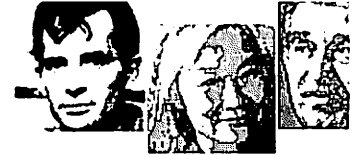
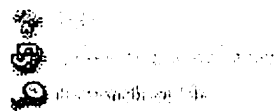


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"Tlön, Pilgrimages, and Postmodern Banality"

Critic: Ian Almond

Source: *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Vol. LXXV, No. 2, April, 1998, pp. 229-35.

Criticism about: Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), also known as: B. Suarez Lynch, B. Lynch Davis, H(onorio) Bustos Domecq, Honorio Bustos Domecq, F(rancisco) Bustos, F. Bustos, Francisco Bustos

Nationality: Argentine

[(essay date 1998) *In the following essay, referring to Borges's story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," Almond considers Borges's relation to postmodernism.*]

When Heidegger was asked in an interview whether he could provide a single maxim for his readers to keep in their heads as they worked their way through his difficult, at times elusive writings, he replied (and the fact that he gave a reply at all is surprising): 'Possibility is higher than actuality'.¹ It is a maxim which--to use a very un-Heideggerian verb--sums up many of the philosopher's own preoccupations concerning *Dasein* and the world: the refutation of substance (*ousia*) and doing (*praxis*) as being ontologically superior to thought and thinking (*theoria*), along with the dismissal of a single objective reality 'out there' in which one must 'realize' one's plans and projects. It is also, however, a maxim which might have been uttered by one of the metaphysicians of Tlön.

How much Borges knew of Heidegger (or even cared) is anyone's guess--in his entire *Obras Completas* he refers to *Sein und Zeit* twice, implying at least a nodding familiarity with the German's precocious foray into the very problems of time and reality which, ten years later, Borges himself would be writing about on the sixth floor of his Buenos Aires library. Whether Borges was ever able to appreciate the word 'postmodern' (he died in 1986) is also difficult to ascertain--

in at least one discussion, he publicly declared 'Deconstructionism' to be 'a mistake, a really pedantic mistake',² although Borges' responses to any kind of criticism or theory in these discussions are often disparaging and dismissive, the poet's stereotypical response to the academic. The intention, however, is not to try and find out exactly what the historical personage Borges was thinking while he wrote '*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*', but whether such a text can correspond in any way to the kinds of things which have been going on in discourse since Nietzsche. Borges has already told us, in his various praises of ambiguity, that we are not to ask the writer questions: 'God must not engage in theology: the writer must not destroy by human reasonings the faith that art requires of us'.³ Again, whether Borges wanted to write something analogous to what Derrida calls the 'event' or 'rupture' in the history of thinking--that historic moment when 'language invaded the universal problematic' and everything 'became discourse'⁴--is not the question. What the story itself has to say in the presence of such texts as (for example) 'Structure, Sign and Play', *Letter on Humanism* and *A Genealogy of Morals*--this is the object of our attention.

Borges' story is uncanny, in the most German sense of the word (*unheimlich*, lit. 'unhomely'). It acquaints us with something which is not of this world. Its account of a fictitious encyclopedia suddenly appearing in the narrator's own 'reality', bringing with it an imaginary universe with laws and worldviews diametrically opposed to our own ideas of 'common-sense', has a definite, unnerving quality about it. The peculiar, resigned tone of the narrator; the strange, inexplicable deaths; the nebulous, quasi-Masonic society of *Orbis Tertius* and its secret, calculating deliberations; the mysterious objects or *hrönnir* which begin to appear everywhere; the blending of 'fictitious' names (some of them made up from lists of Borges' family tree and close friends) with 'factual' ones (De Quincey, Berkeley, Lucerne, Memphis); all these contribute to give the text an otherworldly feel, as if it, too, were a product of *Tlön*.

This would not be too hard to believe. Borges' story is a story about books, a story full of literary cross-references and philosophical quotations, a story where one always refers to an encyclopedia in order to justify a truth-claim, never to reality. It is a story about a snippet from an encyclopedia which ultimately leads to the discovery of another encyclopedia, which in turn promises to deliver yet another ('de aquí a cien años alguien descubrirá los cien tomos de la Segunda Enciclopedia de *Tlön*').⁵ Texts upon texts upon texts, spiralling endlessly into infinity.

The question, then, which Borges' story raises for the contemporary reader, reared on Heidegger, Nietzsche and Derrida, is so obvious that to cite it seems banal: is Borges' *Tlön* the postmodern vocabulary, creeping surreptitiously into our dictionaries of common-sense, infecting everything with its distrust of materialism, instilling into everything we do its indifference to truth? And if so, what idea are we meant to have of *Tlön*, the 'reality' to which we 'have longed to yield'? Menacing, ominous, inevitable? Does Borges' carefully-crafted text constitute a warning or an endorsement of a new age? Are we to laugh or cry?⁶ This all rather depends on how much the world of *Tlön* resembles what we construe to be the Postmodern. At first glance, nothing might seem farther from the truth: 'Las naciones de ese planeta son--congénitamente--idealistas' (21). *Tlön* is a cosmos subject to intimate laws, to a 'rigour' which smacks of rigid, closed totalities, an 'uncountable number' of doctrines, not that different in structure from the rationalist systems of Hegel, Descartes or Aquinas. Even the

controversies seem similar to our own--the 'escándalo' which 'el materialismo' arouses is not unlike the sort of criticism Darwin, Freud or the Dadaists had to undergo. The heresiarch's daring analogy, proffered to sustain the 'scandalous' thesis that objects exist independently of their being observed, might have been taken straight out of St. Anselm or Boethius. However, as we soon learn, it is not the belief-systems themselves but the attitude cultivated towards them that distinguishes Tlön from our own all-too-empirical reality:

El hecho de que toda filosofía sea de antemano un juego dialéctico, una *Philosophie des Als Ob*, ha contribuido a multiplicarlas. Abundan los sistemas increíbles, pero de arquitectura agradable o de tipo sensacional.

(23)

Despite the mention of 'dialectical games', suggesting a Hegelian progress towards a certain goal, we do find ourselves uncannily close to Wittgenstein's 'language games', autonomous value-systems which always generate their meaning *internally*, without trying to correspond or refer to a reality or truth 'outside' in order to justify their existence. The narrator continues:

Los metafísicos de Tlön no buscan la verdad ni siquiera la verosimilitud: buscan el asombro. Juzgan que la metafísica es una rama de la literatura fantástica.

(24)

It is a metaphysics which would certainly fit Lyotard's definition of the postmodern as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. Tlön is a world where nothing has to be taken seriously. Its various doctrines, proposed by all manner of *Weltanschauungen*, are judged purely on their pragmatic and/or aesthetic bases (i.e. if they 'astound'). Whether they coincide with a truth or 'reality' out there is considered irrelevant. This does, admittedly, create something of a difficulty in the story--if there is no 'reasoning' on Tlön, only an 'uncountable number' of doctrines, then why does materialism encounter such a 'scandalous reception' amongst those whom Borges mischievously calls 'los defensores del sentido común' (25)? If there are no dialectical games which actively seek the truth, then why are people so angry about the particular reality suggested by materialism? The answer, presumably, might be that materialism contests the fundamental tenet of Tlön's innumerable doctrines: that Thinking is Being. Materialism insists on the unalterable existence of substance even when it is no longer perceived. As we already know, no-one on Tlön believes 'en la realidad de los sustantivos' (22). The world is 'sucesivo, temporal, no espacial' (21). The 'real' is whatever we perceive or imagine--once we perceive it no longer, it ceases to be. Materialism would be the exact contrary of this--in the heresiarch's analogy, the nine lost copper coins still exist, even when they are out of sight.

In one sense, the difference in Borges' story between Tlön and the narrator's world does teach us something about what postmodernism means in a world still rife with passionate ideologies. Postmodernism is not so much an '-ism' in itself as a means of looking at other '-isms'. It does not expect the Islamic fundamentalist or the Southern Baptist or the Neo-nazi to change their *beliefs*, but simply the way they talk about them. It does not ask totalities to dismantle themselves and dissolve into a nihilistic pool of non-belief; it simply wants them

to 'lighten up' a little, to stop talking (as Tlön's innumerable doctrines did long ago) about words like Truth and Reality with such competitive seriousness, as if they were the only things that mattered. Like Tlön, Postmodernism wants the world's totalizers to acknowledge, once and for all, that one cannot arrive at any kind of 'truthful knowledge about the ways of the world'.⁷ Bereft of this ancient *raison d'être*, most totalities find themselves scratching their heads in a postmodern age, wondering why they should bother to exist at all. Tlön already had the answer long ago; truth-claims aren't supposed to *convince*, they were made to delight. Why bother chasing after boring old Truths and Realities? Astonishment and uncertainty, as both Tlön and Derrida might have said, are so much more fun.

An Atrocious and Banal Reality

So in Tlön we have, like the Postmodern, 'no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions'.⁸ A world of mystery, perhaps, but also a world of truthlessness and 'endless play,' one which will seep into our own and colour everything we do with its own inimitable, ironic hue. Reading '**Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius**' a second time does give it the feel of a horror story--the slow succumbing of our familiar 'homely' reality to an alien order unsettles and disturbs. The curiosity of Borges' story lies in the fact that even after we learn of Tlön's earthly, calculated origins, the uncanniness of the tale remains untouched. In the Twenties and Thirties the American popular novelist H. P. Lovecraft wrote a series of horror novels called the Cthulu series, in which a secret and malevolent hierarchy of demigods, hidden from the world, wreak their evil designs and chaotic whims upon an unsuspecting reality. Towards the end of these novels the main characters invariably lose their minds, as the more one learns of this ancient evil, the more deranged one becomes, until madness finally ensues. The most powerful god of them all, significantly, is a blind, cackling idiot.

Borges' story begins with a conversation after dinner. It is a relaxed, easy beginning to a tale and we quickly forget, as we move on with the story, the subject of that fateful conversation which was to provoke Bioy Casares' quotation and ultimately lead the narrator to Tlön (or Tlön to the narrator):

... nos demoró una vasta polémica sobre la ejecución de una novela en primera persona, cuyo narrador omitiera o desfigurara los hechos e incurriera en diversas contradicciones, que permitieran a unos pocos lectores--a muy pocos lectores--la adivinación de una realidad atroz o banal.

(13)

Is Borges taking us for a ride? The disfiguring and invention of 'facts' is a regular feature throughout the story (Borges' wonderful, sadly fictitious German title *Lesbare und lesenswerthe Bemerkungen ueber das Land Ukkbar in Klein-Asien*, for example). And yet the suggestion, so early in the story, seems almost too obviously placed to be taken seriously: is '**Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius**' itself the first-person novel? Can we trust the narrator who is speaking to us--how do we know what details he is omitting, what facts he is disfiguring? Is he telling us the 'truth' even at this very moment? And what exactly would be the 'realidad atroz o banal' mentioned, with such teasing vagueness, at the end of the passage?

However unreliable the narrator may be, his own attitude towards Tlön changes quite dramatically from the beginning of the story to the end. The initial reaction--one of baffled, then consuming curiosity--eventually transforms itself into 'un vertigo asombrado y ligero' as he stumbles across the eleventh volume of the first edition:

Ahora tenia en las manos un vasto fragmento metódico de la historia total de un planeta desconocido, con sus arquitecturas y sus barajas, con el pavor de sus mitologías y el rumor de sus lenguas, con sus emperadores y sus mares ... , con su controversia teológica y metafísica.

(19)

The narrator is in rapturous delight as the incommensurable richness of an *unfamiliar* planet lies before him (possibility, remember, always being higher than actuality). We could speak about the allure of the non-present here, the Proustian sweetness of the sign which is never quite signified, the world which is never quite realized, the necessary incompleteness which Tlön is at that moment. Perhaps this explains the startlingly different tone of the narrator towards the end of the story, as he speaks about the invasion of Tlön in increasingly negative and fearful terms:

El contacto y el hábito de Tlön han desintegrado este mundo. Encantada por su rigor, la humanidad olvida y torna a olvidar que es un rigor de ajedrecistas, no de angeles. Ya ha penetrado en las escuelas el (conjetural) 'idioma primitivo' de Tlön; ya la enseñanza de su historia armoniosa (y llena de episodios conmovedores) ha obliterado a la que presidió mi niñez ...

(35)

And of the sciences:

Han sido reformadas la numismática, la farmacología y la arqueología. Entiendo que la biología y las matemáticas aguardan también su avatar ... Una dispersa dinastía de solitarios ha cambiado la faz del mundo.

(36)

Hardly the advent of a glorious New Age. The various sciences and dogmas fall, one by one, in a way uncannily similar to the intellectual erosion which science's credibility has suffered in the advent of postmodernism: science, once the vanquisher of myths, has become for many people a myth in its own right, finding itself relegated now to the status of just another informed opinion, just one more language game amongst many. Again, a host of possibilities presents itself on reading these passages. Tlön might be the sweeping promise of the Third Reich or the Great Leap Forward, attractive and alluring at the outset, ultimately destructive and disenchanting as soon as it is badly translated into 'reality'. Or Tlön might represent the inevitable fate of every Idealism which seeks to realize its values in the world of matter--the Platonic idea, descending into the world of forms, quite loses its charm. Is Tlön a false prophet, promising fantasy and astonishment but bringing only disarray, chaos and subjection? Or

does Tlön's fate show what happens when no-one believes any more in the 'realidad de los sustantivos'?

To recap: in Borges' story, the narrator's world encounters a different language game, one which it immediately falls in love with. It yields to Tlön and slowly, move by move, begins to learn a new set of rules--the refutation of reality, the abandonment of epistemological certainties, not to mention the denial of the persistence of substance beyond perception--and soon 'el mundo será Tlön'. The story ends ominously and unclearly: the narrator is visibly reluctant to participate in the general enthusiasm aroused by the 'la Obra Mayor de los Hombres', without explaining why. The only real clue we have to the nature of the narrator's fears lies in his references to the 'rigor' of Tlön, a rigour 'de ajedrecistas, no de ángeles', hinting perhaps at an unspoken resentment of man-made religions. The mysteries of Tlön are artificial, not transcendental--'artificial' in the sense that they have been fabricated by a 'una dispersa dinastía de solitarios' and financed by an atheist and freethinker. We already know from the story that Buckley's own personal involvement in the Tlön project does seem something akin to the Tower of Babel in its aims and goals--the desire to prove to this 'Dios no existente' that man can be His equal, that he is just as capable of creating miraculous works as the Creator Himself. In a surprising number of Borges' most important stories this idea reappears, where human beings take on the role and responsibilities of an absent God, trying (and not always in vain) to perform a deictic role in the affairs of society. In 'La Lotería en Babilonia' a secret organization determines the various fates of an entire city through a non-monetary lottery whose rewards and punishments involve favours, murders, promotions, marriages and are always delivered in secret, so that it is impossible to know whether a piece of good fortune has been determined by the lottery or by chance. In 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' an Irish politician, found by his fellows to be guilty of treachery, agrees to his own public assassination through the re-enactment of the play *Julius Caesar*, thus displaying a Christ-like foreknowledge of a death he knows he must endure. In 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' the Orbis Tertius society takes over God's role as the Maker of Mysteries--creating a mystery which comes to entrance the minds of men and to enslave them. Slowly, through scattered *hrönir*, chance quotations, solitary volumes stumbled across in dead men's libraries, the artificial mysteries of Tlön contaminate the narrator's world and make it its own, a situation about which the narrator clearly expresses no joy. Unlike Tlön's sea of newfound converts, the narrator sees it for what it is: not a religion but an elaborate game, devised by earthly 'chessmasters' and set loose upon a world yearning for novelty and 'astonishment'.

Derrida puts before us two different ways of considering the 'status of discourse'. There is the nostalgic way, the one that seeks the 'truth'--that is, reassurance, origins, the end of play. It is the path one would take who seeks to know ultimate answers and explanations. Derrida calls this the 'sad' and 'guilty' choice--in contrast to

... the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth and without origin, which is offered to an active interpretation.⁹

It reaffirms a widely-held credo in postmodern thinking, namely that the Truthless world of the Postmodern is an exciting, lively, uncertain one, as opposed to

the 'ruined', closed world of the transcendentalizing totalities where 'play' is of minimal significance or even nonexistent. Which path do we want to take? Derrida seems to be asking. Rousseauistic boredom, guilt and sadness? Or Nietzschean joy, chance and un-sureness? Do we want to carry on, trying to 'decipher' the Grand Truth we feel to be somewhere out there, or should we simply abandon it altogether? For Derrida--as for Nietzsche--there really is no doubt as to which would be the more 'interesting' choice.

Exactly how interesting it is to live in a world with no ultimate truth, no truth-seekers, no facts outside language or sense of the mystical (what Wittgenstein defined in the *Logico-Tractatus* as the 'sense of the world as a limited whole') still remains, at least for the narrator of '**Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius**', undecided. We have already seen how Tlön's affinities with the world of the Postmodern amount to three--a deliberate indifference towards Truth, an awareness of the limited, distorting and radically unique nature of our own perspectiveness ('el hombre que se desplaza modifica las formas que lo circundan' [27]), the belief that one doesn't refer to reality, one makes it, and the related idea that this kind of reality which thought or language produces is by no means ontologically inferior to the reality scientists or materialists talk about ('thought', Borges writes, being 'a perfect synonym for the cosmos'). The disparaging attitude of postmodernism towards truth-seeking--that is, in Rortyan terms, the futile attempt to overcome one's own finite cultural contingency by arriving at a 'final vocabulary' which would explain all the other ones which have led up to it--is best summed up by Nabokov:

... The unfortunate image of a 'road' to which the human mind has become accustomed (life as a kind of journey) is a stupid illusion. We are not going anywhere, we are sitting at home. The other world surrounds us always and is not at all at the end of some pilgrimage.¹⁰

The idea that there is something at the end of the pilgrimage that we must seek, something which would somehow justify all our toils, is illusory for the postmodernist and rooted in the belief that there is something 'outside' the world (i.e. outside language) which has to be discovered and described (*mimesis*), not invented or unveiled (*aletheia*). Borges takes this one step further in Tlön, where language and thought literally create matter. Tlön is a world awash with private languages and dialectical games, none of them with the slightest interest in seeking the truth. In a postmodern world, the whole idea of pilgrimage is rendered vain by the fact that there is nothing 'extra-discursive' or 'extra-linguistic' at the end of it--no matter how many leaps of faith he takes, the pilgrim can never really leave his language game or transcend his perspectiveness, he will always be 'sitting at home'. Perhaps this is the banal, atrocious reality which will one day 'disintegrate' our world; perhaps, echoing Nabokov, what we see is all there is. No hidden Truths or gods, no ultimate Realities, no mystical 'beyonds', just an endless number of games, played by an endless number of (seated) chessmasters.

Notes

¹Thomas Sheehan, 'Reading a Life: Heidegger and Hard Times', in the *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993), 93.

²Carlos Cortinez, ed., *Borges the Poet* (Fayetteville: Univ. of Arkansas Press,

1986), 83.

³André Malraux's Introduction to Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (London: Penguin, 1964), 10.

⁴Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1995), 280.

⁵Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Madrid: Alianza, 1982), 36. All references are to this edition.

⁶A question posed by Elizabeth Ermarth in *Sequel To History* (Princeton: Univ. of Princeton Press, 1992), 153.

⁷T. Docherty, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 36.

⁸Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 27.

⁹Derrida, *op. cit.*, 292.

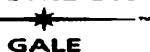
¹⁰Quoted in Ermarth, *op. cit.*, at the beginning of the book.

Source: Ian Almond, "Tlön, Pilgrimages, and Postmodern Banality," in *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Vol. LXXV, No. 2, April, 1998, pp. 229-35.

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