new in these nihilistic verifications; what is singular is the determination Menard drew from them" (43).

What the narrator finds distinctive about Menard's determination is the fact that it led him to be able to reproduce parts of *Don Quixote*. What is admirable, he is saying, is not that he was troubled by the effect of time's passage on a text; it was that he set himself to solve this problem, in a sense, through an act of the mind. This mental act came in the form of recreating the text in a pure form, purely through an act of will. This demonstration of will would serve to

prove that the human mind, as an agent of creation, has power over a text greater than anything the forces of time, culture, and criticism could force over one's reading. This is, of course, immaterialist; it implies that the act of reading creates the text. But Menard's goal pushes this idea to new limits: his ambition is so strongly immaterialist that it breaks down the barriers between reading and writing, making it possible to "write" an already-written text. Instead of the reader figure who "writes" a text by creating individual meaning from reading (which is a metaphor for the human mind that creates its own subjective reality), Menard's will – or the "individual meaning" he derives from his life as a reader and writer – is what actually serves to create the text.

This individual meaning is a stance, ultimately, against pre-determination. Menard notes that he selected *Don Quixote* as the text to reproduce because it felt, unlike other favorite works of his, "contingent", as if it were the result of chance and not a "necessary" act of literature. He claims that works by his other favorite writers, such as Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarme seemed "inevitable" ("Pierre Menard" 41), as if there is a line of causality that links certain events together to create great literature. It is this assumed causality that Menard wants to act against. He seems to be fundamentally against the idea that every effect has a cause; he sets out to create an "effect" (the recreation of *Don Quixote*) without a cause (the act of word-for-word transcription that would create a perfect copy).

Immaterialism is a sort of anti-causal philosophy. Because it places reality within the individual human, who constructs his or her version of the world inside their own minds, the identification of a chain of cause and effect as an explanation for an event (or series of events) would only be meaningful to the extent that one actually believed in the cause-effect chain. What is critical here is the act of belief in a concept, idea, or impression: it is a mental operation that,

according to idealism, is what makes something "real" (because reality is only as "real" as the human mind allows it to be). Therefore, Menard's rejection of cause and effect is in line with his overall immaterialist approach to the acts of reading and writing.

Menard's anti-causal stance is demonstrated in his selection of *Don Quixote* for his aim. The narrator elucidates: "But why precisely the *Quixote?* our reader will ask. Such a preference, in a Spaniard, would not have been inexplicable; but it is, no doubt, in a Symbolist from Nimes, essentially a devotee of Poe, who engendered Baudelaire, who engendered Mallarme, who engendered Valery, who engendered Edmond Teste." ("Pierre Menard" 40-41). The fact that the narrator establishes a lineage that begins with Poe and ends with Edmond Teste speaks to the concept of a causal line which, according to him, makes the existence of certain great literary works "necessary." Baudelaire, Mallarme, Valery, and Teste's works were "necessary" acts of literature; their existence, the narrator offers, is due to a logical progression of literary creation. Menard argues against this logical progression, as the result of causality, because causality is a function of time. He strongly believed that the passage of time tarnished a "pure" encounter with all texts. This is because of the cloud of praise, criticism, new editions, re-workings, and so on, that surround an original work and cast their own light on it. For Menard, Poe, Baudelaire, Mallarme, Valery, and Teste exist within time – within a framework by which their reading will always be informed by factors beyond the control of the writer. Menard sees Cervantes as writing outside of time. Therefore, he had ultimate control over his work – ultimate authorship. Menard quite clearly wanted this control, too. This, of course, is ironic – the only way in which Menard believes he can have ultimate control over a text is to reproduce somebody else's work. The explanation for his choice of *Don Quixote* continues:

> The aforementioned letter illustrates this point. "The *Quixote*," clarifies Menard, "interests me deeply, but it does not seem – how shall I say it? – inevitable. I cannot imagine the universe without Edgar Allen Poe's exclamation *Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted* or without the *Bateau ivre* or the *Ancient Mariner*, but I am Quite capable of imagining it without the *Quixote*. (I speak, naturally, of my personal capacity and not of those works' historical relevance). The *Quixote* is a contingent book; the *Quixote* is unnecessary. (41)

What I believe is most critical in this excerpt is the fact that Menard notes that he speaks "naturally, of my personal capacity and not of these works' historical relevance." He is not saying that *Don Quixote* holds a privileged place outside of inevitability on the basis of anything other than his own memory. The basis for its contingency is within his psyche. Just as his mind is the source that identifies the "necessity" of Baudelaire et. Al., the "contingency" of Baudelaire is only real because this is his opinion.

This is in line with Menard's understanding of history, which seems to negate the concept of truth or untruth as qualities with their basis in historical fact. "Truth," for Menard, is merely what is believed to be true by the individual. Just as Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarme are all part of the same line - which Menard understands as his own lineage, not a lineage agreed on by scholars or of which he read in a textbook somewhere – historical facts are merely what we believe them to be. The narrator explains: "Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened. The final phrases – *exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor* – are brazenly pragmatic." (43)

I believe that in mentioning that history for Menard is not defined as an "inquiry into reality" but as "its origin", the narrator is noting that history is merely a chronology of a series of subjective ideas and impressions. To define history as an "inquiry into reality" is to imply that reality is something that exists as an entity outside of oneself, something to be inquired into. This "something" might be understood as objective truth. If it is outside of one's mind, it can be investigated as a means of discovering its objective qualities. This stands against what he is stating about Menard's definition of history as an origin of reality. The understanding of history as reality's origin is an indicator that one takes concepts from history as a starting point from which to begin constructing one's subjective version of present reality. Menard's assessment of literary history leads him to see *Don Quixote* as different from works by many other writers: what is key is that he understands that this assessment of history is, of course, his reality and nobody else's.

"Pierre Menard" is made more complex when the narrator reveals that the reconstructed text of *Don Quixote* has not actually survived Pierre Menard. This revelation casts the rest of the story into a new light: the reader understands that, just as Pierre Menard was driven by a personal opinion regarding *Don Quixote* (the idea that it is contingent), the narrator is driven by an equally personal and subjective opinion about Menard. Just as Menard "writes" the *Quixote* of Cervantes, the narrator "writes" the *Quixote* of Pierre Menard. I would argue that the story becomes a meditation on the way in which each reader "creates" his favorite texts or authors. The narrator's appreciation for Menard leads him to assume that he was successful in his goal. Not only that, he seems unperturbed by the fact that this mythical text no longer exists. The story reads:

> He decided to anticipate the vanity awaiting all of man's efforts; he set himself to an undertaking which was exceedingly complex and, from the very beginning, false. He dedicated his scruples and his sleepless nights to repeating an already extant book in an alien tongue. He multiplied draft upon draft, and revised tenaciously and tore up thousand of manuscript pages. He did not let anyone examine these drafts and took care that they should not survive him. In vain I have tried to reconstruct them. (42-43)

The narrator's identification of the undertaking as "false" is crucial here. The narrator does not elaborate on what he means by "false" – it is unclear whether he believes that Menard actually did not reconstruct *Don Quixote* or of he thinks that the undertaking itself was a sort of falsification of what is realistically possible. All other evidence from "Pierre Menard" seems to indicate that the narrator believes that he really did reconstruct *Don Quixote*.

What I believe is significant about this passage, though, is that it actually renders the question of whether Menard actually accomplished his goal meaningless. The "point" of the *Quixote*'s reconstruction, the idea for which the narrator deifies Menard, is not to be found in the factual reality of the text. It is in what Menard's goal implies for the act of reading. I believe the narrator sees the declaration of Menard's ambition as a statement on the fact that reading is creative and functions outside of what any history-based understanding could bring to the act of engagement with work of literature. The creative powers of reading are, of course, part of the story of *Don Quixote*, where the protagonist's entire view of reality is created by his view of the novels he loves. This is the sort of literary encounter championed by Menard, who in trying to reproduce the *Quixote* word-for-word was, I believe, trying to indicate the lack of difference between the world of the text and the world of the reader's mind.

This is reflected in the fact that the narrator, in a sense, "creates" Menard. As far as the reader of the story is concerned, the only "real" view of Menard is the narrator's view. There is no access to the reality of who Menard was or what his writing was really like except through the narrator. In this sense, the narrator has the same relationship to Menard that Menard has to *Don Quixote*. This is why the fact that there is no surviving copy of Menard's reconstruction of *Don Quixote* is so important: it brings the story full circle. Although the story leads toward an immaterialist rationalization for skills of the titular poet, I would argue that it is not "about" immaterialism. If it can be said to be about anything, like the other texts confronted thus far, it is about the relationship between a reader and a text. What makes "Pierre Menard" a particularly fascinating case is the fact that the narrator understands what is at the core of the reader-text relationship. This is, obviously, true for his personal reader-text relationship (his relationship to Menard's reproduced *Quixote*) but it is the same as the issue at hand in all of the stories.

What is central to this kind of relationship between a reader and a text – the relationship that I believe is the subject of "Tlön, Uqbar", "Library Of Babel", "The Aleph", and "Pierre Menard" – is that the reader creates the text. He or they create(s) the text by reading themselves "into" it. Their minds are the functional authors of the work. "The reader" (or "readers") figure in each work is fully enveloped in the world of the text. This is why I use the term "relationship" to describe the workings between the reader and the text: it is as personal and life-encompassing as a relationship two people might have with each other.

The text, then, becomes the entire framework for the reader's life – this is because it *is* their life, functionally speaking. I believe that there is no practical distinction between the reader's book and the reader's life, in these stories. Both are projections of the reader's mind. Details surrounding the creation and origin of the text in question have little bearing on its

immediate interpretation for the reader. Each of these stories contends with the idea that accuracy of historical facts of a works' origin is not actually provable. The origins of the Tlön Encyclopaedias is the mystery that drives the entire story; while the narrator discovers certain truths about their fabrication, the essential mystery of Tlön and its surroundings remains a mystery by the story's end. The origin of the Library of Babel is never referred to specifically; it rests upon the idea that the Library is really just a metaphor for something much larger than itself. The text of "The Aleph" is being written throughout the course of a story and so has no verifiable (or unverifiable) historical facts surrounding it; and of course, it is very possible that the text under scrutiny in "Pierre Menard" might never have existed to begin with.

The texts of these stories are not really novels, poems, libraries or short stories at all: they are operations of the mind of "the reader" figure that is in all of them. Each story is a rumination on the idea that human reality is completely relative to individual experience. This individual experience is made up of sense impressions that are put together in the mind of the individual to create their own version of the world. Borges took this idea directly from *A Treatise Concerning Principles Of Human Knowledge* and applied it to the idea of reading. This application took "the world of sense impressions" to be the "text" and the "human mind" that synthesizes its own reality to be "the reader".

I believe the use of immaterialism as the theoretical background for metafictional works has important implications for the possibilities of its reception and interpretations. The philosophy states that reality is a different experience for every individual. The use of immaterialism as a theme and framework for non- metafictional novels and short stories might look like a story that deals with, say, characters who realize that they can never find objective truth. However, I believe that because these works are metafictional, the use of immaterialism

has implications that apply not just to their characters and plotlines, but to the way in which they are received by a reader. Metafictional works contain commentary on the nature of fiction in general – how it should be read, what its function is, and the general role it plays in human life. I believe that the commentary contained in the selected works of Calvino, Nabokov, and Acker affects a reader's response to the work. This response mirrors the philosophy for which George Berkeley argued in *A Treatise Concerning Principles of Human Knowledge*. It is a response based purely on the individual, rendering the idea of "correct" or "incorrect" interpretation meaningless. Whatever a reader brings to their reading of *Pale Fire*, *If On A Winter' Night A Traveler* and *Don Quixote* is the "correct" reading of it. Each of these stories contains a figure (or figures) that are attempting to derive meaning from a text that serves as a metaphor for their life. I believe that readers of these works assume the same position as "the reader" figure in these works.

Part Two: The Borgesian Use of Berkeleyan Immaterialism in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* is a useful place to begin discussing the influence of Borges's short stories on fiction of the mid-to-late twentieth century. As with Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote* and Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*, it takes as its subject the relationship between a reader, or multiple readers, and a text, or texts. I believe that "the reader" in *Pale Fire* "writes" the text that he reads; this is true of the "readers" in *Don Quixote* and *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* as well. Of the three novels, *Pale Fire* is the most useful place to begin demonstrating these links, I would argue, partially due to its intertextual relationship with "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." The fact that *Pale Fire* draws directly from "Tlön, Uqbar" is significant because "Tlön, Uqbar" contains the most obvious references to Berkeley's immaterialism as it is found within the short stories of Borges. As "Tlön, Uqbar" was a useful point from which to embark on a discussion about Borges's connection to Berkeley, *Pale Fire* is a useful point of departure for an explication of the lineage of metafictional techniques first seen in Borges's short stories. The treatment of immaterialism in *Pale Fire* is exemplary of its treatment in "Tlön, Uqbar."

I have noted previously that *Pale Fire* takes as its framework the structure of the novel discussed by the fictional Borges and Bioy Casares at the outset of "Tlön, Uqbar": the tale "whose narrator would omit or disfigure the facts and indulge in various contradictions which would permit a few readers – very few readers – to perceive an atrocious or banal reality" ("Tlön, Uqbar" 3). Of course, *Pale Fire* is not the only novel that features an unreliable narrator who contradicts him-or-herself. I would argue that it relates closely to "Tlön, Uqbar" because it not only operates according to the literary suggestions offered at the story's beginning, but it is

essentially an exploration of the way in which reading a text can influence the reality of the reader – and the way in which the facts of the reader's reality can influence the world of a text.

Pale Fire consists of three parts. The first is the foreword to the second part, which consists of a 999 line autobiographical poem called "Pale Fire". This foreword is written by a colleague of the poem's author, a writer and college professor named John Shade. The colleague, a younger professor and life-long aficionado of Shade's poetry, is named Charles Kinbote. The men are neighbors and acquaintances; after Shade's death, Kinbote takes the task of overseeing the posthumous publication of "Pale Fire", which includes his commentary on the work. The third part of the novel is Kinbote's commentary. It becomes apparent very quickly that Kinbote's interpretation of "Pale Fire" is strongly informed by his almost fanatical admiration for Shade, a veneration that seems to make him want to believe that he strongly influenced the content of the poem. Individual phrases from the poem are singled out as issuing from experiences Shade had with Kinbote; a single image is given pages of commentary about its assumed back story, which seems to have little to do with the actual content of the poem. This back story comprises narratives from Kinbote's supposed life and homeland, a fictional territory named Zembla. It becomes immediately obvious that any connection the poem has to Zembla is simply the product of Kinbote's wishful imagination.

Kinbote's commentary gradually strays from having relevance to Shade's poem to telling the story of the fall of the last king of Zembla. This becomes an important subplot of the novel. By all accounts, John Shade had nothing to do with Zembla outside of the interactions he has with Kinbote. Kinbote's demonstrations of where he sees connections between individual phrases within the poem and stories of Zembla he shares with John Shade makes him seem deeply narcissistic. His understanding of himself as the source for a great writer's last work is

founded on an appraisal of the poem that vastly overreaches and is grounded in a misconstrued sense of the extent to which the two men were close.

The story of the last king of Zembla quickly transforms from ancillary information that supports a reading of "Pale Fire" to a narrative that reflects on the conditions of the inner state of Kinbote. Kinbote's narrative voice is very strong; as he outlines various occurrences from the recent history of the Zemblan royal family, he makes clear his opinions and feelings toward each event and its surrounding implications for all those affected by the king's deposition. In this section, the reader actually gets two narratives: the explicit content, which tells a story of revolution and political intrigue, and what I identify as the implicit content, which is the increasingly-apparent fact of Kinbote's mental instability. There are places in the commentary that have virtually nothing to do with the content of the poem: the ways in which Kinbote strays from his express task leads the reader to understand that Kinbote is in some sort of emotionally fraught condition, and that his commentary on "Pale Fire" reflects more about himself than it does about John Shade or the actual content of the poem.

While it is never fully confirmed in the novel, the commentary gradually reveals the idea that Kinbote himself might be the deposed monarch of Zembla, King Charles, living exiled and in disguise in Appalachia, where he takes a job as a professor and meets John Shade. The reason that this is questionable is because the commentary also indicates that Kinbote may be suffering from mental delusions which lead him not only to a narcissistic view of his role in the creation of "Pale Fire", but to fabricate an identity as the former king of a country that does not actually exist. Kinbote brings his experiences with "Pale Fire", John Shade, and Zembla full circle when he notes that a mistake made on the part of an assassin dispatched to murder him – or King

Charles – is the reason for John Shade's death. The supposed assassin, Gradus, was commissioned to take King Charles's life, but mistook Shade for Charles.

At the novel's end, the reader does not know whether he or she should believe Kinbote or not; from the outset, he appears to be an unreliable narrator, and by its finish, it seems that nothing he says is founded on a trustworthy understanding of reality. This creates a difficult situation for the reader: Kinbote has been the reader's guide throughout the course of the entire narrative. Such a figure as a guide makes the task of determining what is true in *Pale Fire* incredibly difficult. The only other source for objective truth in *Pale Fire*, the novel by Nabokov, is "Pale Fire", the poem by John Shade, a mysterious work which, as mentioned before, seems to have few logical connections to its commentators' notes on it. Understanding the events that comprise *Pale Fire*'s narrative is an immensely complex undertaking. It is difficult to summarily describe what actually happens within the plot, because it seems that the questionability of events and the nature of "truth" in literature and reality is precisely what the novel explores.

I would make the claim that the novel is largely about the relationship Kinbote has to "Pale Fire". This is, in essence, the same as the relationship between the reader figures of the selected short stories of Borges and the texts they read. Ultimately, Kinbote does not read and interpret "Pale Fire" so much as he "writes" it. What is in the text is for him no different than what is within his psyche. He understands the metaphors and symbolic gestures of "Pale Fire" to be reference markers to a series of events which had an obvious and profound impact on him. The imagery and symbols of "Pale Fire" are so elusive, however, that it would not be difficult to take interpretive liberties with it in the hopes of establishing a connection between the events of the poem and any other series of events, more or less. Because the work is autobiographical, any friend of Shade's could, conceivably, see him or herself as having influence over the text. The

extent to which Kinbote reads himself into the text not only denies the significance of the actual narrative of "Pale Fire", but entirely supplants the story the poem tells with his own. The manner in which Kinbote does this reveals him to be a disturbed individual. The degree to which he is attached to Shade and his poem is an indicator of something far more sinister than the friendly relationship between fellow scholars. It becomes progressively clearer throughout the novel that Kinbote is mentally unstable – and that this is the story Nabokov is interested in telling.

His apparent psychological instability supports the idea of him creating the reality of the text with his mind; it would seem that Kinbote creates every part of his reality with his mind – and his reality has nothing to do with the extant reality of the universe. This extreme solipsism is not, actually, what I believe Berkeley was arguing for in *A Treatise Concerning Principles Of Human Knowledge*. Whereas Berkeley would say that God's mind creates the reality of the world, an infinite and whole reality to which every human mind is privy to an individual and subjective part, it is implied that Kinbote's understanding of the world has few reference points to anything outside of his own mind. This is the nature of his implied madness: he is not living in the real world, so to speak. However, the fact that Kinbote himself is not an immaterialist character does not mean that *Pale Fire* does not utilize Borges's literary treatment of the philosophy. I would argue that Pale Fire is not, at its core, about the specific conditions of any of its individual characters at all. It is, I submit, an exploration of the ways in which literature intersects with reality. This exploration has the same roots as the exploration of the reader-text relationship in "Tlon, Uqbar", "The Library of Babel", "The Aleph", and "Pierre Menard". The extreme extent to which Kinbote is attached to Shade sets the scene for an examination of the reader/text relationship that seems to extend beyond the bounds of *Pale Fire*; it comments on the function and meaning of literature as a whole (hence, it is a prime example of metafiction). The

fact that Kinbote seems to have no steady hold on reality allows for the poem "Pale Fire" to have a sort of agency unto itself, as if it were a character – after all, the reader cannot trust Kinbote's assessment of the poem; therefore, it must necessarily speak and act for itself. The readers are as acted-on by "Pale Fire" as Kinbote is, and they are forced into the same role as him. Because of this, the reader is forced to question the power a text has over its reader, and vice versa. They are also forced to examine where the distinction between reality and literature can be drawn, both as a question asked within the text and in the fact that he or she ultimately must identify with Kinbote as a reader of "Pale Fire".

I would argue that for Kinbote, the "real world" is the world of the text of "Pale Fire". Instead of taking a legitimate critical stance with regards to the poem, he simply applies images and phrases from it to events from his own life (events that may not have actually happened). The way in which he stretches the poem's interpretive possibilities to fit the reading he desires is, at times, almost comical in its overreaching. While the story that comprises the novel's third section is indeed a compelling one, as noted before, it does not relate to "Pale Fire" in the way it initially appears to. The story of *Pale Fire* is about Kinbote's relationship to John Shade and the poem, a relationship that is never fully made clear. What *is* clear is that Kinbote has a perspective on his own life and the life of John Shade that links the reality of both to events that seem to have nothing to do with Shade's life, and might not have really happened in Kinbote's life.

Pale Fire seems to take for granted the idea that reality is a subjective phenomenon, and that readers interpret and make sense of a text in the same way that human beings understand reality: their own mind as at the center of their engagement with reality, whether it be actual reality or the "reality" of a text. This speaks to the concept that there is no objective truth to be

found in either literature or real life. To discern whether Zembla actually exists or is merely the delusion of a troubled mind is, I would argue, not an important goal with respect to understanding *Pale Fire*. What I see as the most important issue here is, as it were, quite the opposite: the fact that the question of the existence of Zembla, King Charles, and Shade's assassin cannot ever be answered is where I locate the "true" content of *Pale* Fire. The ultimate mystery that is the plot of *Pale Fire* mirrors the fact that the truth behind the sequence of images, impressions, and incidents of "Pale Fire", the poem, is unknowable.

Because it is the autobiographical work of a deceased person, the "truth" of the work, unfinished as it is, will always be left to guesswork, expository critical theory, and inference. The events, impressions, and personal experiences from Shade's life contained within the poem are, for the most part, only suggested through the language: they are not declared as irrefutable fact. Due to the fact that it recounts personal experiences and feelings, it is clear that those close to Shade, such as his wife or Kinbote, would have a more informed perspective on the work. Unfortunately, he is not present to answer questions of interpretation or meaning. For those who believe that the meaning of a text is circumscribed by the intent of its writer, this forces "Pale Fire" into a position in which it will be perpetually mysterious, a likely subject of debate for generations of readers to come.

Because the author of its subject is deceased and because its commentator is either a deeply unreliable source of "truth" in the work or entirely delusional, it seems that *Pale Fire* comments on the meaninglessness of authorial intent. By extension, I would say it promulgates the concept of the meaninglessness of looking for "truth" in a work of literature. Its main character is obsessed with the fact that he holds the key to the "truth" of the poem. At the beginning of the foreword, he writes: "perhaps, let me add in all modesty, he intended to ask my

advice after reading his poem to me as I know he planned to do. In my notes to the poem [the commentary] the reader will find these canceled readings…in a sense, many of them are more valuable artistically and historically than some of the best passages in the final text."(16) He believes he understands the intentions of its writer in using the specific symbols and images of the poem; this is a knowledge to which he believes he alone is privy. This character, if not downright insane, is deeply unlikable, portrayed as self-aggrandizing, cunning, and given to obsessive habits of thought and behavior. His compulsion to get to the root of "Pale Fire" is not portrayed as a sincere and thoughtful inquisition so much as a greedy quest for knowledge to which he believes he is singularly permitted access. His quest to explicate the truth of the text that he finds so compelling is more descriptive of his character than of "Pale Fire". Kinbote's commentary, as indicated previously, offers greater insight into the life and personality of Kinbote than it does about either John Shade's life or Zembla and the historical circumstances of its beleaguered monarchy. It appears that one of the functions of the commentary is to demonstrate the concept that works of literature cannot be said to have a "truth" outside of the truth the reader brings to the text, i.e., the world within their mind.

This is made clear not only by the commentary, but by "Pale Fire" itself. Several sections of the poem refer to the idea that reality is a subjective experience. While autobiographical, the poem also contains philosophical ruminations on the nature of truth, human knowledge, and the reality of life after death. "Pale Fire" exposes John Shade as the kind of thinker who might ascribe to immaterialism; at various points, the work comes across as a meditation on the idea that much of reality is inexplicable; for Shade, all of his life's happenings seem to have been shrouded in an aura of mystery. This mystery seems to stem from a belief that mental processes

generate their own version of reality – an immaterialist position on the workings of human knowledge.

This hints at the way in which Kinbote understands the poem, as reflected in the commentary. The sections of "Pale Fire" that seem to drawn on immaterialism also seem to reflect Kinbote's particular understanding of himself and the world around him. This engagement with the world is not a purely immaterialist one, because it does not seem to be influenced by factors external to the inner life of Kinbote (at least, this is strongly suggested; Kinbote seems to live entirely within his own mind). Immaterialism clearly states that there is a reality external to one's subjective take on it. A world outside of one's mind exists; it is just that no one person can know it in its entirety (the fact that Daneri from "The Aleph" was able to is what made him a Godlike figure). This reality is created by God, who generates the reality of the universe in its infinity, including the basis for the human experience of reality – sense impressions.

While Kinbote himself is not a purely immaterialist figure, Kinbote's relationship to the "reality" of "Pale Fire" is, however, analogous to the relationship between the human mind and the external universe in immaterialism. This is problematized by the idea that the truth behind "Pale Fire" is ultimately unknowable. If its writer were still alive to deny or confirm certain readings, this would not be so; however, due to the fact that it is the unfinished autobiographical piece of a deceased person, it can only be the source of speculation and debate. The fact that the truth behind the events of "Pale Fire" are unknowable stands in distinction to the tenets of immaterialism, which state that there is a truth behind the reality of the universe – this truth is contained within, and created by, God. This creates a situation in which the reader approaches the text like the human mind approaches the universe – both constitute their experience of the

reality of their respective worlds, whether it be the real world or the world of a work of literature. This analogy could be extended to include the idea that the author of a text would play the same role that God plays over reality. In *Pale Fire,* this God is dead.

I believe the fact that John Shade is deceased confirms the notion that *Pale Fire* is, at its core, about the idea that search for truth within a work of literature is meaningless. Berkeley's philosophy relies on a religious explanation for the existence of reality. *Pale Fire* seems to say that the reality of a novel, poem, or short story is as unknowable as God. In my estimation, this is actually commentary on the condition of literary interpretation in general: the novel appears to indicate that the objective understanding of a work is a pointless goal, as the "truth" of a text is dependent upon whatever a reader – like Charles Kinbote – sees as truth. This perception is not based on actual fact; it is based on subjective perception and understanding.

The first section of *Pale Fire* – the foreword to "Pale Fire"-begins with a structural outline of the work. Kinbote discusses Shade's method of writing, and then offers information about the dates of writing of each of the poem's four cantos. The first indication of the novel's relationship to Borgesian writing techniques is found in an early mention of the fourth canto of "Pale Fire":

> Canto Four was begun on July 19, and as already noted, the last third of its text (lines 949-999) is supplied by a Corrected Draft. This is extremely rough in appearance, teeming with devastating erasures and cataclysmic insertions, and does not follow the lines of the card [it is noted that the poem was composed on index cards] as rigidly as the Fair Copy does. Actually, it turns out to be beautifully accurate when you once make the plunge and compel yourself to open your eyes in the limpid depths under its confused surface. (14)

This connects directly to the novel imagined by Bioy Casares and Borges in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius". The narrator of *Pale Fire* obviously "omitted or disfigured" (to use Borges's words) the facts of his poem in the corrected draft of the fourth canto; the "devastating erasures and cataclysmic insertions" of the corrected draft would be the "various contradictions" in which the narrator of the poem "indulged" ("Tlön, Uqbar" 3). While the reader of *Pale Fire* might argue that because the corrected draft of "Pale Fire" does not count as the actual text, because it is not the copy, I would disagree with this assessment.

This is because what readers of *Pale Fire* understand to be the body of "Pale Fire" is entirely mediated through Kinbote's understanding of the poem. If Kinbote declares that the corrected draft is a part of the work, the reader has no choice but to accept this, even if no part of the corrected draft is included in the final product of "Pale Fire". The incompleteness of "Pale Fire" is mentioned throughout the text; the fact that it is an "unreliable" work because of the circumstances surrounding its creation is, I would argue, the basis for the entire novel. The "devastating erasures and cataclysmic insertions" of the fourth canto are parts of the poem, just as it is clear that the "various indulgences" of the suggested novel of Borges and Bioy Casares in "Tlön, Uqbar" are part of the work. If the work's contradictions negate the reality of certain events and sections of the text, this negation is part of the work. In works such as "Pale Fire" and the subject of Borges's and Bioy Casare's discussion, the concept of truth and stable reality within a work is the subject for experimentation.

What is distinctive about "Pale Fire" is that it is left to the reader of *Pale Fire* to understand that there is no underlying, objective reality of the poem. Kinbote would have the reader believe that his interpretation of the text is the correct interpretation. Given the fact that his interpretation relies on external events from real history (as far as he understands it), it would

necessarily indicate that he wants to promulgate the idea that his reading is not just a correct analysis, but the *only possible* correct analysis. This places the readers of *Pale Fire* in a position in which they are forced, by the novel's end, to question the "truth" of the entire novel. I would claim that this makes any reader of *Pale Fire* as much of an authority over the titular poem as Kinbote. Of course, the very fact that the reader is an "authority" over the work is the subject of *Pale Fire*'s tacit commentary: it is, I believe, stating that works of literature are the subjective product of a reader's imagination. The analogy between this phenomenon and the way in which the human mind functions in immaterialism is also made clear in the short stories of Borges.

In the case of both "Pale Fire" and the suggested novel of Borges and Bioy Casares in "Tlon, Uqbar", the existence of facts and events in the text that contradict themselves or negate the reality of other parts of the work is, it seems, critical to any appraisal of the work as a whole. The negation of a text's reality or internal logic is what these texts are actually about. The content of the plot, the development (or lack thereof) of its characters, the cultural context of a work – all are secondary to the fact that these are works of literature that are about the act of reading literature.

Towards the end of the foreword, Kinbote notes that he never shared any stories of personal mishaps or troubled experiences of his life with John Shade. This is particularly revealing, as the content of the commentary is founded on the story of King Charles's escape from Zembla – a narrative of great misfortune and suffering. The fact that King Charles and Kinbote might be the same person renders this early observation, if not a lie, then at least a stretching of the truth. Even if they are not the same person per se, Kinbote's relationship to King Charles is obviously an emotionally fraught one; the sharing of his story would, I believe, count as the sharing of personal misfortune. The text reads:

> We never discussed, John Shade and I, any of my personal misfortunes. Our close friendship was on a higher, exclusively intellectual level where one can rest from emotional troubles, not share them. My admiration for him was for me a sort of alpine cure. I experienced a grand sense of wonder whenever I looked at him, especially in the presence of other people, inferior people. This wonder was enhanced by my awareness of their not feeling what I felt, of their not seeing what I saw, of their taking Shade for granted, instead of drenching every nerve, so to speak, in the romance of his presence. (27)

This excerpt exemplifies Kinbote's assessment of his relationship with Shade as it permeates the entire novel. He envisions himself as a sort of student-confidante to the older man; it is clear that he believes himself to occupy a privileged place with regards to Shade's social life. References to Shade as "my poet" punctuate his account of their time together. Here, he identifies his admiration for Shade as singular in its intensity and as issuing from a perspective on Shade's genius that is somehow more pure, accurate, and informed than the perspective of anybody else. What is particularly significant here is the indication that his feeling of "wonder" in Shade's presence is amplified by the fact that it his alone. Kinbote derives pleasure from the singularity of his emotional reaction. This is important because it posits that whatever he values in Shade or his poetry is not something immediately obvious; Shade does not have a larger-than-life personality, nor is he a widely famous literary figure. It seems there would be no immediate reasons to commit one's affections and attentions entirely to this man.

Given this, it makes sense that Shade is the object of Kinbote's obsession. A writer with a strong group of fanatical admirers would, I believe, make it difficult for Kinbote to read himself into Shade's work. That Kinbote's admiration for Shade is enhanced by the fact that it is

unshared by others indicates that Kinbote, in some ways, identifies himself with some quality, or qualities, of Shade's work that makes it wholly unique. Were others to share in the extent to which he adores the poet, it would undermine the very thing that makes Kinbote such an ardent fan: the fact that he is able to relate to the work on a deeply personal and individual level.

One of the qualities of Shade's work to which Kinbote relates so strongly is the use of imagery and metaphors for concepts that are, at their heart, immaterialist. As noted before, the poem refers frequently to the concept that human perception is ultimately founded in a subjective understanding of the universe. Directly after Kinbote's description of his experience of spending time with Shade, he outlines the methodology of Shade's writing process. This observation seems to be plucked almost directly from *A Treatise Concerning Principles Of Human Knowledge:*

> He is looking from the terrace (of Prof. C.'s house on that March evening) at the distant lake. I am looking at him. I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and apart, recombining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse. (27)

It is important to note here that this excerpt begins with Kinbote watching Shade: this immediately establishes the idea of Kinbote as a voyeur, a perceiver. His statement about John Shade "perceiving and transforming the world" is not so much a descriptive account of how Shade actually operates so much as the romantic fantasy of an obsessive fan. In this way, the actions of Kinbote mirror the way in which he sees Shade as writing poetry. As Shade "perceives and transforms the world", "recombining its elements" to produce a work of writing, Kinbote

perceives and transforms the figure of Shade to produce a person that is more a character of his imagination than a real man. This supports the fact that Kinbote "writes" the poem "Pale Fire" by reading himself into it. In the novel, John Shade and the poem are fundamentally linked: the only intimations of Shade that exist outside of Kinbote's description of him are within the work. Because it is an autobiographical work, and because Kinbote's relationship to both man and poem is essentially the same – fanatical admiration – John Shade and "Pale Fire" are, I believe, inextricable figures. Kinbote "creates" John Shade in the foreword just as he "creates" "Pale Fire" in the commentary.

What is important here is not the fact that Kinbote "creates" Shade and his poem, but that his understanding of John Shade mirrors the very way in which Shade operates with regards to both. The actions of "perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle" could be applied to Kinbote's engagement with the objects of his fanaticism. The "organic miracle" here is contained primarily in the commentary: it is an organic synthesis of reality and imagination. The reality of the commentary is the poem; the imagination is demonstrated through the imaginative work that comprises the basis for its supposed relationship to the story of Zembla, King Charles, and Gradus.

Although "Pale Fire" seems to have nothing to do with the story of Zembla that emerges through the commentary, it is, in my assessment, connected to Kinbote because of its recurrent imagery that is suggestive of an immaterialist understanding of human perception and worldly knowledge. Kinbote's perception of the poem and its author is rooted in the way Berkeley believed all human perception works; it seems that John Shade held a position on human perception that similarly did not stray far from immaterialism. While "Pale Fire" portrays

specific events from its author's life, such as the deaths of his Aunt Maud and his daughter Hazel, the idea that the human experience of life is ultimately a subjective, internal reproduction of a reality created by some unknowable force (such as God) is frequently insinuated through the use of imagery that comments on the distinction between individual thought and extant truth. The poem's opening line is an example of this:

> I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
> By the false azure in the windowpane
> I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I
> Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky. (33)

This beginning immediately establishes the theme of perception and its fallibility, a subject that runs throughout the poem.

These verses specifically reflect the poem's theme of the unreliability of the senses. In the first line, the poet identifies himself as a shadow – an object that is a secondary reproduction of the shadow-casting object. This shadow is slain by "false azure". Whatever renders this azure "false" is not disclosed, but it implies that the sky's blueness is a product of faulty perception. Either the speaker is mistaken in seeing the sky as azure, or the existence of the azure is somehow unfaithful to the reality of the sky otherwise. I would argue that if the color of the sky is "fake", it follows that either the sky itself is fake or that the observer of the sky might be incorrect in their observations of it. The idea that the perception of a color can be "wrong" indicates that human sight is capable of creating an individual visual reality distinct from actual reality.

There is, of course, no direct reference to a sky at all – it is only "false azure" in a windowpane. I would claim that the fact that the azure can be "false" implies that the experience

of viewing the sky is based on an unreal or subjective perception of the external world. Furthermore, the fact that the false azure is framed by a window indicates that the speaker is looking at the sky from a distance – from a point outside of it. This supports the fact that the azure is "false": it is false to the speaker who is viewing it through a window, or distanced perspective. This implies that the speaker's perception, as an act by a body that functions externally to whatever it being perceived, does not reflect reality faithfully so much as it interprets it. In this line, the speaker is not inside the sky: he (assuming that the speaker is Shade, and thus a "he") is within a room that has a window to the outside world. This is a fitting metaphor for the distance between the human mind and the world outside in immaterialism. One's senses would be the window to the sky, and the world inside the window – the human mind – makes sense of the outside world in a way that might actually be "false" or unreal.

In the space of two lines, the speaker changes location: in the first line, he is a shadow by "the waxwing slain" by the "false azure in the windowpane". If the waxwing is slain by the false azure, it is in the sky; the shadow produced by the waxwing would, logically, not be inside a room with a view out to the sky. The fact that the waxwing is inside the sky that slays it is also confirmed by the fact that it is a reference to the Greek myth of Icarus. The well-known image of Icarus, the legendary wearer of wax wings, is of him in the sky. The speaker, then, indicates that he is first inside the sky, and then inside of another space – a room with a window. This establishes immediately that the poet envisions himself not as an embodied human, but a metaphysical force that can narrate his life from various points in time and space. The poet is outside of the immediate physical and temporal location of the events in his poem, with an almost-omniscient perspective on the details and impressions of the occurrences he outlines. This is an important narrative voice for a work that questions the nature of the reality of the events it

takes as its subjects. The fact that the poet is distanced from his world by a general sense of unreality speaks to its immaterialist qualities. Several lines and images seem to suggest that to understand Shade's life would be not to give a description of various events and circumstances that comprise a sort of plot, but to understand the way in which he appraises and interprets these events. It seems as if the true subject of the work is not the autobiographical details it puts to verse, but the relationship between the events and the mind of the man who found himself a part of them.

The power of the mind to create its own version of reality – a reality that deviates from the truth of the external world – is exemplified by the following passage:

> I was an infant when my parents died.
> They both were ornithologists. I've tried
> So often to evoke them that today
> I have a thousand parents. Sadly they
> Dissolve in their own virtues and recede
> But certain words, chance words I hear or read,
> Such as "bad heart" always to him refer,
> And "cancer of the pancreas" to her. (35)

The sentence " I've tried / So often to evoke them that today / I have a thousand parents." is particularly significant. These sentences, I believe, suggests that the mind has greater agency over the experience of human reality than any factor external to the self that is essentially separate from the external world. Shade has evoked his parents so often that he produced "a thousand parents" – a thousand figures of thought that, this line suggests, are as "real" as actual, living parents. Of course, these figures are real only for the moment in which he thought of them.

This is demonstrated by the fact that a thousand individual instances of evoking them produced a thousand individual parents; one moment of grasping at their existence does not suffice to place working figures of his parents in his mind for his entire life. This is also demonstrated by the phrase "Sadly they / dissolve in their own virtues and recede". Arguably, the "virtues" to which this line refers would be the ephemeral nature of thought; unlike persons, events, and objects external to the mind, thoughts are fleeting in nature. The inconstancy of thought, then, creates a reality that is based on a fluid sequence of perceiving, interpreting perception, and synthesizing some personal awareness of oneself and one's life that changes over time.

What remains the same is the subjective character of the experience of reality. The way in which language, reading, and writing connect to this phenomenon in *Pale Fire,* along with the works of Borges, Calvino, and Acker, is exemplified by the last sentence of this excerpt:"Certain words, chance words I hear or read / Such as 'bad heart' always to him refer / And 'cancer of the pancreas' to her" is a prime example of the way in which the act of reading, as a process that interprets language to create meaning, is treated in all of these works. Words are, in a sense, filled with personal affects and experiences. Phrases and words that have one literal definition take on new meaning relative to one who has had personal encounters with the actual truth for which those words are signifiers. For Shade, the words "bad heart" refer not only to a specific physical pathology, but to the loss of his father. This reflects the notion that words and linguistic structures, as the elemental units of human thought and thus human reality, are not signifiers of an unchanging and impersonal meaning. This line suggests that language is, in some sense, a code for a reality that is interpreted individually.

Just as "bad heart" and "cancer of the pancreas" are, for Shade, terms that mean "death of parents," the entirety of "Pale Fire" is, for Kinbote, comprised of words that reflect his internal

experience of reality – an experience that is comprised of the world of Zembla, its royals, and an assassin set on ending the life of the mysterious King Charles. There are several instances in the second section of *Pale Fire* that seem to suggest that Shade's assessment of reality is not very different from Kinbote's. The entire novel thus becomes a meditation on the fact that there is no objective truth to be found through an individual human experience of the world; the appearance of objective truth or factual reality is an illusion generated by a mind that reworks its sensory and data inputs to create a view into the outside world that is partial and that only holds meaning for the individual who creates it. Truth and reality exist within a thinking subject's thoughts: this is Berkeley's basic premise. The Berkeleyan implication that humans cannot understand the world objectively seems to be a concept with which Shade is intimately familiar.

The poem reveals that in his childhood, Shade lived through an experience that catalyzed the specific understanding of perceptive faculties and the way in which they operate that drove many of his thoughts on the world as an adult. As a small boy, he suffered from an illness that caused his awareness of reality to break down, as if he were hallucinating or suffering from some other profound psychological pathology. It is suggested that this malady and its subsequent periodical recurrences constituted a near-death experience; along with the sensation of being "distributed through space and time" (38) his heart stops beating for "several moments" and he is aware "that [he] had crossed / The border" (59). The first instance of this illness begins the poet's fascination with the mystery of possible life after death. The concept of the afterlife is an important theme in "Pale Fire": the circumstances surrounding the death of his aunt and his daughter and his own near-death experiences are outlined in detail in the work, and he notes that he is haunted by the lack of knowledge about what transpires after death.

In my reading of this poem, Shade's relationship to the potentiality of the afterlife is essentially the same relationship that the "reader" figure has to the text to which she or he commits her or his attention and that the human mind, according to Berkeley, has to extant reality. Ultimately, the afterlife, the world of the text, and the real world are the products of the subjective imagination of the living human. This is comprised of a thought process which, if it suggests an actual connection to truth or reality, is only fabricating it through the synthesis of meaning from sensory impressions. In the instances of all three worlds – text, real world, and afterlife - the search for a truth which humans might regard as objective can never amount to anything. The role of the author of the text here is the same as the role of God with regards to Berkeley's understanding of the world and, according to most spiritual traditions, the existence of the afterlife: God and the author are the forces that create the objective reality of the respective worlds over which they rule, whether that be the human universe and afterlife over which God is an authority, or the text over which the writer obviously assumes authorial control. The reader of the text and the human being, then, are privy only to a profoundly subjective and personal awareness of the literary work, their experience of reality, or the afterlife.

What is specifically interesting regarding this special relationship is that in *Pale Fire* as well as in *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*, *Don Quixote*, and the selected short stories of Borges, the narrative voice seems to wish to divest itself of agency over the textual world. In each case, it is as if the narrator is saying that he or she understands the motions of the plot and the text's meaning with no greater accuracy or insight than the reader. None of these works is narrated by a traditional third-person voice – the voice typified by an ominiscient, God-like perspective on the narrative and its subject. On the contrary, each of these works is narrated in the first or second person (alternating chapters of *If On A Winter's Night* address the reader

directly as "you"). The owner of the narrative voice is always as acted upon in the text as he were active, and each seems to be as surprised and intrigued by the plot motions as the text's reader might be, implying that his or her knowledge of the world in which they find themselves is as partial and potentially flawed as that of their reader's. This, I believe, reflects the notion that there is no ground for objectivity or truth in these works. A reader cannot look to the narrator as the "owner" of the text or as holding some special key to its understanding that might be accessible via careful analysis of the way in which he or she outlines the events of the plot. The narrator and other characters of these works are as much in the dark with regards to the "truth" of the text as the reader.

This places the reader in a difficult position with regards to deriving meaning from the work: he or she is as much in command of the "truth" of the narrative as the narrators or any of the characters. *Pale Fire*'s suspenseful ending reflects this: the mystery behind the relationship between Kinbote, Gradus, King Charles and John Shade is left unsolved. It is up to the reader to determine the reality of the circumstances surrounding Shade's death and Kinbote's commentary. I would argue that the quest to determine this reality is the ultimate "point" of the novel, if it can be said to have one. The reader possesses as much authority over the lives of its characters as Nabokov had. This is reflected in the relationship Kinbote has to John Shade. In spite of his probable insanity, the novel upholds him as exemplary of the situation of the reader consumed by the world of a text into which he reads his own life, his personal impressions and feelings.

The treatment of death and the afterlife in both the poem "Pale Fire" and the novel after which it is named functions, I believe, as a metaphor for the greater issue of human knowledge and its perpetual failure to grasp an impartial picture of the world it works to interpret. In *Pale*

Fire, the mystery of the external world is embodied in the ultimate mystery of death; in the short stories of Borges, this essential lack of knowledge is suggested in the treatment of the concepts of infinity, time, and the world of the text. What is crucial here with specific regard to the genre of metafiction is the fact that, as metafictional works, these texts offer implicit commentary on the actual situation of the reader. The implications of metafictional works operate, ostensibly, both within and without the world created by the text insofar as they speak directly about the situation of literature. This engagement with the situation of literature mirrors the unavoidable situation of all texts, which is that they are received in the act of reading; because of this, one could say that every work of metafiction contains content which relates directly to every member of its audience.

The fact that these specific works contain both a figure that symbolizes a reader and commentary on the nature and circumstance of reading creates a situation in which their actual readers are, in a sense, the subject of the text. The reader of *Pale Fire, Don Quixote, If On A Winter's Night* and the stories of Borges is like the reader figure contained within all these texts, approaching the novel or short story of their choice with as little awareness of what they are to find within it as the "readers" these works take as their subjects.

Because of this, these works seem to lead us to believe that the "truth" of the text cannot be reduced to any one factor or constellation of factors from which readers might derive "accurate" meaning. They cannot, for example, look to lessons learned by the main character throughout their assorted pitfalls and triumphs as the "true" content of the text; they cannot read any of these works as cultural commentary, as the cultural context of all of these narratives is, I would argue, entirely irrelevant to the stories themselves. The works contain no ethical content or normative messages, and they do not describe the condition of a person, place, time, or

situation so much as they indicate the meaninglessness of attempts to understand a person, place, time, or situation. These elements of *Pale Fire* distinguish it as a text that stands in sharp contrast to classical literature, particularly that of the nineteenth century, which tends to locate the context of its content as containing the truth or specific significations of a work. *Pale Fire* exists as a body unto itself, without reference points that extend beyond the text into any greater cultural, historical, or ethical framework; the reader enters into an engagement with it contingent upon nothing but what they, individually, bring to the work.

Writer, philosopher, and critical theorist Maurice Blanchot took a similar stance with regards to the relationship between a reader and a text. His novel *Death Sentence*, published in 1948, treats the subject of death and the afterlife much the same way that John Shade does in his poem: I believe that for both Shade and the unnamed protagonist/narrator of *Death Sentence*, the reality of life after death is a symbol for the ultimate truth of life, which is that there is no such knowable truth of life. For Shade, this creates a situation in which surreal poetry is a realistic descriptor for actual events. Attempts to understand what *Pale Fire* is about force a reader to look to the poem "Pale Fire," a work filled with abstract images that could signify a seemingly infinite number of meanings; this is why it is easy for Kinbote to connect "Pale Fire" to his own life. The protagonist of *Death Sentence* similarly treats the concept of the narrative as ghostly and myserious, eluding rational understanding. The novel features a woman named Nathalie, and it is suggested that she represents Blanchot's assessment of the origins of narrative. Blanchot theorized that the experience and meaning of literature cannot be reduced to factors of origin or authorial context, a perspective that flies in the face of thinkers who believed that literature contains normative messages, ethical contents, or indeed, any statements about anything larger than what the text contains unto itself.

In his essay “The Negative Eschatology of Maurice Blanchot,” literary critic Kevin Fitzgerald writes of Blanchot’s opposition to the theories of Jean-Paul Sartre, who claimed that literature should be considered on the basis of its ethical content and political character. Fitzgerald writes:

> In opposition to the Sartrean program of *littérature engagée*, Blanchot published in the January 1948 issue of Bataille's *Critique* his important essay, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" (Literature and the Right to Death [WF 300-344]). By polarizing or dichotomizing in this longish essay the space of literature and the political action of the world, Blanchot defends poetic ambiguity against Sartre's denunciation. Speaking of the equivocal nature of the written word, he responds to Sartre: "the cat is not a cat, and anyone who claims that it is has nothing in mind but this hypocritical violence: Rolet is a rascal" [WF 311]. In this manner, rather than view the double meaning that coalesces around the written word as a sickness the writer must combat, Blanchot implies that ambiguity alone allows the reader to develop a sincere dialogue with the text, via interpretation. Standing Sartre's argument on its head, he states, "deceit and mystification not only are inevitable but constitute the writer's honesty.” (Internet source)

I believe the reader-text relationship characterized by Blanchot’s opinion that “ambiguity alone allows the reader to develop a sincere dialogue with the text, via interpretation” is essentially the same as the relationship between the reader figures of *Pale Fire* and their texts, and the relationship between Berkeley’s human mind and the world it individually makes cogent. Blanchot’s claim that “the cat is not a cat” reflects the immaterialism that underlies all questions of interpretation and all searches for meaning that somehow exists beneath the surface of

language. Ultimately, Blanchot believes that the reader's mind actively supplies a literary text with its meaning, and that the intentions of the author are ultimately irrelevant to the literary experience. His statement that "the cat is not a cat" addresses this: the word "cat" is merely a term to describe what a cat actually is, but that is fundamentally different to every individual.

It is apparent that both Blanchot and Berkeley would make the argument that what I might think of as "cat" is necessarily different from what others identify as "cat"; this is because my version of the reality of cats is mine and mine alone. I interpret "cat" to mean something unique to my understanding of it, and in doing so, I develop a "sincere dialogue" with the concept "cat," just as Blanchot conceives the readers to have a sincere dialogue with the text. Although the term "cat" is the word for speakers of English to describe and discuss what is known as a cat, what "cat" actually signifies is different for every person – this would be the immaterialist argument – and for literature, it means that every text is slightly different for every different reader. In reading, the reader assumes a degree of authorial control over the work, just as the human mind authors its own life in the act of perceiving reality.

This is precisely the relationship Kinbote has to "Pale Fire." As both publisher and critic of the work, it is comical that his relationship to it is skewed to a degree of subjectivity that would render his critique, were it real, absolutely useless (if it were, say, published in literary journals or magazines, for example). This, of course, is due to the fact that it is essentially an immaterialist commentary on the nature of reading; Kinbote's engagement with the poem, while profoundly narcissistic and absurdly self-referent, is very similar to the reader-text relationship Blanchot imagines or the human mind about which Berkeley theorizes. Shade's poem is an excellent source for deeply personal interpretations, given the surreal character of his imagery and turns of phrase – as noted before, it is easy to imbue his poetry with any sort of personal,

subjective meaning. I would argue that Nabokov wrote the second section of *Pale Fire* specifically to create situations of "double meaning that coalesces around the written word", in Fitzgerald's words; instead of double or even triple or quadruple meaning, however, the language of "Pale Fire" contains an infinite stock of interpretive potential. This allows Kinbote's assessment of the work to deviate as considerably from its actual content as it does. While the plot motions of "Pale Fire" are indisputable – occurrences such as Shade's daughter's death, his experience of falling in love with his wife, his childhood illness – the poem's abstract imagery and philosophical ruminations are, I would argue, more significant with regards to the novel *Pale Fire* as a whole. If "Pale Fire" can be said to have a point, it is not to be found in the sequence of individual events that compose John Shade's life, but in his approach to larger conceptual issues surrounding the meaning of life. That the life occurrence that form the poem are merely the lens through which the poet investigates greater questions of truth, meaning, life, and death, questions that apply to each human life but which take on a subjective character relative to individual experience.

The figure of John Shade and *Death Sentence*'s Nathalie fill the same role for the protagonist of their respective novels. Both are presented only through the perspective of the individual protagonist; in both cases, they seem to be created by the imagination of their admirers (*Death Sentence*'s main character is, if not in love with, absolutely fixated on Nathalie). Both, I believe, represent the world of the narrative – a place capable of being filled by any reader's imagination. Shade, of course, is nothing but literary content; the sole window a reader has into his life is his own autobiographical poem and its critique. Nathalie is equally elusive. The protagonist of *Death Sentence* functions as the "reader" who fills her with his own meaning,

creating his own image of Nathalie in the act of perceiving her. This is exemplified in a description of an exchange between the two of them:

> That was why she nearly went crazy herself: she could not face the task of making herself known to a man who was looking at her that way – with eyes in which she could not see herself – and saying to him: you met me at such-and-such a place. That seemed impossible to her. But since at the same time I was behaving with a sort of savage intimacy toward her – she was forced to believe that something had happened which she had not noticed, and that actually she was perfectly known to me, even if this meant that she was someone she herself did not know (42)

This is a particularly important passage to consider in light of the possibility that Nathalie represents the world of narrative potential. The fact that she nearly goes "crazy" facing the "task of making herself known to a man who was looking at her" "with eyes in which she could not see herself" reflects the notion that literature is not solely self-referential, but contains content that refers to the reader through its treatment of its subject matter. The reader finds points of self-identification within a text from which he or she derives meaning from a work. The text itself does not supply a reader with meaning within the hermetic seal of the novel, poem, or short story. In this way, according to Blanchot's theories, texts have no meaning without a reader. The character of Nathalie represents the text that is meaningless without its reader, *Death Sentence*'s narrator.

Here, Nathalie is faced with the responsibility of assuming agency over the meaning of herself and her life – the duty of "making herself known." This is a chore that is, according to Blanchot's theories of writing (as narrativized in *Death Sentence* and demonstrated throughout a great deal of his critical work)o, literally impossible; the narrative does not "make itself known"

to a reader, but the reader makes the text known to himself or herself. The "savage intimacy" with which the protagonist behaves toward Nathalie is, of course, the intimacy between the reader and the text. I would argue that this intimacy is necessarily "savage" because in deriving meaning from her, or knowing her, the protagonist ultimately destroys her. His intimacy with Nathalie supplants the reality of her existence with his own conception of her existence. The idea here is that he has absolute authority over her character: she is both read and created by him. She cannot make herself known to a man with "eyes in which she cannot see herself" because if she is not reflected in his eyes, there is nothing about her to be known. As the meaning of a text is reliant upon the reader's subjective perspective on it, Nathalie's qualities are contingent upon her perception. If she is not reflected in the eyes of those with whom she engages, she will not show herself to them.

The defining quality of Nathalie thus seems to be a categorical reticence toward character definition; she is not a fully fleshed-out human, but a fleeting glimpse into a world that evades description. This is because she is a figure of the narrator's perception – she is not a person unto herself, but an extension of him. Of their relationship, he notes: "I can say that by getting involved with her I was hardly getting involved with anyone" (55) – she is a functional nobody, an empty space filled in by the narrator's considerations of her. His authorial control over her is analogous to the control of the reader over the text, and to the control of the human mind over the creative synthesis and ultimate meaning of the sensory information it gathers. Nathalie represents whatever the narrator chooses her to represent: this is why she is devoid of personality features. She is as real as the world of Tlön, which is to say, her significance and impact on the world of the character whose life she enters is entirely contingent on the character's fascination with her. It might be noted that Nathalie is never seen without the narrator; he refers frequently

to the fact that he does not want her to be without him. Her character is entirely mediated through him, in the same way that the features of literary works are entirely mediated through a reader.

His treatment toward her as the story progresses reflects this: he is deeply possessive of her, alarmed by any indication that she has control over her own life. The novel ends with an argument between the two figures: the narrator is perturbed by the discovery that Nathalie has plans for a sculptor to make a cast of her hands and head. His request for her to forego this idea results in a peculiar dialogue between the two of them in which the concept of Nathalie making a plan for the future is revealed as the root of his fear. The text reads:

> "Will you give up your plan or not?" She looked at me with a look which I thought was almost willing. "Say yes," and I took her by the hand to encourage her. "Otherwise, I might just lock you up in this room.". . . Of her own accord she finally spoke: "What was that word you said?" I searched her face. My God, I said to myself absurdly, remind me of that word. . . By chance, I heard the word "plan." "That's the word," she said.

There are two things that appear to trouble the narrator here. The first is that she intends to have a reproduction of her head and hands made, since in doing this, she would copy herself, a process which with which I believe that the narrator would take issue. In copying herself, she would make it possible for others to know her in the same way that he does. Just as Pierre Menard creates a new text in the copying of *Don Quixote,* the copying of Nathalie would create a new figure from which another potential reader might derive personal meaning. This takes away *Death Sentence*'s narrator's full authorship of Nathalie. A large part of the pleasure he derives in effectively owning her is the pleasure that Kinbote takes in assuming that he has a special place

with regards to the life of John Shade: for both Kinbote and *Death Sentence*'s protagonist, the fact that they are the only functional "author" over their subjects is a necessary element in their relationship. Kinbote notes that without his commentary, Shade's poem "simply has not human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his…has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality than only my notes can provide" (29). Similarly, the narrator of *Death Sentence* provides the only human reality that inheres to the character of Nathalie.

The other issue that troubles the narrator here is the fact that Nathalie has made a plan. The problem with planning, specifically, is that it assumes that she has control over her own future – her own narrative. In taking hold of the direction of her own future, she divests the narrator of his ability to effectively "write" her. Once the narrator identifies Nathalie's decision to get a cast of her head and hands made as a "plan", it ceases to be a plan. After the narrator makes clear that he wishes for her to give up the idea, Nathalie says, "It isn't a plan any longer" (77). What is critical here is that she does not say "Yes, I will give it up" or "I won't do it," but that she notes that her decision is no longer a plan – whatever it is now, his identification of it as a "plan," or a choice she made for herself in the future, negates its meaning as such. He is the ultimate writer of her life, and she has no future that goes unauthorized by him.

Nathalie, by certain factors of her personality (or functional lack thereof), is as inert and meaningless as a text without its reader. Nabokov allows for Kinbote to have incontestable ownership over the character of Shade because Shade, as the subjective textual figure, is a dead man – he has no present voice or possible future. Whereas Nathalie could speak back to her author (thought in a limited way), Shade remains trapped in the dual world of the poetry of "Pale Fire" and the poetic imagination of a raving fanatic. The question of the "real" John Shade is

then thrust into the foreground of a reader's attention: how does a reader make sense of the character of Shade when all that is shown of him is in "Pale Fire" and Kinbote's assessment of it? I would claim that the character of Shade is elucidated by his relationship to the world around him: as a figure with certain personality attributes and qualities, he might be unknowable, but the role he plays in the text is that of an ultimately immaterialist thinker.

As noted before, the relationship between Shade and Kinbote and the relationship between the nameless protagonist of *Death Sentence* and Nathalie function in the same way as Shade's relationship to the reality of his life. After his cataclysmic childhood illness, Shade's assessment of the ways in which perception (and the knowledge of reality it subsequently produces) works are forever altered to reflect a position on the nature of reality that is essentially immaterialist. This is best exemplified by the ultimate mystery of death, a mystery that taunts Shade from a very early age. At the beginning of the second canto of "Pale Fire," Shade writes

> There was a time in my demented youth
> When somehow I suspected that the truth
> About survival after death was known
> To every human being: I alone
> Knew nothing, and a great conspiracy
> Of books and people hid the truth from me (*Pale Fire* 39)

The lines "a great conspiracy / Of books and people hid the truth from me" note that for the young Shade, the world of literature and the world of other people contain the truth of the most profound mystery. Shade reflects on this period of time as "demented," indicating that he has since reconsidered this suspicion. It seems that later in life, he comes to the awareness that no book or person contains the secrets of life after death. Furthermore, it seems that he comes to

realize that books, people, and events contain no secrets or factors of their life or substance that are essentially codes to be broken or content to be interpreted as signifying some objectively true meaning. It is, however, significant that Shade chooses to include this reflection on his youth in the poem. Although he later disabuses himself of the notion that he alone does not understand what happens after death, the mystery of the afterlife continues to grip him. He is perpetually caught in the tension between feeling compelled to understand the secrets of the grave and knowing that he cannot.

The theme of tension between attempts to understand the external world and the inevitability of the fact that he cannot continues throughout the poem. The poet evidently holds a strong belief in the metaphysical and seems to constantly be grasping for the right words to explain exactly what he is experiencing. The fact that he cannot do this seems to frustrate him not only on the basis of the fact that he cannot communicate his reality to the external world, but that he cannot communicate it to himself. It is as if language's limitations in creating a whole picture of reality inside his mind are the forces which compel him to write with the urgency, regularity, and careful methodology that he does. He is conjuring an unknowable force through his words, but what is implicit throughout the poem is the idea that his poetry suggests something it can never literally reproduce. This is particularly important in light of the fact that Kinbote supplants this unknowable something with a story of his own; the reader of *Pale Fire* is thrown off by the idea that the metaphysical points of "Pale Fire" are actually references to something that transpired in the real world. However, this is obviously not the case, and is made further complicated by the idea that the real-world events of which Kinbote writes – such as the youthful interests of the deposed King Charles, or the variety of unusual circumstances his escape from Zembla found him in – probably did not happen at all.

Shade's aggravation with language as a means to concretize the metaphysical is exemplified in a passage from "Pale Fire" in which he bemoans the fact that human beings can only begin to reveal, through language and thinking, the vast plains that the afterlife might hold in store for them. The passage reads:

> It isn't that we dream too wild a dream:
> The trouble is we do not make it seem
> Sufficiently unlikely; for the most
> We can think up is a domestic ghost.
> How difficult these efforts to translate
> Into one's tongue a public fate!
> Instead of poetry divinely terse,
> Disjointed notes, Insomnia's mean verse!
> *Life is a message scribbled in the dark.* (41)

The most significant part of this excerpt are the lines "It isn't that we dream too wild a dream / The trouble is we do not make it seem / sufficiently unlikely." This connects directly to Blanchot's argument, as quoted in Fitzgerald's piece, that "deceit and mystification constitute the writer's honesty". Shade, it seems, implies here that a mimetic representation of the world inside the mind is a meaningless goal. The world of the afterlife, as the space in which the descriptive and creative powers of the human imagination should be given the greatest degree of freedom to create something entirely new, must not be inhabited by "domestic ghosts" but by something that resembles nothing in human reality. I believe that Shade would extend this argument to include the idea that human reality is unknowable: he uses the realms of life after death to make a case for creating and communicating dreams that are fantastical, unlikely, and which have no seeming

relationship to the real world because it is a logical place to argue for the powers of the mind in creating the existence of a place.

Life on Earth is, in fact, as mysterious to Shade as life after death. Death is an event in which something becomes definitively and irrevocably unknowable: nobody can make the argument that there is a concrete, stable reality of death as they might for the notion that there is a concrete, stable reality of life, an objective truth to which all human beings have access. Shade's poem exposes a tendency in its author toward an immaterialist understanding not only of death, which is an essentially immaterialist concept, insofar as humans have to individually invent what it means, but of the real, living universe. A few stanzas prior to the excerpt listed above, he writes, "Space is a swarming in the eyes; and time, a singing in the ears" (40), locating the reality of time and space inside the individual. The line "life is a message scribbled in the dark" suggests this: it seems to say that life is an act of writing, or creating, but furthermore, it is creation without illumination of the space around it. What might be suggested here is the idea that ultimately, one synthesizes one's own reality without being sure of anything beyond one's own mind; it really is writing in the dark, toward a mysterious end.

The analogy between writing and the internal, subjective creation of one's reality continues throughout the poem. In the Third Canto, the poet seeks out a woman who has had near-death encounters as a means to gain insight into his own experiences with the edges of life and death. Her story was printed in a magazine; he contacts her so that they can meet and exchange stories of their respective deathly incidences. He is captivated by the fact that they both seem to have seen a white fountain in the great beyond; however, he soon realizes that the "white fountain" of which he read in her article was actually a misprint – what she actually saw was a

white mountain. This completely throws off his conception of their connection and the fact that she might confirm the existence of life after death. The text reads:

> There's one misprint – not that it matters much:
>
> *Mountain*, not *fountain*. The majestic touch.
>
> Life everlasting – based on a misprint!
>
> I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
>
> And stop investigating the abyss?
>
> But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
>
> Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme,
>
> Just this: not text, not texture, not the dream
>
> But topsy-turvical coincidence,
>
> Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense. (62-63)

The first issue worth noting here is the phrase "life everlasting – based on a misprint!". Shade clearly pitches a great deal of his faith in the written word. For him, the existence of life after death is as good as confirmed by the written word of another. It seems that he was ready to begin believing in the afterlife based solely on the contents of one article in a magazine. This indicates that he trusts the written word more than his own appraisal of the philosophical circumstance of life after death, experiences with the death of others, or his personal near-death experiences. The greater issue here is the relationship between the written word and the reader: before learning that "white fountain" was a misprint, Shade was primed to fill it with his own meaning; afterwards, he is ready to abandon his inquisition into the reality of the great beyond entirely. True to immaterialist form, he ultimately chooses to imbue the event with his own meaning: he

decides that the coincidence of the misprint is part of some larger pattern that indicates that his quest to uncover death's reality is not in vain.

The fact that Shade fills the incident of the misprint with his own meaning, essentially transforming its role, mirrors the fact that Kinbote essentially creates the character of John Shade. What makes this sequence of mirroring even more complex is the fact that, I would argue, the reader cannot help but be drawn into the same role. There are points within the text of *Pale Fire* which seem as though Nabokov is directly addressing the reader – offering up information that assumed profound meaning in the context that the work recognizes itself as a book. There are instances in "Pale Fire" which allude to the existence of a commentary. These sections seem to be so prescient with regards to the existence of the commentary that follows them that it is as if the authorial voice is immediately directed toward the reader, an occurrence which throws the work into an entirely new light – all of a sudden, it is as if the reader is a character. An example of such an instance is as follows:

> And while the safety blade with scrape and screak
> Travels across the country of my cheek,
> Cars on the highway pass, and up the steep
> Incline big trucks around my jawbone creep,
> And now a silent liner docks, and now
> Sunglessers tour Beirut, and now I plough
> Old Zembla's fields where my gray stubble grows,
> And slaves make hay between my mouth and nose.
> *Man's life as commentary to abstruse*
> *Unfinished poem.* Note for further use. (67)

It is significant that this passage opens up with a relatively mundane description of Shade shaving his face. Compared to certain flights of linguistic fancy in the work, this excerpt is not particularly distinctive. The fact that it is a fairly boring description of a fairly unremarkable act functions, however, to emphasize the last two lines. It is as if the poet is caught in thought, and then there is a sudden break – as if "man's life as commentary to unfinished poem" is an immediate revelation, and the attention is suddenly not on him or the events of his life, but something far more profound entirely. This would be the commentary on "Pale Fire," something of which he is obviously unaware. However, as I have mentioned, the third part of *Pale Fire* is a red herring for the mysterious content of "Pale Fire." The allusions to underlying stories, ideas or impressions that are never made clear within the poem do not actually resolve themselves in Kinbote's commentary. What is important, however, is not that they do or do not solve the mysteries of "Pale Fire," but the fact that to the reader, it seems that they do. The notion of "seemingness" having the same function as "being" is a large part of what *Pale Fire* is about. At first, it *seems* as if the lines "Man's life as commentary to abstruse unfinished poem" must necessarily have some connection to the third part of the novel. The fact that it does not is mystifying, but it is in this sort of mystification that the novel finds its true footing. It is true that the entirety of Kinbote's life, as far as a reader can be aware, is indeed commentary to an abstruse unfinished poem. However, this does not mean that Shade used Kinbote's life as fodder for the content of his work. Nor does it mean that he necessarily didn't, although this seems to certainly be the case. The function of the line "man's life as commentary to abstruse unfinished poem" does not, I believe, shed light on the actual workings of *Pale Fire* itself. Instead, it puts readers in a situation where, like Kinbote and "Pale Fire," they believe they see clues and

connections in the work that reveal its "true" meaning. This line, however, only serves to compound the greater air of unknowability that surrounds *Pale Fire*.

The notion of man's life as commentary to an abstruse unfinished poem can also be read in a larger immaterialist light. In the short stories of Borges along with *Pale Fire, If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*, and *Don Quixote*, there is the figure of a reader and a text; the lives of each of the readers could conceivably be considered commentary on the text insofar as they offer insight into the way the text functions for the individual reader. While each of these texts are not literally an "abstruse unfinished poem", they are unfinished in the sense that their meaning and interpretation remains open – the fact that they retain an air of mystery and inexplicability is the foundation for each of the stories that take the relationship between their "reader" figures and these texts are their subject.

The commentary section – Part Three – of *Pale Fire* makes evident the extent to which Kinbote desires a stable and unchangeable meaning behind "Pale Fire," an origin of the poem that places him and the stories he recounted to Shade as its source material. It seems that Kinbote can derive meaning from the work only if he believes himself to have literal authorial control of the work in the sense that without him, the work could not exist. He seems to be incapable of supplying "Pale Fire" with meaning if it does not have actual relevance to his life. An example of this is seen in a section of the commentary in which Kinbote bemoans the deletion of a certain passage of the original version of "Pale Fire" from the publish version. The text reads:

> As children playing in a castle find
> In some old closet full of toys, behind
> The animals and masks a sliding door
> [four words heavily crossed out] a secret corridor –

> …I cannot say how sorry I am the he rejected these lines. I regret it not only because of their intrinsic beauty, which is great, but also because the imagery they contain was suggested by something Shade had from me. (118)

There are a number of instances in the above excerpt that reflect the idea that Kinbote can only contend with the work if he locates himself as the absolute root of its mysteries. What is particularly interesting here is the fact that the reader must also question his or her relation to the work in light of the fact that they are, in an important sense, a functional Kinbote. The line "the animals and masks, a sliding door [four words heavily crossed out] a secret corridor" is tantalizing: the four words heavily crossed out seem significant on the basis of the fact that they are crossed out. The fact that there is erased text leads both the reader and Kinbote to believe that there is some fundamental truth that is missing – and that through careful analysis or explication, they might be able to conjure what those words were, thus illuminating that section of the poem. The very fact that Shade chose to edit part of his original thought process out is what is tantalizing here: the reader wants to know not only what it is that leads to the image of a secret corridor, but why Shade saw it fit to remove that from the final draft, as if it contains some profound horror or truth that would entirely change the meaning of the poem.

This drive to understand a work for its intrinsic and original meaning is what fuels Kinbote; I believe that *Pale Fire* is an examination of this drive, and that Kinbote is a figure that hyperbolizes the tendency of readers to explicate a text in a way that indicates that there is intrinsic meaning within a work, meaning that is deeper than the surface of the language. Kinbote's method of doing this ends with him identifying himself as the source for the text that obsesses him. In doing so, he makes a fool of himself to the readers of *Pale Fire*. Insofar as *Pale Fire* offers commentary on the way literature actually functions for a reader, and the interpretive

control the reader has over literature, it seems that he is actually a symbol for the readers to whom he appears to be a ridicule-worthy character. In seeking meaning, he reveals his own flaws; his search for meaning signifies the content of his mind rather than the content of the work. In doing this, it is as if Nabokov is saying that meaning does not inhere to the written word or to the reader's journey to uncover meaning in the word, but in a subjective and necessary partial understanding of literature that is based in the reader's mind as a window through which all content is filtered. What Kinbote lacks is the awareness that one's take on a text is one's own and cannot be extended to have meaning for other people: in writing a commentary to be published, Kinbote implies the larger statement that his interpretation is the single correct one. This is obviously not the case; by extension, I believe that any single understanding of *Pale Fire* does not suffice to elucidate the work on sheer basis of the fact that the work itself indicates the meaninglessness of singular interpretation or any attempt to understand the objective meaning or message of a work of literature. Just as Berkeley theorizes that one synthesizes a subjective version of reality in the gathering of objective sensory information, *Pale Fire* indicates that one synthesizes a subjective experience with a text based on his or her interaction with its objective content.

As we have seen, the notion of seeking an origin to a text so as to uncover a correct interpretation or meaning of it is revealed as fundamentally pointless in *Pale Fire*. *Death Sentence* similarly toys with the problems of the origins of narrative as a source for literary analysis and understanding – Nathalie, as a symbol for narrative, is mysterious, evading description and agency over the world that surrounds her. She is only an extension of her reader, as "Pale Fire" and the figure of John Shade are only an extension of Kinbote's imagining, and, for Berkeley, the real world is merely a play of images synthesized within the mind of the

individual. These images, in turn, are rooted in sense impressions with as many potential interpretations as there are human beings. In all cases, the author of a world – whether it be the world of a text or the "real" world whose author is God – is revealed as a sort of illusory character, a figure whose existence is understood only in subjective terms. Ultimately, for the individual, this author only serves as the embodiment of one's particular experience of reality. The relationship between the reader and the text, or the human mind and the world, is a fiction that is active in the creation of the appearance of meaning outside of one's mind – but it is a *fiction*, or an invented creation. The meaning that appears to be beyond one's mind is artificially synthesized and cannot be rationally deduced to an objective origin, such as an author's intention, the ethical function of a work, or the uncovering of some key plot element, as would be the case with a typical murder mystery, for example.

Critical theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes took the stance that *Pale Fire* and *Death Sentence* seem to take with regards to the concept of narrative origin and authorship: in his essay "Death of the Author", he writes of the sway that the image of the author, as the root for understanding and interpreting a work, holds over readers and critics alike. He argues that the concept of the author is merely a fiction that has had a long hold on the traditional approach to reading:

> The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice

> of a single person, the *author* confiding in us. Though the sway of the Author remains powerful (the new criticism has often done no more than consolidate it), it goes without saying that certain writers have long since attempted to loosen it. In France, Mallarme was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'. (1322)

This claim is highly important with relation to Borges, Nabokov, Calvino, and Acker. Borges masterfully sidestepped the problem of critics looking to him and his authorial intent as the source for understanding his works. He did accomplished this by fictionalizing himself in his texts, more often than not as a reader figure who seems just as baffled by the problems of literature as his fellow fictional characters and his actual readers. Beyond that, Borges's personal essays reflect his self-understanding not as a literary figure, but as a devoted reader who sought to understand fiction in writing fiction – one whose primary intellectual allegiances were to the art of reading, not writing. The very content of his fictional work seems to absolve him of the responsibility of explaining it or offering insight into it; because much of it comments on the situation of the reader, the reader of Borges is compelled to look to the work or to herself in order to gain insight into the work – not to Borges as a figure that stands outside of the work. The Borges a reader understands is based on her own experiences as a reader of all literature; ultimately, he is a personal invention of every individual reader. For this reason, his self-fictionalization seems to make perfect sense.

Nabokov similarly avoids the problem of being seen as the source for understanding his works – at least *Pale Fire*. He accomplishes this in a different way, however. As *Pale Fire* offers commentary on the situation of the reader, and furnishes readers with a reader figure whose analytical approach is absolutely not to be followed, it implicitly questions the traditional approach to literature against which Barthes writes. *Pale Fire* is a radical argument against these traditional readings: Kinbote's interpretation of "Pale Fire" effectively destroys the author in the process of attempting to understand his motivations. John Shade becomes nothing but a "shade" – a ghost, a phantom – of Kinbote's fantasies about him; with regards to his reception by the reader of *Pale Fire*, he is stripped of any agency over the text that is supposed to be his.

Pale Fire is constructed so that this reflects Shade's approach to his own life, as exemplified by certain passages from the poem. He makes no claims to understanding events that happen to him or his own interests; he merely conveys his experience of reality through poetry. To grasp both "Pale Fire" and *Pale Fire* is to assume the stance that Shade takes and that Kinbote fails to take: there is no objective or singular reality, either in the literary world or the real world, and to speak of the meaning of life, the existence of the afterlife, or the truth of a literary work is merely to speculate or suppose.

This is supported by what I believe is a highly revealing section of the commentary: during lengthy explanation of a short line from the poem, Kinbote recounts part of a conversation he had with Shade. Shade is discussing his personal opinions of the way literature is taught and assessed, and notes "when I hear a critic speaking of an author's sincerity I know that either the critic or the author is a fool" (156). This is in line with the way Shade seems to approach both his life and his art: sincerity is never a principle that comes into play, because to be sincere is to assume that there is something to be sincere *about* – some element of oneself or one's life that

might be understood as more true than any false performance of the self or mystification of the real. In contradistinction to this, Shade seems to suppose that the true content of both a life and a work of literature is to be found in its mystification and "performance"; the appearance of the real, for Shade, is as good as the real. This is a fundamentally immaterialist stance insofar as it makes the claim that the perception of a thing is the same as the thing itself; the performance of a work of literature and its individual interpretation is the same thing as the work itself – there is no reality beneath it.

The imagined narrative of Bioy Casares and the fictional Borges at the beginning of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" promises "an atrocious or banal reality" to the most careful and dedicated readers. It seems that Nabokov designed *Pale Fire* to indicate the existence of this atrocious or banal reality; the complex narrative and highly innovative structure of the work suggests that a committed reader will, through careful analysis and reflection, come to some ultimate conclusion regarding the truth of who Charles Kinbote really is and the extent to which his commentary on "Pale Fire" reflects anything actual about the poem. *Pale Fire* is underscored by the promise of a reality that exists beneath the immediate and obvious plot content. This, however, is not the case – and the fact that it is not the case is, I would argue, part of its larger commentary on the situation of reading in general. The angle on literature that Nabokov takes in *Pale Fire* is perhaps best summed up by what seems to be a minor digression in the commentary. Kinbote is discussing the work of a Zemblan artist; in outlining the artists methods, he discloses an approach to the invention of a false reality that I believe is critical to consider with regards to analyzing Borges, Calvino, and Acker:

> But in some of those portraits Eystein had also resorted to a weird form of trickery: among his decorations of wood or wool, gold or velvet, he would insert

> one which was really made of the material elsewhere imitated by paint. This device was apparently meant to enhance the effect of his tactile and tonal values had, however, something ignoble about it and disclosed not only an essential flaw in Eystein's talent, but the basic fact that "reality" is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the "reality" perceived by the communal eye. (130)

Kinbote's definition of "true art" is revelatory of the way in which the entirety of *Pale Fire* functions. The world of *Pale Fire* does not have to contain the underlying truth it seems to indicate it has – while the communal eye of the readers of *Pale Fire* might see a certain truth or reality hiding beneath the text, or within certain patterns that emerge over the course of the novel, it is ultimately nothing but an absolute mystification of itself. Kinbote remains a fundamentally mysterious character. Arguably, his entire life narrative, as outlined in the commentary, is his true art that "creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the 'reality' perceived by the communal eye." Certainly the commentary's end suggests this: Kinbote fancifully imagines possible futures for himself, futures in which he assumes new identities and lives in the perpetual evasion of Gradus:

> Oh, I may do many things! History permitting, I may sail back to my recovered kingdom, and with a great sob greet the gray coastline and the gleam of a roof in the rain…but whatever happens, wherever the scene is laid, somebody, somewhere, will quietly set out…a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus (301).

The end of the novel retains the aura of mystery with which the entirety of *Pale Fire* is imbued. This is not unlike the endings of the short stories of Borges: ultimately, the reader is left in a state

of speculation and wonderment. These texts offer windows into the complex relationships between readers and texts, providing multiple avenues of thought and commentary on the subject. These texts declare that the world of literature is based in not in its content as established by the author, but its reception and interpretation: the experience of literature becomes a two-way street in which the reader's understanding of a work is as critical to its meaning as a writer's intention in writing it, in the same way that what the human mind knows to be real cannot surpass the limitations imposed on it by its own necessarily subjective character.

I would extend this argument by making the statement that these works, in their appropriation of the Borgesian immaterialist approach to literature, present the reader with a situation in which interpretation of literature becomes meaningless. Any reading is the correct reading; because of this, the search for meaning within a text that relies on factors external to the work itself (i.e., authorial intent, cultural or historical context, ethical concerns) will be fundamentally fruitless. Thus Borges's adoption of immaterialism as a theoretical background for literature problematizes the possibility of shared readings that makes claims to correctness or objectivity and explication of the texts that refer to anything beyond the texts themselves.

This phenomenon is taken to an extreme in Italo Calvino's novel *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*. Whereas the short stories of Borges and *Pale Fire* present their readers with a reader figure internal to the text, *Winter's Night* turns its actual reader into a character by addressing him or her directly and narrating his or her actions throughout the course of the novel. This creates a work that is so deeply self-reflexive that there seems to be no route to its interpretation or analysis beyond one's immediate engagement with it. Whereas *Pale Fire* and Borges's short stories play with the idea that there is a secret world or hidden truth (or truths) within their narratives, Calvino's novel completely dissolves the boundary between reader and text, forcing

the reader into a radically subjective position in which they are as active over the text as Calvino's narrator. *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* is the next step in a lineage that imagines reading as an absolutely immaterialist phenomenon, an act that creates worlds that exist solely within the reader's mind.

Part Three: Traces of Borges in Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* and Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote (Which Was A Dream)*

Italo Calvino's 1979 novel *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* is one of the most structurally innovative and complex novels of the twentieth century. It tells the story of a reader's attempts to read a book titled "If On A Winter's Night A Traveler," a task that proves nearly impossible due to publishing errors made within the text. The novel opens by addressing the reader in the second person, as "you," and describes the process of this reader in preparing to embark on his or her journey into the book; this begins a pattern in which every other chapter is narrated directly to the reader, outlining his or her actions or thoughts with regards to the chapter directly preceding it. These other chapters consist of the first chapters of a plethora of different novels, each from a different writer and cultural background. Throughout the course of the narrative, the narrator comments frequently and in depth about the situation of reading and the various ways in which the act of reading can be conceived and approached. The main character's frustration with the texts he comes across in his quest for a satisfactory reading of "If On A Winter's Night A Traveler" evolves into an extended meditation on the nature of reading by the narrator, who, in directly confronting the reader's engagement with the text, makes great statements about the power that reading has over a reader and the way in which a reader's mind affects the world of the text.

What is specifically significant with regards to *Winter's Night*'s relationship the short stories of Borges and *Pale Fire* is the narrator's use of the second-person voice. Borges's narratives and Nabokov's novel contain reader figures with which their actual reader, arguably, identifies – in both instances, the reader figures are presented with texts that open up expansive philosophical problems and which, for one reason or another, capture the attention of the reader

who seeks some sort of profound meaning or understanding of the work as it relates to their own life. Given the complex, surrealistic, and challenging nature of the works themselves, the reader figures contained within each of them might be read as symbolic of the situation of the actual reader of Borges or Nabokov. This is the framework in which the commentary on reading within each of these texts unfurls: the fact that these are all narratives about reading creates an ironic scenario in which the underlying understanding is, of course, that all these texts are themselves being read by a figure outside of the narrative – the actual reader. This is never mentioned directly inside the work, of course; the barrier between reader-figure and reader is always maintained.

This wall is entirely destroyed in *Winter's Night*, largely due to the use of the second person voice. It is startling to read the first line of the novel, which is "You are about begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night traveler*" (3). This line creates the illusion that the actual reader – *not* the reader figure – is the subject of the narrator's voice. The "you" to which the narrator refers is, of course, a character distinct from the reader, but this distinction becomes very complicated as the entirety of this main character's identity and actions within the novel revolve around his (it is implied that this figure is male) attempts to read a text with the same title of the actual novel. Throughout the course of the narrative, the reader's understanding of what it means to read evolves alongside the narrator's lengthy musings on the various approaches one might take to literature and, perhaps most significantly, the subject-object relationship of a text – the subject – and the reader's mind, the object. Ultimately, the novel might be conceived of as an argument for an approach to literature that locates the entirety of the experience of a novel inside the reader's mind, calling for an approach to the world of a text that sees it as fully subject to a reader's mind. This is in line with the Borgesian approach to

reading, as exemplified by the individual stories of so many of his characters as they struggle to contend with a text (or body of texts, as in "The Library of Babel"). This is also the exact circumstance of Kinbote as he dissects "Pale Fire": it is, ultimately, revealed that the meaning the work holds for him is rooted entirely in himself, as opposed to the work of its author or other's opinions of it.

Borges's literary reworking of George Berkeley's immaterialist version of the philosophy of idealism found multiple iterations in his stories and in *Pale Fire*. It seems to be stretched to its ultimate conclusion in *Winter's Night*, the narrator of which calls for a re-conception of reading that champions the mind of the reader as being entirely active in creating the world of a text. The novel questions the nature of objectivity and the idea that a novel does not exist without readers to draw their own conclusions from it; it is shown, at various points in the plot, that there is no single correct way to read or discuss any text. The magic of literature, at least as it is posited in this novel, is proposed as existing in the fact that each work of fiction creates as many texts as there are readers.

The concept of the world of a text which is entirely dependent on subjective impressions and personal re-fashioning of its specific elements and features is symbolized in *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* in the character of Ludmilla – a woman who, like the main character, is attempting to read "If On A Winter's Night A Traveler" and who joins the protagonist on his quest to uncover the mystery of the literary mix-up so that she too might garner a satisfactory reading and understanding of the work. Ludmilla functions for the main character in the same way that the novel does: he does not understand her, is obsessed by the thought of knowing her, and seeks to form a sort of union of readers with her (with an clear ulterior motive that is blatantly Eros-driven). This union could be thought of as a holistic engagement with the literary

work. Ludmilla, I believe, represents the world of the text, which plays the role of subject to the reader's mind, which is the object, or stable ground for meaning-derivation and textual interpretation. In inserting a sought-after "other" into the work, Calvino envisions the relationship between a reader and a text as a romantic relationship. In this relationship the main character is compelled by the thought of the mysterious "other" whom he seeks to psychologically inhabit, but whom, it is suggested, is merely a flight of fantasy within his mind. Lengthy passages are devoted to the main character's imaginings of her and who she might be, if only he were to get to know her better. They become progressively closer as the narrative unfurls; their search to uncover the truth of the book that compels them leads them both on strange adventures together. The novel's end sees the protagonist deciding to marry Ludmilla, which, I would argue, is a metaphor for the ultimate union of reader and text, object and subject, mind and extant reality. Subject and object become one, and the search to make "sense" of the subject is understood to be an extension of the object, which includes the quest for the subject as a part of itself.

This ending suggests that, ultimately, the novel and the reader are one and the same, that a reader must look to him or herself to begin to understand or have an honest experience with a work. There is no external "other" in either a text or another person; what is thought of as being external to one's experience is really the subjective impression of the "other" that is entirely contingent to one's individual approach to an "other" figure, whether it be a text or a person. The reality of this figure is merely a play of words, impressions, and images inside the mind. The ending, however, is far from the only instance in which the Borgesian-immaterialist approach to reading is concretized in a scene or event from the plot.

Winter's Night contains a great numbers of scenes which function as virtual manifestations of the notion that reading is an immaterialist phenomenon. Each character in the novel seems to come to this conclusion on their own, through some series of unusual events or personal musings. The first glimpse of the novel's heavy immaterialist leanings is seen toward the end of the first chapter. The reader – the "you" of the book – has just purchased the novel, and the narrator is commenting on the fact that the book's covers seem to reveal very little about the book itself and that the tone of the authorial voice does not match with his remembrance of the author. This lays the groundwork for the fundamental mystery that is *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*. The text reads:

> You turn the book over in your hands, you scan the sentences on the back of the jacket, generic phrases that don't say a great deal. So much the better, there is no message that indiscreetly outshouts the message that the book itself must communicate directly, that you must extract from the book, however much or little it may be . . . So here you are now, ready to attack the first lines of the first page. You prepare to recognize the unmistakable tone of the author. No. You don't recognize it at all. But now that you think about it, who ever said this author had an unmistakable tone? On the contrary, he is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these very changes you recognize him as himself. (9)

The fact that the exterior of the book does not indicate any connection between itself and books with which the reader is already familiar is important: it allows for an experience of the text that has no precedent. Because of this, the reader cannot default to prior analyses or past experiences to make sense of the novel; nor can he look to the author as a source against which to compare

this novel in the hopes of a deeper understanding of it than what his immediate impression of the text might offer. No – the reader must sally forth on his or her own, without any sort of guidance based on memory of other texts or expectations based on some awareness of authorial consistency. The only thing that the reader can expect is to be caught up in something entirely new to him, something for which he cannot prepare himself.

The reader's mind, then, is a sort of tabula rasa with regards to the world he is about to enter. This blank slate allows for an experience with the work unclouded by impressions that, in reality, would have nothing to do with the immediate work at hand anyway (at least, according to what this passage seems to propose). The sentence "So much the better, there is no message that indiscreetly outshouts the message that the book itself must communicate directly" speaks to a philosophy of reading that locates the meaning of a text solely and absolutely between the reader's mind and what is in text itself – not in the world of the author who created it, nor in its cultural background or critical reception, nor in how it functions within the larger canon of similar literature. Literature, this sentence intimates, cannot be conveyed in terms that extend beyond the immediate relationship that evolves between a literary work and its reader. The back cover of a book can only offer one window into the way it actually functions for a reader; critical work on the book is mere subjective speculation that cannot, ultimately, offer up any single reading or interpretation of the work as "correct". The book must communicate itself directly: there is no secondary reproduction of the text that is a faithful transmission of the experience of the work itself.

This is what allows for the creation of a new *Don Quixote* in its copying, and why, in his commentary, Kinbote creates an entirely new narrative. Reproductions or analyses of literature, instead of offering a window into the "reality" of a book, are mere conveyances of one reader or

critic's experience with the work. These works seem to declare that such experiences are not more correct and should not function to alter or shift an individual perspective or experience of the work; they simply offer an example of the way in which one person came to assess their reading of the work. If, perhaps, works of literature were treated as objects that have ultimate and stable meaning, works that should be considered exactly the same way by every reader, critical work and literal reproduction would function as a sort of science that could conceivably reveal an essential nature of each work that holds true for each reader. This would be in line with an objectivist understanding of reality, a philosophical perspective that posits that reality is its own phenomenon that humans might come to know through rational inquiry. On the other hand, these texts stand fundamentally against the concept of a singular and stable real world, one that might be irrefutably announced as "true" on the back of a book or in the writings of a metaphysician. There are as many real worlds as there are minds in the world, and nobody else's understanding of this reality has any fundamental connection to one's own, insofar as one's own experience of reality is entirely within one's mind.

This concept is treated in both the chapters that address the reader directly as "you" (and which track "your" excursions in understanding both the alternating chapters and the figure of Ludmilla) as well as the various fictions that comprise the chapters that are really only the first chapters of various, unrelated novels. The second "first chapter" chapter is set in Poland and features a young narrator about to live away from home for the first time in his life. This young man gets into a fight with a boy around the same age. His narration during this fight dislocates him from the immediate space and time of the story's events and consciously addresses his status as artifice, or one who is being "read" by a reader. This is significant because it directly points

out the fact that he is a construct of the reader who is watching him as he wrestles with the other boy.

The passage indicates the falsity of the narrative and the fact that its "reality" is entirely inside the reader, as one who is outside the text and who enters the story more real than any of its characters. This reader is in a functional subject-object relationship with the character. This relationship is mirrored by the narrator's angry relationship with the other boy, Ponko, a figure whom he has the distinct and curious impression of somehow transforming into over the course of the fight. The text reads as follows:

> While we were clutching each other, I had the sensation that in this struggle the transformation was taking place, and when he rose he would be me and I him, but perhaps I am thinking this only now, or it is only you, Reader, who are thinking it, not I: indeed, in that moment wrestling with him meant holding tight to myself, to my past, so that it wouldn't fall into his hands, even at the cost of destroying it . . . I had been seeking to tear something from my past so as not to leave it to my rival, to the new me with dog's hair, or perhaps already I had been trying to wring from the past of that unknown me a secret to add to my past or future. (39)

In this passage, the young man is asking a fundamental question about the role his mind plays in creating his experience of reality. In saying "perhaps I am thinking this only now," he submits that his memory has an active role in his current understanding of reality, indicating that remembering can have the function of warping the present. He has the distinct ability to distance himself from his own mind and recognize that its experience of the world is mutable, subjective, and impermanent – and this seems to scare him, as if the lack of objective reality in the universe indicates that he might not have a self at all. This appears to imply, for him, the fact that the

entire world as he understands it is entirely grounded in his own perception. This further signifies that he himself is merely the construct or perception of another, such as Ponko or the reader. In saying "perhaps… it is only you, Reader, not I, who are thinking it" he reveals a fundamental skepticism with regards to the objectivity of his own perceptions and thought processes. Ponk admits both that he creates his own world, and that he also might be part of a world created by another. He is, of course; he is a character in a novel. In directly pointing out the absolute artifice of literature, profound commentary on the very character of reading, as a whole, is made possible. This is the very crux of metafiction.

I would argue that in the acting of calling attention to his own artifice, Ponko assumes a nature very different than that of most characters in novels. For the most part, characters in literature function unawares as to the fact that they are being voyeurized by a reader: the world within the text does not operate as if it is a subject, or being watched, and does not consciously perform to a reader. Here, the young man is fully aware that he is being watched by a reader – and in directly addressing this, he breaks down the barrier between reader and text, drawing them into the work by openly addressing their role in its function. In stating that it might very well be the reader who is considering Ponko, and not him, he destroys the literary fourth wall: he points out his status as unreal in relation to something that is real, which, I believe, implicitly states that any agency he has in the text is only an illusion. This forces the reader into a position where they must reflect on their own role as a reader, as they are essentially creating Ponko by reading him. Instead of following the narrative of characters who uphold the semblance of being as real as their readers, the story becomes about the reader, in a sense. The reader must reconsider the idea that they are outside the text, as the spotlight is turned on them. It would seem that they are, in reality, coextensive with it.

Of course, the novel is written about the very situation of reading, and seems to have been designed to catalyze self-reflection as a reader. I would argue that this creates a situation in which critical analysis or interpretation of the work is made extremely difficult: ultimately, the ground for understanding or discussing this work is within the person reading it – the identification of the main character as "you" lends the reader a sense of fundamental authority over the text. I believe that this is part of the "point" of *Winter's Night*: as with *Pale Fire*, the process of seeking a deeper meaning to the work that compels its reader figure ultimately leads to no great revelation or knowledge about the work, but reveals a great deal about the character itself. It could be argued that this is a terminal project: in indicating the meaninglessness of holding one critical viewpoint over another, all perspectives become equally valid, and the notion of stable meaning within a work is thrown into a sort of limbo. Thus, immaterialism as a metafictional device could be conceived of as somehow fatalistic, ending with the ultimate conclusion that whatever is within the reader's mind is the meaningful content of a text, and that any search for an objective understanding of the text's function and meaning is a trick created to divert readers from their own role in creating the work before them. This radical subjectivity is redoubled in *Winter's Night* by the unavoidable identification of the novel's reader with its reader figure, the main character. The reader's journey through *Winter's Night* mirrors the main character's journey through "If On A Winter's Night A Traveler"; as the main character is left on ultimately unstable ground regarding the text, so the reader is forced into a position where they must rethink their approach to reading and the nature of their relationship to the text.

The novel also contains multiple send-ups of formal or academic approaches to literature. It parodies the kind of engagement with literature that posits that a great deal of research and historical background on a work is necessary in order to truly understand or have a meaningful

experience with a text. These instances of parody suggest that the narrator believes in an immediate experience with literature unclouded by academic or intellectual cant and obligations. This is demonstrated in several instances throughout the story. For example, Ludmilla's sister, Lotaria, desperately wants to classify and categorize every text she encounters according to what she presumes to be its correct intellectual grouping; workers at a publishing house are frenzied in the acts of producing and promoting new novels, seemingly more concerned with the business of reading than the act itself; professors from separate departments of a local university war over the correct historical and ethnographic placement of one of the texts included in the mixed-up edition of "If On A Winter's Night A Traveler." All fail to rise to a pure enjoyment of reading that surpasses a rational understanding of how the texts function for other people and within the larger scheme of the literary and intellectual world. These characters are all absurd; their respective plights are demonstrated with a sly and subtle humor, and it is strongly implied that the narrator believes that their approach to the written word is vastly misguided, shaped by years of education and instruction in how to read that places greater emphasis on knowledge that surrounds the text than on the creativity and individual response of the reader. This is perhaps best exemplified by the first description of Lotaria. The main character meets her while seeking Ludmilla's counsel on the section of "Winter's Night" that seems to be the first chapter of the Polish novel starring Ponko. The scene plays out as such:

> "Well, it's a kind of a Polish novel that she's also reading. I thought we might exchange some impressions. Bazakbal's novel." "Polish? What sort?" "Um, it doesn't seem half bad to me." No, you misunderstood. Lotaria wants to know the author's position with regard to Trends of Contemporary Thought and Problems

> That Demand a Solution. To make your task easier she furnishes you with a list of names of Great Masters among whom you should situate him. (44)

The use of capital letters at the beginning of "trends of contemporary thought", "problems that demand a solution", and "great masters" indicates the tongue-in-cheek attitude that the narrator takes toward Lotaria and her perspective on reading. Furthermore, the fact that he does not identify the specific trends of contemporary thought or problems that demand a solution to which Lotaria refers compounds his humorous disregard for her inquiries. What is specifically interesting here is that the main character does not openly agree with the narrator in this regard. He is a sort of neutral party, overwhelmed by Lotaria's taste for a stringent scholarly approach to reading novels, but himself remaining silent with regards to judgment of her character. In maintaining the main character's neutrality, I would argue that Calvino allows for the reader to identify with the reader figure – the witty, subtle critique of certain styles of reading is left to the narrator, and the main character need not assume a partial or biased role that might cause certain readers to dissociate from him.

This is maintained throughout the entirety of the novel: the reader figure has no solid opinions or strong voice to mirror or counter the narrator's ruminations on reading, but is instead at the mercy of the texts he reads, the narrator who commands his actions, and Ludmilla. He is not a well-developed figure by any standard: his personality is entirely enveloped within the narrator, who directs his actions. This allows him to be a cipher for *Winter's Night*'s actual reader: because the reader is given such little information about his actual personality or existence in the world, it is not difficult to fill in the blanks of the reader's life with personal information, allowing for a closer relationship between the reader of *Winter's Night* and its reader figure.

The text continues:

> Again you feel the sensation that you felt when the paper knife revealed the facing white pages. “I couldn’t say, exactly. You see, I’m not actually sure even of the title or the author’s name. Ludmilla will tell you about it: it’s a rather complicated story.” “Ludmilla reads one novel after another, but she never clarifies the problems. It seems a big waste of time to me. Don’t you have this impression?” If you start arguing, she’ll never let you go. Now she is inviting you to a seminar at the university, where books are analyzed according to all Codes, Conscious and Unconscious, and in which all Taboos are eliminated, the ones imposed by the dominant Sex, Class, and Culture. (44-45)

The sensation to which the opening line of this passage refers is the feeling of the main character when he realizes that the novel he purchased is not tome he expected at all, the one which would continue the story of the section of “Winter’s Night” immediately prior, but an entirely new one. That he feels this same feeling during his first encounter with Lotaria reflects his personal destabilization as a reader that serves as the background for the novel: not only is the text of “Winter’s Night” still an utter mystery, with its mixed-up chapters all seemingly from different books, but here he is faced with the idea that he somehow reads incorrectly. Lotaria is invested in the idea that her personal approach to reading novels is correct: she cannot conceive of her sister’s way of reading, which seems to be driven by a pleasure principle instead of a search to understand and classify texts according to norms institutionalized and standardized by culture and academia. In his subtle skewering of her character, the narrator questions the validity of this attitude, instead championing Ludmilla’s ability to be lost in a text without assuming an analytic or notably formal method of reading.

I would furthermore posit that the narrator aligns himself with both main character and reader in doing this. The assumption that underlies the sentence "books are analyzed according to all Codes, Conscious and Unconscious, and in which all Taboos are eliminated, the ones imposed by the dominant Sex, Class, and Culture" is that the narrator is addressing an audience that agrees with him or her – the capitalization of "codes, conscious, unconscious and taboo" is an ironic jab at the fact that those things, as features of a normative intellectual society, have a certain stature, and that stature is founded on a societal constructs that do not hold true for every reader. This sentence seems to suggest that both the main character and the reader are somehow outside of the influence of this construct, or can at least distance themselves from it to the extent that they might laugh at that sentence, joining the narrator in his or her amusing reproach of Lotaria.

What perhaps disturbs the narrator the greatest about Lotaria's take on literature is its position that reading is a sort of science, that texts contain falsifiable evidence that serve as grounds for understanding literary experiences to be objective and undynamic. *Winter's Night* calls for a remarkably unscientific reader who resists every brand of unchanging and categorical reading. There are several moments throughout the course of the novel that refer to the fundamental unknowability of the roots of literature, indicating the idea that the written word extends into a world that is incommunicable and that language exists at the edge of a store of experience and feeling that is largely untranslatable into words. This implies that one cannot ever really know what the author was attempting to "do" in his or her writing of a work, and any work of literary analysis must make intellectual leaps of faith. Critique and analysis then become arts of supposition and persuasion of a subjective idea to a larger audience, promulgating the idea that the text being critiqued and analyzed might be reduced to some objective essence or scheme

of concepts by the critic or literary analyst. Thus the critical work attempts to turn the experience of a text into something that might be widely shared, rather than something personal. *Winter's Night* rejects this objectification, handing over full critical (and/or uncritical) authority of a work to each of its readers by implying that the essence of a book is dependent on the individual reader. This novel wants its readers to experience it as they will.

One key incident that reflects the stance against a conception of literature that sees it not as a series of fully knowable phenomena occurs during the main character's visit with a university professor. He wants to discuss one of the novels whose first chapter is contained within "Winter's Night." This professor rhapsodizes about the language in which it was written, Cimmerian (an invention of Calvino's); the features that distinguish Cimmerian from other languages underscore the entire novel's position on the written word:

> "Books are the steps of the threshold…all Cimmerian authors have passed it…Then the wordless language of the dead begins, which says the things that only the language of the dead can say. Cimmerian is the last language of the dead, the last language of the threshold! You come here to try to listen there, beyond…Listen…Cimmerian books are all unfinished", Uzzi-Tuzzi sighs, "because they continue beyond…in that silent language to which all the words we believe we read refer…Reading," he says, "is always this: there is a thing that is there, a thing made of writing, a solid, material object which cannot be changed, and through this thing we measure ourselves against something else that is not present, something else that belongs to the immaterial, invisible world, because it can only be thought, imagined, or because it was once and is no longer past, lost, unattainable, or in the land of the dead …" (72).

The connection this excerpt has to the immaterialist position on knowledge is undeniable: it directly identifies the relationship that a reader has to a text as unfolding within the world that is "immaterial, invisible, because it can only be thought, imagined". The way in which Uzzi-Tuzzi's passion for Cimmerian is described stands in harsh contrast to the description of Lotaria: he is portrayed as a likeable, if mildly obsessive, old man, one who holds fast to his affinity for a dead language on the basis of a philosophy of reading that is not widely popular. This suggests that the narrator agrees more with Uzzi-Tuzzi about reading than with Lotaria. Uzzi-Tuzzi appears to be arguing for a conception of literature that, while identifying books as obviously static groupings of words and sentences, signifies a fundamental mystery beneath its surface. Uzzi-Tuzzi firmly states that all readers believe that words refer back to a "silent language," something whose meaning is ineffable but which is fundamental to language. It seems that this something would have to be unknowable, according to immaterialism; the concept of a static, objective, and knowable truth of reality is a fiction, just as the ultimate root of language, according to Uzzi-Tuzzi, is in a realm that language itself cannot touch.

Cimmerian, as noted before, is the language of a fictional country. The novel tells its history: Cimmeria evidently existed as an independent state between World War One and World War Two, but was thereafter absorbed by surrounding countries. Uzzi-Tuzzi remarks that its culture, language and literature remain almost completely unknown to the world at large, and Cimmeria-enthusiasts like him are, for the most part, nonexistent. That Cimmerian is the fictional language of a fictional country that no longer exists makes sense in terms of the larger issues, given the function that the Cimmerian language and literatures play against the whole scheme of *If On A Winter's Night*. The mysteriousness of Cimmerian stands as a foil to existing and developing languages and literature which are enfolded within a system of reading that seeks

to objectify and analyze them according to the same system of reading espoused by Lotaria. Because it is essentially apocryphal, Cimmerian resists easy classification and discussion; its books are all unfinished, mysteries at their core, and the country has all but vanished from cultural consciousness. This allows for Cimmerian and its literatures to assume a role that is based entirely on speculation. In this way, Cimmerian is very similar to Tlon: it is an unknown world with a series of literary works that, upon analysis and investigation, seem to only reflect the ultimate unknowability of the country from which it comes.

Uzzi-Tuzzi's remarks on reading are also reminiscent of Blanchot's conceptions of literature. Both men hold an essential theory of reading that locates the heart of a text in silence and mystery, as if its ultimate meaning is not inherent to the words themselves, but to whatever the reader cares to see there, a care which resists temporal permanence, which by nature transient and difficult to describe. The essence of a text becomes a construct in the reader's mind. This idea, as noted before, is symbolized in the figure of Ludmilla – referred to frequently throughout the text as the Other Reader. At time, Ludmilla appears to be inextricable, for the main character, from the "Other" that is the text he is attempting to read. He notes clearly, shortly after the scene excerpted above, that his interest in the work and his interest in her are indiscernable: upon Uzzi-Tuzzi questioning the main character's motives for visiting his university office, the narrator remarks "to be sincere you should answer that you can no longer distinguish your interest in the Cimmerian novel from your interest in the Other Reader of that novel" (51). Ludmilla holds the same function that the titular text does in *Winter's Night*. The cat-and-mouse game the main character plays with the text is analogous to the way in which he seeks her. This is compounded by the fact that, to an even larger extent than his character, Ludmilla's identity is completely founded on her love of reading. Virtually no distinguishing details are given about Ludmilla; she

is only the beautiful, female Other Reader who, according to her sister, constantly has her nose in books, and who is – importantly – last witnessed lying in bed next to the main character as they are both reading.

The lack of character development in this novel allows for its wealth of philosophical ruminations on the nature of reading and perception to take center stage. I would argue that, like Ponko, the main character and Ludmilla do not function in the same way that most characters do in novels; this story, it seems, is not really about them at all – they are necessary elements that allows the true star of the novel to shine, which is reading itself. One specific, significant idea that runs throughout the novel is the notion of language's limitations. The truth that any piece of writing is more artificial than the "real world" outside of it and, as such, one can never be perfectly faithful to the reality of what the writer is trying to express, is contended with over and over again in *Winter's Night*. This is expressed in the scene of Ponko's fight and Uzzi-Tuzzi's description of the Cimmerian language: both indicate that language and the novel somehow extend into a territory that is only made real by imaginative work. In Ponko's case, he recognizes that his very thoughts are contingent upon the existence of a reader to think them into him, in a sense – Ponko understands that he is the subject of another's mental work. For Uzzi-Tuzzi, the language with which he is obsessed is founded on the belief that beneath language there exists a whole universe of inexpressible things. Language seems to function as a sort of common denominator of symbols into which human minds collectively enter, but which is an ultimately imperfect reproduction of the truth that exists within each mind – a truth that the individual thinker holds as his or her own, that cannot be conveyed in the sequence of objective symbols of which language consists.

This concept is expressed very well in one of the "first-chapter" chapters. The main character of this particular novel jumps right into a narrative in which he ruminates on language and its unfortunate restrictions. This excerpt is highly important in light of the reader figure's plight – it seems to offer a profound explanation for the situation of reading that affects all readers, and is symbolized by his confused journey to understand "If On A Winter's Night A Traveler." The text reads:

> There are days when everything seems to me charged with meaning: messages it would be difficult for me to communicate to others, translate into words, but which for this very reason appear to me decisive. There are announcements or presages that concern me and the world at once: for my part, not only the external events of my existence but also what happens inside, in the depths of me; and for the world, not some particular event but the general way of being of all things. You will understand therefore my difficult in speaking about it, except by allusion. (55)

What is perhaps most important from this passage is the note that what is concerning is not just the messages the character receives from the outside world, but that what happens inside of him is at once as significant and incommunicable as the meaning-charged signals from the outside world. This, I believe, speaks to an immaterialist experience of the world: what happens within this main character is something very important, but it cannot be wrought in the terms used by mankind for collective communication. In this way, language might be conceived as the outside world into which all human beings necessarily enter – the world which, according to Berkeley, is created by the mind of God. This is the real world, but human minds derive their own subjective and isolated experience of it based on personal experience and sense impressions. This subjective

and isolated world constitutes the fundamental mystery that is each human mind – and as it is treated in these novels, each novel.

This excerpt seems to underscore the idea that the personal importance we ascribe to the external world is our own, and the extent to which we believe it comes not from us, but is inherent to the outside world, is just a personal belief we hold. This could be read as a clue for the main character of *Winter's Night*: as he scrambles to understand the text and Ludmilla, he does not turn to himself to recognize his true situation as reader, or one who essentially creates his own experience of the text. He is busy trying to figure out the truth of the things which take hold of his mind without recognizing his own agency over the text. For the actual reader of this text, I would argue that the recognition of this agency is unavoidable: their role in the text, as indicated by Ponko's direct addressing of the reader, is made very clear. They are more real than any of the characters and are functional in creating their world. What is specifically interesting about that scenario is that the reader of Ponko is both the main character and the actual reader of *If On A Winter's Night*. The "you" to which Ponko refers could be either or both, but given the later events of the novel, it is clear that while the reader might understand that he or she is the one thinking Ponko's thoughts, the full weight of that declaration evades the main character.

Ludmilla, who I believe symbolizes the style of reading absolutely championed in the novel, seems to have an innate understanding of the creative role the reader takes over the text. During the scene in which Uzzi-Tuzzi is meeting with her and the main character, the main character remarks – not without a hint of envy – that for her, books exist as a result of her desire to read. The excerpt reads:

> "I like to know that books exist that I will still be able to read…" she says, sure that existent objects, concrete albeit unknown, must correspond to the strength of

> her desire. How can you keep up with her, this woman who is always reading another book besides the one before her eyes, a book that does not yet exist, but which, since she wants it, cannot fail to exist? (72)

Ludmilla seems to have come to a solid awareness that her experience with a text is a direct correlate of her desire to read. This passage, I believe, does not suggest that this is a phenomenon particular to Ludmilla –the fact that books exist as a result of her wish to read. She is, I would argue, a reader who has attained an ideal of literary enlightenment. She assumes the attitude toward reading that *Winter's Night* attempts to impress upon both its reader and main character. This perspective locates the experience of a text in the desire and creativity of a reader; the ideal reader, then, would be one who is open to explore the worlds hidden within the language with a freedom and desire unbound by extant concerns, such as those attended to by Lotaria. Ludmilla's mind is what is active in her reading: she does not allow her reading to overcome her, but rather fills the text with her own desire – her mind, in essence, is what makes the text real. It is noted that she is a strong-willed character: the narrator remarks that "you understand by now that Ludmilla, for all her mild manner, likes to take the situation in hand and decide everything herself: your only course is to follow her" (47). Ludmilla is conscious of her own agency, understanding her experience of the world as her own, not seeking to find meaning, but to create it on her own terms.

Ludmilla's role as a model for ideal reading is maintained throughout the entirety of the novel. It seems that the main character's quest to understand her, inhabit her mind, and (ultimately) to date her is a symbol for his desire to figure out how, exactly, to read. What he seems to miss is that his quest is actually futile: he is looking for an understanding of literature that he might be able to understand in terms of secondhand or vicarious experience, but this is

fundamentally impossible: his engagement with the world of literature must come from a place within himself, not something that can be found in analyzing or pursuing the true meaning of a story. Throughout most of the novel, he does not seem to realize this, and becomes immensely frustrated at the circumstances that prevent him from both accessing the real "If On A Winter's Night A Traveler" and Ludmilla. The ending is significant in light of this: in his deciding to marry Ludmilla, he takes active control of the narrative. In consciously deciding to join forces with the Other Reader, he signifies his ultimate self-identification as reader and one who has agency over a narrative – both the narrative that is his life and the narrative represented by Ludmilla.

The location of the meaning within a text inside of a reader's mind is treated in various instances throughout the novel, not all of which refer to the main character's relationship (or lack thereof) to Ludmilla. The main character finds himself consulting with a worker at a publishing company who has some noteworthy opinions on the role of the author in the text. These thoughts seem to reflect Roland Barthes's basic premise that the author, as a mythologized figure, is dead – although here what is being argued is that the author is a functional fiction. This is significant because it raises the question of authorial control over the content of a work: insofar as the author is merely another symbol in the text, as a necessary part of the book, the real "author" of a work then becomes its reader. The scene plays out as follows:

> "What does the name of the author on the jacket matter? Let us move forward in thought to three thousand years from now. Who knows which books form our period will be saved, and who knows which authors' names will be remembered? Some books will remain famous but will be considered anonymous works, as for us the epic of Gilgamesh; other authors' names will still be well known, but none

> of their works will survive, as was the case with Socrates, or perhaps all the surviving books will be attributed to a single, mysterious author, like Homer."(101)

What is implied by this passage is that the author, as the name on the jacket of a book, is just as much a part of the book as any one of its characters – as such, the author is not real; he or she is a necessary part of the overall work known as "book" but is an operative fiction. The speaker here identifies Homer as being as fictional as "The Odyssey"; the name of Homer, for him, is included in the general scheme in which modern minds see the epic. There is no distinction between the author and the work. What this suggests is that the author is not a figure who hides in the background of a text whose intentions, motivations, and personal leanings might be sought after or researched as a means by which to come to a greater understanding of the work. The author is entirely within the work, and he or she is a subject of their own creation. The Calvino that would come to be known through reading this novel is, as far as any readers can tell, the only Calvino there is; he is entirely enfolded in the novel. He is not the "real" Calvino, however; he is the Calvino invented by Calvino as a necessary part of a Calvino book. This idea is initially toyed with in the section where it is noted that the writer "is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these changes you recognize him as himself" (9). The author which is presented in this novel has no identity beyond that which is presented in each individual work.

This is made more complex by the fact that the author of the text initially sought-after in *Winter's Night* is a fictionalized version of Calvino – a patently Borgesian literary device. I would argue that the work is doing two things here: first, it establishes a scenario in which the main character must come to the awareness that they cannot seek to understand an author figure

outside of the work as a means by which to understand the work itself. Then, it turns to the actual reader and questions the role that Calvino actually plays in the text; it seems that in saying "he is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next," Calvino is divesting himself of the responsibility of filling any expectations he might have established beforehand. He leaves the question of literary intent to the reader. This, I believe, is part of the greater project toward which all of the commentary on reading contained within this novel works.

This self-reflexivity is demonstrated not only in the fictionalization of the author, but in the book's own recognition of its limitations. Just as the moment in which Ponko turns to his reader and notes that it is them that might be thinking his thoughts, not him, there are various cases in which the fact that fiction is limited by its own unreality is remarked upon. These instances all seem to remark: it is not for us, as characters in books, to be agents of our own interpretation; nor can we know what we will actually make our readers think or feel. That is supplied by the reader. In particular, the characters in the "first chapter" chapters have some general awareness of the fact that their existent is dependence upon a reader to create them. There is a sort of resignation inherent to these admissions, as if these characters have had to come to unfortunate terms with the fact that they are inexorably bound by their own artifice to being the mere creation of a real, thinking human mind. This resignation is very interesting, however, because it gives to these characters a reality that their readers cannot access – unless they too imagine themselves to be a character in a book. The reader of *Winter's Night* cannot empathize with Ponko or any other character who turns to the reader and remarks upon the fact that they are real, and he or she is not.

However, I would claim that the reader is thus thrown into a position in which he or she must consider the nature of their own existence in light of the fact that the existence of these

characters is obviously contingent upon the reader. Ludmilla is, in this novel, more real than any of the characters from the "first chapter" chapters. They are the subjects of her objectification; she creates them in her reading. She, in turn, is the subject of the main character's objective mind; her role in the novel is entirely wrapped up in his imagination of her, as he is "reading" her in a sense, thus creating her. And, of course, this main character is being read by the actual reader of the novel. I believe that because of this situation, alongside the commentary on reading that comprises an enormous part of *Winter's Night*, the question is implicitly asked: who is "thinking" the actual reader in order to create him or her? The immaterialist answer to this question would be God. The fact that the author of a written work, in the analogy between the real world and the world of the text, serves the functional role of God, must be considered here in light of the fact that the author of this work seems to want to strip himself of authorial control over the text. Italo Calvino does not seem to want to transform the readers of his novel into subjects defined by their identity as reader, as Ludmilla and the main character are – he does not want to be the God figure in the text. Where, then, is the thinking mind that is necessary for the existence of this world, in the analogy between mind-world and reader-text relationship?

A better question to ask might be: after a certain point of grappling with immaterialism as a metafictional device, might attention then be turned to the analogy between the necessity of the mind to create an experience of the world and the necessity of a mind to create a reality of the text? It would seem that, in frequently drawing attention to their status as characters in books, the figures of the "chapter title" chapters in this novel want to completely do away with the illusion that a book contains a world unto itself. The reader might seek entrance into a world that is not their own, but in their insistence of their own falsity, he or she is perpetually returned to the fact that they are engaged in the creative act of reading – and the book is not a self-contained world,

but a present extension of their mind. There is no "other mind", such as the mind of the author or the mind of a character, with which the reader meets and contends; the entirety of the book is within him or her.

Philosopher Jacques Derrida, in his book *Of Grammatology*, contends with the question of the necessity of the mind – which he refers to as the "logos" – in serving as the origin of a written text. His argument seems to be that the written word cannot be reduced as issuing from a single point of rationality in the form a single authorizing mind. I believe that this is significant in light of the lineage that begins with Borges's engagement with immaterialism because it raises the question of the necessity of seeking textual origin in an author in order to have a meaningful experience with the work. The question here is one of the validity of perspectival viewpoint in creating meaning from a text: instead of the single objective perspective, such as that provided by an author or God, that creates a stable real world or text, the mind of every individual is instead championed as creating their own authentic experience of either a textual world or the real world. A relevant passage from this work reads:

> This "rationality" – but perhaps that word should be abandoned for reasons that will appear at the end of this sentence – which governs a writing thus enlarged and radicalized, no longer issues from a logos. Further, it inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition, but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of *truth*. (10)

The "rationality…that no longer issues from a logos" is the rationality that is supposed to order and make cohesive a body of written work. This rationality might be conceived of as originating in the author. The significations that are then sourced from that logos then become rendered

meaningless, as the basis of their origin is revealed to be a fiction or a construction. For example, when the narrator makes the comment that the book "If On A Winter's Night A Traveler" does not resemble anything that matches the protagonist's expectations of a Calvino text, he destroys the existence of elements within the narrative that might signify it as a Calvino text; this is the groundwork for the situation in which the reader becomes active in authorizing their own understanding of the work, a view of the work that operates outside of any possible conception of Calvino. Derrida, I believe, is making the case for the deconstruction of the logos as a necessary part of textual understanding and interpretation entirely: the concept that there is a single mental focal point to which written words, as signifiers, point back to, is argued as being an operative fiction of writing that evolved alongside the historical evolution and trajectory of writing itself. I would argue that Calvino's novel makes a case for this philosophy of reading and writing.

Derrida does not argue for the destruction of the concept of the signified, but rather for a re-examination of the distinction between signifiers – i.e., language symbols – and signifieds. Traditional thought conceives of signifiers as deriving from signifieds; a spatial analogy might view signifieds as existing in the background, or prior to, their signifiers, which point back to them. Instead, the meaning of the sign is contained within the sign itself, or within the reader of the sign, as opposed to something else for which the sign merely stands as code. This is significant in relation to *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* because of the self-recognition of its "first chapter" characters as only literary characters and the use of the second-person voice. This novel, by its very function, announces itself as a part of the reader's real world by constantly attention to the fact that it is a novel, i.e., unreal. Instead of the characters in the "first chapter" chapters as maintaining the literary illusion that they are ciphers for real people, their artifice is

foregrounded; the text then becomes an exploration of their artifice. Their meaning is entirely subsumed within the fact that they are nothing more than characters, or artificial creations– as opposed to real people being transformed into characters by words and narrative movements. Similarly, the fact that the narrator directly addresses the reader as "you" places him or her (the voice is, significantly, un-gendered) in a role in which they can be nothing other than narrator: the role that they fill is one of pure literary invention, and is not supposed to be anything but. The fact that the world from which this voice narrates is completely contained within the text that they are narrating is called into question; the voice of the narrator does not hark back to an understanding of the world within the text that is somehow hidden or implied to be part of a larger narrative that extends beyond the work (as might be the case with an omniscient narrator, or a subjective narrator who is also a character in the novel, such as Charles Kinbote). The narrator narrates, and he or she is a symbol or signifier for nothing but that which narrates or tells a story

The concept of the character whose function is purely that of character-in-novel is demonstrated in the opening of one of the "first chapter" chapters. In the first sentence of this particular novel-within-the-novel, the character immediately recognizes his role as character in book, one who is part of a narrative that is distinct from the reader's world while its existence is still entirely contingent on it. In this excerpt, it seems less as if the character is operating within a fake world that is created by a writer than as if he is indicating his limitations as a fictional character who is constricted by language in the true signification of that which he intends to present as real. The text reads:

> The first sensation this book should convey is what I feel when I hear the telephone ring; I say "should" because I doubt that written words can even give a

> partial idea of it; it is not enough to declare that my reaction is one of refusal, of flight from this aggressive and threatening summons, as it is also a feeling of urgency, intolerableness, coercion that impels me to obey the injunction of that sound, rushing to answer even though I am certain that nothing will come of it save suffering and discomfort. Nor do I believe that instead of an attempted description of this state of the spirit, a metaphor would serve better. (132)

What I believe this excerpt implies is that a reader derives an understanding of a text based on their personal supposition of intention by author or character, as opposed to what the language is actually doing. This allows for questions such as: "what is the writer actually saying here?" or "what does this work actually mean?." These questions, according to this philosophy of reading, would be essentially meaningless: what the writer is actually saying is just what is on the page, and what the work actually means is contained within the reader, who would be at fault to base their understanding of the work on assumptions of authorial control and intent or in the voice or actions of the character. As they are merely artificial creations, characters in novels are as mutable as the reader wants them to be; the qualities and import of their pain, pleasure, and life circumstances depends on their reception. This is the dreaded truth of every character within the "first chapter" chapters of this novel. Their lives are cut short at the moment in which the chapter stops, never to be continued; in that instance, any semblance of their reality is negated, and in terms of their engagement with the text, the reader is left at square one.

I believe it is important that all of the "first-chapter" chapters are cut at a moment of suspense – the instance in which it assumed that both the main character and the actual reader have become personally invested in the continuation of the narrative. No climax is ever rewarded with an anti-climax; no thesis or hypothesis with a synthesis. To have done this, I believe, would

be to have inserted a measure of literary reality into the lives of these fictional characters. The fact that their reality is negated at the moment in which the protagonist and/or reader have suspended disbelief in their story compounds the overarching statement each work makes, which is that it is not real.

Winter's Night questions the idea that there is any "real" within a novel. By "real," I mean a ground or original source to which a reader might look to begin to make sense of a work. This might also be conceived of as the "logos" or thinking mind that, like the mind of God, creates the world in its perception. The characters in the "chapter-title" chapters make obvious the fact that they are constructs; it is, however, also obvious – and ironically so – that Ludmilla and the main character are also being read. This would imply a hierarchy of realness, where the actual reader is more real than the reader figure, who is more real than Ludmilla, who is more real than the characters in the books they read together.

What is important here is that the origin for the realness of each character is not in its author or to be found anywhere in the text – it is in its readers, who effectively create the entire world of *Winter's Night* in their reading of it. This supports the thesis of Roland Barthes insofar as it essentially reveals the author, as a figure who reigns over the text and circumscribes its meaning and interpretation by his or her intentions (making it necessary for the reader to suppose and infer what the writer was actually doing), to be a myth. The literary world then becomes a world divorced entirely from the real world, a world that deals in mystification and which is entirely other – or divorced from a logos. This concept is treated directly toward the end of the novel, in the form of speculations that constitute an elegant summary of a great bulk of the thematic content of *If On A Winter's Night*:

> How is it possible to defeat not the authors but the functions of the author, the idea that behind each book there is someone who guarantees a truth in that world of ghosts and inventions by the mere fact of having invested in it his own truth, of having identified himself with the construction of words? Always, since his taste and talent impelled him in that direction, but more than ever since his relationship with Ludmilla became critical, Ermes Marana dreamed of a literature made entirely of apocrypha, of false attributions, of imitations and counterfeits and pastiche. If this idea had succeeded in imposing itself, if a systematic uncertainty as to the identity of the writer had kept the reader from abandoning himself with trust – trust not so much in what was being told him as in the silent narrating voice – perhaps externally the edifice of literature would not have changed at all, but beneath, in the foundations, where the relationship between reader and text is established, something would have changed forever. (159)

That "something that would have changed forever", it seems, would have been the change to the sort of literature for which this novel argues. This novel is one that deals in uncertainty as a basic principle; this uncertainty is never resolved or reconciled, but instead becomes the essence of the text, in a sense. In this way, it is very much similar to *Pale Fire*: both novels establish a suspicion of the text insofar as its origin and function is mysterious, and neither answers this problem. If a resolution need be found in either text, it is in the very fact that it cannot be resolved – the fundamental mystery is left a mystery, and it is up to the reader to make sense of the work within their self. Another important connection between this passage and *Pale Fire* is the identification of literature as an art of mystification; as mentioned in the prior section, Kinbote notes that John Shade ascribed to the idea that truth in literature is to be found in its

mysteries, and this theme runs throughout the entirety of *Pale Fire*. That in and of itself harks back specifically to Borges's story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," in which the new style of reading exemplified by Menard's writing is said to be one of, among other things, "erroneous attribution" (44).

This passage asks how it is possible to supersede a reading that relies upon the functions of the author. For Ermes Marana, it indeed might not be possible; a succinct answer itself might not be possible. It seems, however, that the novel itself is an answer to that question. This is largely due to the role that both the narrator and Calvino play in the novel. The narrator, as mentioned before, consistently makes clear the fact that his or her voice is a strictly narrative voice. It directs the actions of the main character as he make his way through the text, assuming no role other than that of a literary device. And insofar as the novel which constitutes the first "first-chapter" chapter is supposed to be written by Calvino, and remarks about the writerly persona of Calvino are made in the opening pages, Calvino himself becomes a fiction that is operative within the text. In doing this, combined with his other multitude of metafictional techniques, I would argue that Calvino succeeds in moving past "the idea that behind each book there is someone who guarantees a truth in that world." There is no "behind" to this book; the "behind" is within the text, and any further search for an origin is a cat-and-mouse game not unlike the one played by the main character – or for that matter, Charles Kinbote or the various main characters of the short stories of Borges.

The search for an ultimate truth to be found within a text constituted largely by a reader's internal world is, similarly, found in Kathy Acker's 1986 novel *Don Quixote (Which Was A Dream)*. Whereas *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* features a reader figure who comes, through seeking the meaning of a text, to recognize a sort of internal unity with the outside world of

literature, *Don Quixote* places the narrative directly inside the main character from page one. From that point, it explores the nature of radical subjectivity and creation of meaning on the level of the individual as the main character – the classic Don Quixote re-envisioned as a female knight on a quest for love – lives through a series of what can perhaps best be described as waking hallucinations in which it is clear that her mind is more active in the creation of her reality than any real world. It is frequently speculated that the real world is just a series of narratives imposed on a subject, and that these narrative might be overcome or warped to fit a better reality for the individual. These narratives are identified as the traditional narratives of hegemony: their writers are Christian, white, male, and beneficiaries of capitalism. Don Quixote stands against each of these institutions as she tries, through her mind, to create a new narrative and find love on terms unwritten by anybody but herself.

This novel takes the philosophy of immaterialism to a new height: the reader figure is almost literally living through a textual world in which the reality of exterior narratives is contested by the creation of new, interior narratives that seek to supplant them. Arguably, the metaphor between the mind-universe and reader-text relationship need not be conceived of as a metaphor in this book: the universe is a literal living text, and because the reader figure is living completely within her own mind, there is no functional distinction between the mind as the body the creates the universe and any other part of her identity. And, of course, this novel is a reimagining of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. This is significant for multiple reasons: firstly, insofar as the main character is living out a textual, unreal life, it makes sense that events of the plot that comprise her story would be openly identified as based in a textual reality. Secondly, the figure of Don Quixote famously lives entirely inside his mind, unable to distinguish between the stories of chivalry with which he is obsessed and the reality of the world in which he actually lives.

What is crucial to this version of *Don Quixote* is that the reader figure is impelled to live within her own mind as a form of rejection against the world established for her by oppressive forces whose reality is also based in pre-written narratives. This implies that a new "real world" can be created simply through mental action, whereas Cervantes's *Don Quixote* has the titular figure as insane. While the sanity of Acker's protagonist is frequently questioned, it is not questioned more often than the sanity of the entire world, which is portrayed as a brutal dystopia of power-hungry oppressors that make the possibility of real, human love nearly impossible. Throughout the text, figures of "otherness" are demonstrated as creating meaning by writing their own personal narratives that stand in contradistinction to the ones provided for them by the white, Christian, male, capitalist majority.

A critical connection between *Don Quixote (Which Was A Dream)* and *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* is that this text seems to be the dreamt of by Ermes Marana, the one which might have permanently altered his approach to literature: *Don Quixote* comprises of apocrypha, false attributions, imitations counterfeits, and pastiche; this is the style for which Kathy Acker is widely known. This seems to make sense as a link between the two texts, as I would furthermore argue that the relationship between the main character and the text that is established in Calvino's novel is taken to an extreme in Acker's novel. Whereas the life of Calvino's protagonist is founded on a compulsion to understand a narrative outside of himself, the life of Acker's protagonist is founded on a compulsion that comprises a narrative within herself, one openly acknowledged as being created by her.

One instance of Acker's use of pastiche that treats the concept of both immaterialism and otherness is found toward the beginning of the novel. Seemingly out of nowhere, the narrator – who is so candidly sympathetic to the main character that it is difficult to distinguish between the

two – digresses from the plot to discuss a situation of Arabs in the West: "The Arab leaders are liars; lying is part of the Arab culture in the same way that truth-telling and honest speech're American. Unlike American and Western culture (generally), the Arabs (in their culture) have no (concept of) originality. That is, culture. They write new stories paint new pictures et cetera only by embellishing old stories pictures …" (25). The opening sentences of this digression immediately establish its humor and irony and identifies the speaker with the Arab, non-American "other". What is ironic here is that *Don Quixote* is, of course, not an original narrative; it only exists as an embellishment of an old story. Because of this, and also because of the irreverent tone of the digression, the speaker implicitly takes the side of the Arabs – this section is an obvious jab at a Western self-image founded on a construction of the non-Western "other."

The passage continues: "They write by cutting chunks out of all-ready written texts and in other ways defacing traditions: changing important names into silly ones, making dirty jokes out of matters that should be of utmost importance to us such as nuclear warfare" (25). Acker's style is that of pastiche and collage, a seeming patchwork of a number of sourced texts. Furthermore, in this novel she changes "important names" into "silly ones"; arguably, she does this in imagining the classical Don Quixote as a lovelorn female knight. Were that not "silly" enough, the famous Sancho Panza is imagined in this text as a talking dog named St. Simeon, and various figures from history, such as Thomas Hobbes and Richard Nixon, make appearances as caricatures symbolic of a hyperbolized version of the roles they play in real cultural memory.

What is most important here, however, is that the Arabs here treat truth not as a sacred ground, but as a construct. This concept underscores the entirety of *Don Quixote* – from its borrowed title and basic trope to the points made by the various instances of cultural criticism and commentary made within it, truth in this novel is envisioned as a weapon constructed to be

used against the individual, something that masquerades as authority but which in reality undermines the power of the individual over their own lives. The truth-makers in this story would not want the "other" figures, such as the Arabs, animals, other nonwhites, non-heterosexuals and Don Quixote, to ascribe to a philosophy that locates the production of reality within their own minds. This would serve to undermine their power, and could potentially be the grounds for revolution.

Don Quixote realizes this. What distinguishes her from other reader-figures is that she has come to an awareness of the capability of her own mind in creating a personal, subjective version of reality. Although she comments on the fact that this isolates her from the extant universe, she also envisions it as liberating. An excellent demonstration of this is seen in a conversation she has with her canine sidekick, St. Simeon. The text reads as follows:

> 'St Simeon.' Don Quixote could barely utter that name without tears appearing on the skin below her eyes. 'St Simeon the dog may or may not be real because the St Simeon in my heart is certainly my idea. In fact, I guess it doesn't matter whether or not St Simeon loves me.' 'If you don't care whether he loves you, why do you care whether you'll see him again?' 'Because of the evil enchanters!' Don Quixote expostulated. 'They separated us because they knew that the only thing that'll destroy me is to be apart from the dog (or saint). The dog and I're two peas in a pod. Evil enchanters such as Ronald Reagan and certain feminists, like Andrea Dworkin, who control the nexuses of our government and culture, 're persecuting and will continue to persecute us until they have buried and downed, drown us in our own human forgetfulness.' 'I don't get it.' 'As soon as we all stop

> being enchanted,' Don Quixote explained, 'human love'll again be possible.' (102)

Here, Don Quixote openly admits to the fact that her talking-dog sidekick is most likely a construct of her own mind. That doesn't seem to bother her; for Quixote, her entire experience of reality is an internal fiction, and those who would seek to replace this belief with the idea that there is an external reality – a real world over which she has limited control – are forces of cultural imperialism and personal oppression that take their power in forcing others to believe that they are not, actually, creating their own personal narratives.

What is important to Quixote here is not that Simeon is real or that he loves her, but that her ability to fictionalize is not stripped from her. The "enchantment" that must be stopped in order for human love to be possible is the power of figures such as Ronald Reagan and Andrea Dworkin to inhabit the minds of those who might otherwise take control of their own stories. These figures resist them by refusing to play by the normative constrictions imposed by Reagan, Dworkin, et. al.; they write their own narratives, essentially, absorbing the reality of the outside world but making sense of it in terms that satisfy and liberate them. At least, that is the ultimate dream that is the goal of Quixote's quest. The ability to rewrite her own story is crucial to Quixote, who sought but could not find a reality that fit her in a world that saw her as "other". The subtitle to the second part of the novel speaks to this, summing it up in a phrase: "Being born into and part of a male world, she had no speech of her own. All she could do was read male texts that weren't hers." The narrative that follows, from which the above passage is culled, demonstrates her mode of resistance against this, which is to produce her own reality.

It is useful to note that the dialect in which Quixote speaks is the same as the narrator's dialect. This makes the distinction between the two confusing; at times, it seems that the narrator

is Quixote herself, but at other points it is quite clear that she or he is not. This is significant because it creates a situation that destabilizes what is typically the most consistent voice throughout a literary work: the voice of the narrator. It gives the impression that Quixote is at once living through the plot motions and is also distanced from them, narrating her own story from a time and place distinct from the setting of the character. It also seems to imply that Quixote desires an objective narrator for her story, but is unable to forge one. I would argue that this reflects Quixote's disjointed internal state, which straddles two realities – the reality of the life-narrative handed to her by external forces, and the reality she writes for herself.

Don Quixote is a story of the tension that inheres to this state of being: the protagonist never seems entirely sure that she will be able to effectively destroy external reality through the actions of her mind, but she continues to try: this is the circumstance of her quest. Insofar as the narrator and the main character are virtually indistinguishable – their voice is identical, as are their opinions and personal responses to the various occurrences that comprise the novel – it seems that Quixote can never quite attain to a view of the world that is at once objective and entirely her own. One instance which demonstrates Quixote's determination to create a new reality for herself via her own understanding of the world, as well as the narrator's identification with her, is seen in the cavalier admission that Quixote "got rid of" Richard Nixon – and why this is not enough for her:

> Don Quixote got rid of Richard Nixon. Death had won Don Quixote's first assault against America. Death lies everywhere. The green and yellowed plains house nuclear weaponry. The cities stink. Of beggars with real cut-off legs held together by wires, sitting next to four-million dollar buildings. Of artists who're so uneducated they don't know there's no chance of becoming anything else but a

> beggar, of becoming a successful artist. There's no sexuality. When dying take all the time, there's no time. Nature is abomination. Nixon, a minor fact in nature, no longer mattered. Don Quixote realized that defeating Nixon isn't defeating America and that to defeat America she had to learn who America is. What is the myth of America, for economic and political war or control is now taking place at the level of language or myth. (117)

Here, it is made clear that Don Quixote wants to do away with the American narrative that governs both her life and the lives of those around her. She "gets rid of Richard Nixon" – although the actual means by which she does this, the event in which she does away with him, is never mentioned. This reflects the magical thinking of Don Quixote: in one instant, the brutality and negativity that surrounds Nixon is mentioned; in the next, she "gets rid of" him, ostensibly due purely to the fact that she wanted to be rid of him. This is the sort of logic that rules her life; her opinions and desire are the basis for her reality as she creates her own story in order to create her own world.

What is specifically interesting in the above passage is the note that "economic and political war or control is now taking place at the level of language or myth." This is precisely why Don Quixote is an empowered figure: although she has no political or cultural agency, her ability to transform personal visions and hopes for herself into a sort of story is as good as having actual political clout. The implication here is that in the present-day dystopia (as identified by Quixote), the ability to live inside one's own mind and supplant old cultural myths with new ones is personally empowering. Quixote, I would argue, is as much a reader figure as any from texts by Nabokov, Calvino, and Borges; the text she is reading, however, is the story handed to her by external forces. In her trying to understand this narrative, she both comments upon it and

creates her own, in the same way as Kinbote. The fact that she is re-writing a famous fictional life reflects this: Cervantes's Quixote, as a male figure created by a male writer, included in the canon of renowned world literature, is exterior to the existence of Acker's Quixote. It might be useful to note here that throughout her entire career, Acker existed on the fringes of the literary world; her most notable influence was William S. Burroughs, and she never gained the widespread recognition that befell Borges, Nabokov, and Calvino.

The popular literary world, then, is as much the world of the oppressive hegemony – supplying figures such as Acker's Quixote (and arguably Acker herself) with both actual narratives and cultural meta-narratives – as are Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, and the entire sphere of straight, white capitalist males. For the heroine to be "Don Quixote" is ironic not only because she is female, but because Cervantes's classic represents a tradition from which female writers and heroines have been barred: how many female knights or major heroes have come out of classical literature? Whereas Cervantes's Quixote saw windmills as giants and lived out a faux chivalric existence, Acker's Quixote sees famous texts written by males as fodder for new stories and lives out an existence that is chivalric because its new reality not only supersedes the boundaries of what mental action is supposed to be capable of, but because it is culturally subversive. Acker's treatment of immaterialism gives a voice to the "other" ignored by traditions of every make and mark, identifying it as a philosophy that empowers on the basis of its radically subjective implications.

This radical subjectivity, expressed on the level of language and thought, is exemplified in a particularly moving passage toward the novel's end. The heroine still seems to be isolated, cut off from any reality beyond the one she creates within herself. Her only friends are dogs, and

she is coming to terms with the fact that all which she knows is a mere construct within her psyche:

> Don Quixote Explained Poetry To The Dogs: 'I write words to you whom I don't and can't know, to you who will always be other than and alien to me. These words sit on the edges of meanings and aren't properly grammatical. For when there is no country, no community, the speaker's unsure of which language to use, how to speak, if it's possible to speak. Language is community. Dogs, I'm now inventing community for you and me. I who am at the edge of madness. Mad, all I have vision: what I alone see.' (191)

In this passage, Quixote posits the creation of a new language as a means to form a union between herself and the dogs – her only source of friendship and personal community, as she has abandoned the human world (which she identifies as having first abandoned her). The acknowledgment that "language is community" is highly significant: throughout the text, Quixote rejects "high" language and conventional structures of grammar and syntax as a means to break or subvert the linguistic fabric that holds together the oppressive external world against which she fights. The words she speaks "sit on the edges of meanings", refusing to fall into categories or definition established by anybody but herself; to speak the language of the external world, it seems, would be to negate the reality of herself.

This passage is also significant because she openly recognizes that her world is a visionary one; all she has is what she alone sees. In this novel, that situation is imagined as at once profoundly empowering and isolating. She comes to this recognition through constant internal battles with a world she hopes to improve, or at least understand, but is left with the final conclusion that she must accept a visionary view of the world if it is to ever be anything but

denigrating and oppressive to her. As a reader-figure, this distinguishes her from the reader figures of Calvino, Nabokov, and Borges: whereas they are left either in a state of speculation as to their role in understanding the texts which play "subject" to the object that is their minds or, at best, form a sort of unity of themselves and the text (as the ending of *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* demonstrates), Acker's Quixote begins from a point at which the text and the reader-figure are unified. The life of the reader figure is a textual life, and there is no tension between the real world and the textual world, as they function as one and the same for the reader. She lives out a life in which fiction and reality are blurred as a means to show that the "reality" posited by others is merely an operative fiction.

It is critical that this transpires on the level of language. For the reader-figures of Borges, Nabokov, Calvino, and Acker, the realities that they seek to understand are linguistic realities – worlds created through language. The metaphor that connects Berkeley's relationship between the human mind and its subjective universe and the reader figures in these works and the texts they mentally inhabit is such that the elements that a reader reconstructs in his or her mind to make sense of the textual world are purely wrought in language and language structures. In creating her own language, Don Quixote creates the ultimate new textual world. It is not just that her speculation and commentary on a work comprises the work itself, as is the case with Charles Kinbote or the protagonist of *Winter's Night*. Because, for her, there is no separation between the universe outside her mind and the textual world – the real world is, functionally, a text that she borrows around which she constructs her life – the only way in which she can create a personal new world, or new text, is to radically re-conceive of how language is used and what is can do. As she notes, language is community; in order to forge a new community, she needs to forge a new language. This is mirrored by *Don Quixote*'s highly unusual structure, which is a pastiche of

various narratives seemingly culled from a variety of different sources. This collage forms a picture of the protagonist's mind as she wanders through a world that has become dystopic due to its submission to various hegemonic powers. These are the powers that construct the reality against which she battles by replacing their reality with hers.

Acker's novel is strikingly different from *Pale Fire*, *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*, and the short stories of Borges. The main difference is that there is no external text that its protagonist, as a reader figure, seeks to understand or make sense of. However, as I have argued, I believe that the external text the protagonist seeks to understand is the narrative of the world in which she finds herself, a world which makes little sense and in which the operative characters seem far more like caricatures than actual human beings. This is a progression from the situation of *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*, in which the text is represented by an actual text (from which the novel derives its title) and a character in the story (Ludmilla) and in which the lines between the protagonist's life and the narrative that compels him begin to blur. The novel's end, in which he decides to marry Ludmilla, is symbolic of his union with the textual world, as I have noted before; Don Quixote begins her story already unified with a textual world, and she lives out a real fantasy-battle fought on the level of language.

There are other significant differences between Acker's novel and the others examined in this paper. For one, Acker experiments the most radically with style and content organization in her novel. The pastiche, cut-up style of *Don Quixote* follows no pattern of logic. It is also written in a distinctly lowbrow dialect and includes explicit descriptions of brutal violence, transgressive sexual acts, and harsh swearing as a part of the heroine's overall linguistic project, which seeks to reveal the most chilling and base elements of oppression. The fact that the books seems to

have an obvious cultural agenda and political bent also distinguishes it from the texts by Calvino, Nabokov, and Borges.

I would argue that these differences do not problematize Acker's inclusion in the genealogy, but constitute an instance in which variations on the Borgesian approach to Berkeley's immaterialism are highly obvious. This novel includes a reader figure who creates the meaning of a textual universe in her own mind; that this textual universe has obvious connections to the real world does not negate the essential situation of the main character's engagement with the outside world, or textual world, which is deeply immaterialist. It is also an interesting place to reflect on the trajectory of this genealogy across time. The short stories of Borges were published in the 1940s; Nabokov's novel was published in 1962; Calvino's in 1979, and Acker's in 1986. Each text reworked Borges's treatment of immaterialism in terms that fit the overall novel, but remained true to the trope of a reader whose engagement with a text is such that its reality is located entirely inside his or her psyche. It is true that Acker's novel has ethical concerns and is quite obviously part of a feminist project that extends beyond Acker and does not need Borges; however, the ethical concerns of Acker's novel are not immediately relevant to her use of Borgesian techniques.

I believe that *Don Quixote (Which Was A Dream)* is also a useful place to conclude the genealogy. Borges's approach to George Berkeley's immaterialist position on idealism saw some of its most significant iterations in *Pale Fire*, *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*, and Acker's *Don Quixote*. Each novel has its fundamental differences, and yet the manner in which they appropriate Borges's original use of the immaterialist philosophy is essentially the same. The metaphor that connects the human mind and the outside world to the figures of a reader and a text are highly important for the ways in which all of these texts come to be known as

metafictional. This is due to the fact that the location of the meaning or reality of a text within the mind of a reader is precisely what allows for greater commentary on the state of reading in and of itself to unfurl.

While the genealogy here ends with Kathy Acker, it radiates into the future of literature in the form of other writers, writings, and theorists that adopted a stance on reading similar to the one espoused in the meta-narratives of each text considered in this paper. A profoundly important question underscores these works when considered in conjunction with one another: if the meaning of reading fiction is, in fact, based entirely on subjective impression, and if the derivation of truth and meaning in novels and short stories is only relevant on the level of the individual, how do writers contend with this in the present day, and how might they contend with it in the future? Arguably, the radical subjectivity that serves as the theoretical foundation for each of these works is part of a nihilistic project: insofar as each reader's perspective is equally valid and serves to "create" the written work unto himself or herself, it would seem that a shared discourse or dialogue about literature would be functionally meaningless, and the meaning of each work simply "ends" with every individual reading of it.

By their very nature, the texts considered in this work resist being defined summarily as part of a larger category or genre of literature (except, perhaps, "literature that comments on literature") or as including a set of shared features, beyond a desire to serve as both fiction and literary theory. Because each work stands alone, and because of what is implicit within the content of the work itself, it is left to the individual writer to interpret and build on the issues presented in *Pale Fire, If On A Winter's Night A Traveler,* the short stories of Borges, and *Don Quixote (Which Was A Dream)*. On one hand, the theoretical implications of these works might constitute an instant in which the writer, looking to Borges, Nabokov, Acker, and Calvino as a

foundation for their own writing – as the latter three writers did with Borges – must be entirely self-reliant in their engagement with these works, unable to default to tradition or shared notions of the function and meaning of these texts. She or he would be writing in a vacuum of sorts, in which he or she is forced to invent their own literary values or do away with any notion of right or wrong reading or writing. On the other hand, this might allow for greater freedom of writing, interpreting, and theorizing. The express project of Borges, and the avant-garde literary circles with which he was associated, was to redefine and re-examine what language and literature could do. This sparked a tradition defined only by a categorical resistance to tradition, to being bound by concerns of evaluation based in literary theory that could easily become outmoded or stale. Works within this tradition resist this problem by asking timeless questions about the very essence of fiction reading in and of itself; that these questions are never easily answered reflects their position of fundamental subjectivity, allowing for a seemingly infinite amount of conclusions to be drawn from them, or, perhaps, no conclusion at all.

This, I believe, constituted a significant shift in the history of literature: the innovations of certain seminal twentieth century writers created a situation in which each of their works constituted a sort of genre unto itself, due largely to the degree of self-reflexivity and self-awareness within each work. Of these writers, Jorge Luis Borges was certainly one of the most radically innovative and most significant, both in terms of his widespread recognition during his life and in the influence he held, and continues to hold, over other writers. A very small fraction have been acknowledged in this paper; any attempts at listing or discerning all of the writers who are indebted to his work would, undoubtedly, be incomplete. What is perpetually compelling about Borges, in light of this, is that he envisioned and espoused an image of himself not as a great writer, but as one ultimately defined by a love of reading: Borges was a reader before a

writer. In this way, the very figure of Borges himself is an embodiment of "the death of the author" that haunts literary theory of the twentieth century. In his writings, Borges aligns himself with his readers: he, too, is one impelled to take journeys into unreal worlds and mental spaces made possible only by the written word. This is evident in his self-fictionalization and also in his non-fictional works, in which he writes passionately of himself as a reader. Borges made no claims as to what literature was or the correct way to read or approach a text; the overarching impression he gives is that of one as delightfully mystified by the entire institution of reading and writing itself as any of his readers. He espoused the virtues of reading for pleasure, and was not selective in what he read. He read for the sake of reading, and provided more questions than answers about the notion of reading in and of itself.

Perhaps a definitive resistance to stable theories of literature, then, is not a nihilistic outcome of a distinctly twentieth century compulsion to ruthlessly innovate and create works which question their own meaning. It could be, instead, a mode of literary engagement that reveals a desire to take pleasure in the mysteries of the textual world – a space committed to honoring the fantastical, the unnecessary, the impossible, and the speculative within every reader. These works, I would argue, champion the reader as the true hero of every fictional work. The reader begins a quest every time she or he turns to the first page, subjecting themselves to the author's experimentations. He or she might not be left on stable ground – for the texts considered in this paper, he or she will likely come away with more questions than answers, and might be at a loss to easily describe the work they just encountered. That, of course, is not a problem; these works defy understanding by their own design, and in doing so raise issues of what it means to "understand" any text.

There are no solid or stable answers to the issues raised in these works, but there are – ideally – instances in which the mind of a reader and the world of a text become one, moments which exist independently of the need to classify a text's function or meaning. This is the instant in which the main character of *In On A Winter's Night A Traveler* decides to marry Ludmilla; it is the fanaticism of Charles Kinbote, possessed as he is by John Shade; it is the moment in which the fictional Borges peers into the Aleph and when, in another tale, he begins to understand that the reality of Tlön is leaking into the reality of Earth. In these moments, each of these readers is overcome by a textual world to the extent that "understanding" the world becomes meaningless, and they have subjected themselves entirely to the written word as a space of positive mystification. The lack of answers or stability inherent to these works is, ultimately, a love note to that which defies rational understanding and to the ability of literature to defy any and all perceived limitations of what the written word can do. With each reading of a Borges story, a new Borges story is written; because of this, these works and all that claim them as influential will continue to enchant and mystify, and their meaning and truth, in their beautiful mutability, will continue to radiate outward.

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