Borges and the Idea of Utopia

By JAMES E. IRBY

Il n'y a pas de hors-texte.
Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*
. . . ce lieu obscur qui ne songe interminablement qu'à se déchiffrer.
Jean Ricardou, *Problèmes du nouveau roman*

Toward the end of 1938, under circumstances he has told in interviews and fictionalized in his story "El Sur," Borges nearly died of septicemia. This delirious ordeal, which also caused him to fear for his sanity, soon was revealed, however, as an incredible stroke of good fortune. Prompted by a desperate resolve to test his mental capacity, the convalescent Borges undertook to write something in a new genre, to write—as he said later—"something new and different for me, so that I could blame the novelty of the effort if I failed."[1] This new work was the story "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," the first of a rich and dazzling series of metaphysical tales with which, after some years of relatively scant and tentative writings, Borges did considerably more than just reaffirm his creative powers. In May 1939, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" was published in Victoria Ocampo's review *Sur*. Exactly one year later, in the same journal, appeared the next such tale, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," which subsequently opened the volumes *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1941) and *Ficciones* (1944). This leading position was not, therefore, a matter of chronological but rather of theoretical priority, for perhaps more fully than any other of his fictions, it declares their basic principles, characteristically making of that declaration a fictionalized essay, a creation which studies itself. The subject, fittingly enough, is the enigmatic emergence of a new man-made universe, systematically designed and inserted into reality. For this reason, and for other reasons I will mention shortly, I would like to discuss this work in relation to the idea of utopia. My discussion will be divided into three parts: (1) some of the senses in which the world of Tlön is a utopia, (2) some anticipations of this idea in Borges' earlier writings, and (3) some of the ways in which the presentation of Tlön is dramatized. But first, a reminder of the tale's plot.

I.

In a kind of memoir mingling essayistic discourse with anecdote, real names with inventions, Borges tells how his friend Bioy Casares discovers in an anomalous copy of a pirated edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* an interpolated entry on a supposed country in Asia Minor called Uqbar, which diligent consultations elsewhere fail to

verify. The entry mentions that the epics and legends of Uqbar never refer to reality but to the imaginary regions of Mlejnas and Tlön. Later Borges himself comes upon the eleventh volume of a so-called *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*, which bears the unexplained inscription "Orbis Tertius" and contains fragmentary though methodical information on what is now said to be an entire planet. Astonished and delighted like a true bibliophile, after referring to various friends' polemics over the dubious existence of the other volumes and to vulgar distortions by the popular press, all of which the reader is presumed to recall, Borges proceeds to outline the *Weltanschauung* of this "brave new world."

Whereas our common concept of reality is materialistic, i.e. presupposes the independent existence of material objects and beings that the mind registers like a camera, Tlön's universal philosophy is a kind of ultra-Berkeleyan idealism according to which the only realities are mental perceptions. Not even space exists, only a dimensionless continuum of thought. This is first exemplified in an account of the planet's languages, which determine the nature of all its disciplines. In Tlön there are no nouns, only adjectives (qualities) or verbs (acts or processes), variable aggregates of which may comprise the entities designated by our nouns, and countless other entities as well. Both these and other constructs ranging all the way from causal links to scientific or theological systems are completely metaphorical, are "poetic objects," since only instantaneous perceptions are real, not their subsequent connections in memory. Hence in Tlön philosophies proliferate and compete wildly like avant-garde poetic styles, although the hypothesis that the universe is one supreme mind, that all phenomena are the somehow-associated thoughts of that mind, seems to prevail. The most scandalous heresy in Tlön is, of course, materialism, which the languages of Tlön can scarcely even formulate as an *aporia*. Borges' summary of this world concludes with a dizzying account of how its "things" multiply by thought and, conversely, vanish when they are forgotten.

To the sections on Uqbar and Tlön, Borges adds a concluding postscript already dated "1947" in the original 1940.[2] Here curious discovery and eager discussion give way to a somewhat troubled report that Tlön has begun to intrude into our own everyday world. A letter discovered by chance reveals the history of its laborious creation over a period of centuries by anonymous groups of scholars, first in Europe, later in the New World. Strange objects from Tlön are found, the entire *First Encyclopaedia* is unearthed and widely excerpted, and everywhere people yield to the enchantment of an orderly, man-made universe of the mind come to supplant the divinely incomprehensible reality we know. One by one our sciences are reformed, our very memories replaced by others. In a hundred years, a projected *Second Encyclopaedia* will appear, announcing the even more ample but as yet undefined realm of Orbis Tertius, by which time our world will already be Tlön. As these events unfold, Borges finally assumes a resigned indifference, idly correcting his never to be published translation of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*, which the advent of Tlön and its marvellous tongues will surely obliterate.

All this, rich with enticing allusion and ellipsis, is compressed into some twenty-odd pages. Even in rapid synopsis one can see that "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" comprises many interwoven levels of meaning whose relationships alone are exceedingly complex, not to speak of the levels themselves. Already a kind of palimpsest, a many-layered paraphrase of other paraphrases, the tale tends to make any critical résumé and commentary both desperately tautological and inaccurate, for at every turn one is also faced with sly reversals and subversions of the very schemes the work sets forth. For the moment, however, let us assume that, at least insofar as exposition is concerned, there are two main levels, one being that of the narrator's own progressive involvement with the events he relates, and the other (contained within the first) being that of the description and chronicle of Tlön itself.

The theoretical section of this second level (the summary of the Eleventh Volume) offers the outlines of a special kind of utopia, a most pure and extreme utopia, so to speak. Here is no new social order, but rather a new natural order, a whole new epistemology, a new relationship between mind and phenomena, worked out in myriad consequences of detail. Furthermore, this is done not in some single futuristic *roman de moeurs*, but in a vast, many-volumed compendium which registers not only the science and mathematics, the languages and literary theory, of an idealist cosmos, but also (according to certain oblique references by the narrator) its no doubt singular flora and fauna, topography and architecture. Literally, Tlön is an *ideal* world (a world of ideas) and a *utopia* (a no place, a world outside spatial coordinates). In its denial of matter, it constitutes a drastic case of what all utopias imply: the world upside down, a mirror image of habitual reality. (Remember the tale's first sentence: "I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia."[3]) This paradox (etymologically the word "paradox" means "contrary to opinion," that is, to ordinary opinion) is paralleled by another which also relates to an essential aspect of utopia. Utopias represent a convergence of reason and reality and are presumably objects of desire. In Tlön thought and reality are *one*, but desire or hope or even distraction may engender more or less faithful *duplicates* of anything (or duplicates of duplicates, and so on). These are known as *hrönir*, which, among other properties, have a profound temporal effect. In the narrator's incomparable words:

> The methodical fabrication of *hrönir* . . . has performed prodigious services for archaeologists. It has made possible the interrogation and even the modification of the past, which is now no less plastic and docile than the future.[4]

He then points out the delicate differences between *hrönir* of various degrees: "those of fifth degree are almost uniform; those of ninth degree become confused with those of the second; in those of the eleventh there is a purity of line not found in the original."[5]

At this point, as it draws to a close, the whole scholarly review of the Eleventh Volume works up to a wild crisis beneath its calm, detached language. The idea of proliferation, of the endless rivalry and replacement of unverifiable mental constructs, was earlier introduced by referring to theories; now it operates with pencils, rusty wheels, gold

masks, buildings. The gradual shift in vocabulary to familiar terms we construe as "concrete" forces us with growing perplexity to realize what is happening, to read these passages over and over, i.e. to produce our own succession of textual *hrönir*. Furthermore, it would seem that in a world where supposedly "a later state of the subject . . . cannot affect or illuminate the previous state,"[6] forms and moments nevertheless minutely substitute for one another in a headlong rush toward indistinguishability, toward chaos. And yet, we are told, this world has been codified in an encyclopedia, this spaceless world divided into northern and southern hemispheres.

The narrator caps his summary of the Eleventh Volume with a very brief description of how objects fade and disappear *from view* when forgotten. The idea of proliferation is thus abruptly juxtaposed with that of loss, and, retroactively, the idea of forgetting suggests that the preceding discussion of *hrönir* was, at least in part, an extended metaphor of the processes of memory, as well as of historiography. In his recent conversations with Richard Burgin, Borges recalls how, when a child, he heard his father speak of his own childhood memories as only memories of other memories, like a pile of coins each of whose effigies imperceptibly distorts the one before, moving further and further away from the now-unknown original.[7] This "saddening thought," already a contradictory union of proliferation and loss like the idea of the *hrönir*, is also found on a magnified scale at the end of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."

Borges' utopia is an idealistic one because that philosophy represents, for him, a victory of mind over matter, over the "hard and fast," over all inert resistance and unreason. But his uncanny pursuit of its ultimate consequences, logically discarding Berkeley's coherence-lending God, swirls toward a total atomization where reason finds no foothold.[8] Already in its discursive middle section we begin to experience the story's essential drama and can glimpse at least three implications: (1) intensifying the paradox of Tlön enlarges its scope to parallel or include our perception of the story itself, (2) Tlön is also a nightmare, an "anti-utopia," and (3) its states are not so fantastic or otherworldly after all. Perhaps I can make this more clear by showing how the main levels of the story interact, particularly in the very moving (and ambiguous) final pages. But first, I would like to trace some of the intimations of utopia in previous works by Borges.

II.

Borges began his literary career around 1920 as an affiliate, first in Spain, later in Buenos Aires, of the so-called *ultraísta* movement, an enthusiastic but rather incoherent version of futurism which exalted the juxtaposition of violent metaphors as the sole poetic device. Borges, however, far from incoherent, tried to establish in his own manifestos and essays of the period a theory of metaphor based on clear philosophical principles. These writings repeatedly display three themes: (1) the use of Berkeleyan idealism to break down substantive reality—and even the continuities of space and personal identity—into a flux of immediate perceptions, (2) the combinational rearrangement of these perceptions by means of metaphor to form new poetic realities, and (3) the fervent hope that the future would bring a collective realization of his theories.

Argentine *ultraísmo* quickly evolved into another more nationalistically inspired movement now usually termed *martinfierrismo* (after its principal review, *Martín Fierro*), in which Borges also figured prominently. Now his futuristic vision ("futuristic" in the literal sense) also embraced a desire for a more lucid and authentic national literature, centered (for him) on images of the old quarters of his beloved Buenos Aires. The title essay of his book *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926) exhorts his companions to join him in that task:

> Now Buenos Aires, more than a city, is a country, and we must find the poetry and the music and the painting and the religion and the metaphysics that correspond to its greatness. That is the magnitude of my hope, which invites us all to be gods and work toward its incarnation.[9]

Here we can already glimpse something of the demiurgical, collective, and encyclopedic enterprise that engenders Tlön.

Another essay in the same volume, "Palabrería para versos," outlines his concurrent and admittedly utopian aspiration toward a language of new and more comprehensive signs:

> The world of appearances is a rush of jumbled perceptions. . . . Language is an effective arrangement of the world's enigmatic abundance. In other words, with our nouns we invent realities. We touch a round form, we see a glob of dawn-colored light, a tickle delights our mouth, and we falsely say these three heterogeneous things are one, known as an orange. The moon itself is a fiction. . . . All nouns are abbreviations. . . . The world of appearances is most complex and our language has realized only a very small number of the combinations which it allows. Why not create a word, one single word, for our simultaneous perception of cattle bells ringing in the afternoon and the sunset in the distance? . . . I know how utopian my ideas are and how far it is from an intellectual possibility to a real one, but I trust in the magnitude of the future and that it will be no less ample than my hope.[10]

This, of course, reads like a preliminary draft for the section on language and "poetic objects" in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," and is, in turn, a revision of passages from earlier *ultraísta* writings. All of these texts, placed side by side, suggest an essential oneness, a Janus-faced sense of time which in fact Borges often invoked in the 1920s by defining hope as "memory of the future"[11] or "recollection coming to us from the future."[12]

By 1930 the boom period of avant-garde solidarity and national optimism was over. The tone and concerns of Borges' work shifted, though not its underlying premises and implications. In a little-known address given in 1936 on the occasion of the four hundredth anniversary of Buenos Aires, he now spoke with uncertain pathos of his native city's mushrooming growth as a sacrifice of past and present in the name of an unknown future which hope must nevertheless somehow welcome:

> No one feels time and the past like a native of Buenos Aires. . . . He knows he lives in a city which grows like a tree, like a familiar face in a nightmare. . . . In this corner of America . . . men from all nations have made a pact to disappear

> for the sake of a new man which is none of us yet . . . . A most singular pact, an extravagant adventure of races, not to survive but to be in the end forgotten: lineages seeking darkness. [. . .] Buenos Aires imposes upon us the terrible obligation of hope. Upon all of us it imposes a strange love—a love of the secret future and its unknown face.[13]

In those years Borges had abandoned poetry and ceased to theorize about metaphor, turning instead to the problem of fiction, whose aims and devices he first examined in the volume of essays called *Discusión* (1932), one of his most fascinating and unjustly neglected works. His earlier essays had brightly proposed a salutary reduction of common realities to an immediate swarm of perceptions. In *Discusión*, however, such a state lurks as a perplexing disorder to be resolved not by metaphors or a new poetic vocabulary but by a linear discourse of oblique allusions and internal correspondences which "postulate" a coherent reality existing only by virtue of the text itself. In a key essay entitled precisely "La postulación de la realidad," Borges argues this in a most devious fashion, mingling as specimens both historical and literary texts, leaving his reader to deduce for himself that *all* discourse is "fictional." Another key essay, "El arte narrativo y la magia," concludes that imaginative or fantastic fiction is superior to other kinds because of its broader, "magical" notion of causality, linking elements by similarity and contiguity as well as by logical cause and effect.

Discusión is also the first of Borges' works to include essays of a type quite frequent in his later writings: examinations of fantastic cosmologies—the cabbala, gnosticism and (ironically, critically juxtaposed with these) the Christian conception of Hell—which, of course, are also "fictions." His interest in such theories suggests one of the reasons why Borges turned from poetry to narrative in those years: a need to treat in more dramatic form questions of human destiny, of time, illusion, and finality, and to do so within some closely reasoned world picture radically opposed to unthinking mental habit.

Another model or symbol of this enterprise was the concept of utopia, scarcely mentioned in *Discusión*,[14] but emphatically used a few years later to invoke an ideal of pure, thorough inventiveness which most fantastic literature neglected. In March 1936 he opened his review of an early volume of stories by Bioy Casares with words which anticipate the subject of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and one of the story's passages:

> I suspect that a general scrutiny of fantastic literature would reveal that it is not very fantastic. I have visited many Utopias—from the eponymous one of More to *Brave New World*—and I have not yet found a single one that exceeds the cozy limits of satire or sermon and describes in detail an imaginary country, with its geography, its history, its religion, its language, its literature, its music, its government, its metaphysical and theological controversy . . . its encyclopedia, in short; all of it organically coherent, of course, and (I know I'm very demanding) with no reference whatsoever to the horrible injustices suffered by captain Alfred Dreyfus.[15]

There is one more direct anticipation of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" worthy of note, this time in the nature of a formal prototype which not only parodied both Borges'

avant-garde theories and (before the fact) his ideas on fiction, but also showed how intimately a mad drive toward total disruption could coexist with his dreams of order. This prototype was revealed a few years ago in his remarkable preface to an anthology of writings by his late friend and mentor Macedonio Fernández (1874–1952). Onetime anarchist, genial eccentric, a kind of Charles Ives of Argentine metaphysics who improvised vast idealist negations of time and self, Macedonio became for the young *martinfierristas* a guiding spirit in disinterested speculation and absurd humor and was, in Borges' words, "the most extraordinary man I've ever known."[16]

One of Macedonio's most curious fantasies was that of becoming president of Argentina, a goal toward which he felt he should first move by very subtly insinuating his name to the populace. Presumably sometime in the 1920s, Borges and a number of friends undertook collectively to write and place themselves as characters in a novel enlarging upon these imaginary machinations, a work to be entitled "El hombre que será presidente," of which only the two opening chapters were composed. The obvious plot, relating Macedonio's efforts, all but concealed another, concerning the conspiracy of a group of "neurotic and perhaps insane millionaires"[17] to further the same campaign by undermining people's resistance through the gradual dissemination of "disturbing inventions."[18] These were usually contradictory artefacts whose effect ran counter to their apparent form or function, including certain very small and disconcertingly heavy objects (like the cone found by Borges and Amorim toward the end of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"), scrambled passages in detective novels (somewhat like the interpolated entry on Uqbar), and dadaist creations (perhaps like the "transparent tigers" and "towers of blood" in Tlön). The novel's technique and language were meant to enact as well as relate this whole process by introducing more and more such objects in a less and less casual way and by slowly gravitating toward a baroque style of utter delirium. In the end, Macedonio was in fact to reach the Casa Rosada, but, as Borges adds, "by then nothing means anything in that anarchical world."[19] From this project for an idealist's devastating rise to power, let us return to the story of Tlön.

III.

Borges' outline of "El hombre que será presidente" points up what is also one of the most striking formal aspects of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius": the mirroring of plot elements in the verbal texture of the tale. Consider, for example, Tlön's emergence. Within the story this comes about through a growing series of textual substitutions, ambiguities, revisions, and cross references which engender a whole new state of affairs and even seem to elicit rather palpable objects (more about these later). Borges' own text comprises an intricate network of word choices and juxtapositions that almost imperceptibly operate in a similar fashion. There is, of course, the mingling of real and invented names, and the narrator's self-revision in the postscript even as the *First Encyclopaedia* is revised in its second appearance. There are the word shifts I mentioned earlier, and others as well: at times a few adjectives seem to generate new degrees of "reality," one at the expense of the other. When Borges discovers the Eleventh Volume,

the hitherto merely dubious Uqbar becomes "a nonexistent country" alongside the designation of Tlön as "an unknown planet"; [20] later, however, Tlön is called "an illusory world"[21] to make way for the "still nebulous Orbis Tertius."[22] Very tenuous or even omitted indications can be curiously evocative. The name "Orbis Tertius" first appears in the Eleventh Volume stamped on "a leaf of silk paper that covered one of the color plates"; [23] this subordinate allusion to a veiled image makes the volume and the name more vivid; later one may well wonder what manner of "thing" could be pictured there. In the postscript, we learn of the slave-owning, freethinking American millionaire Ezra Buckley and his role in enlarging the secret society's project to the creation of an entire planet, for all must be on a grand scale in America.[24] This episode culminates with an abrupt syntactical leap: "Buckley was poisoned in Baton Rouge in 1828; in 1914 the society delivered to its collaborators, some three hundred in number, the last volume of the First Encyclopedia of Tlön."[25] Filling in the dark gap between these two statements, following up other hints, parallels Alfonso Reyes' alleged proposal that Borges and his friends reconstruct the Eleventh Volume's missing companions *ex ungue leonem*, a proposal which, in turn, adumbrates a basic principle of Tlön: mental projection. The very first elements in the story—the mirror, the duplicated yet "false" encyclopedia, the debated narrative whose omissions or inconsistencies (not its direct statements) allow one to *guess* its "atrocious or banal" subject—set this process in motion by reflecting one another in widening patterns of self-reference. Indeed they signal that this is a text about its own principles, about the principles of all texts. Tlön is also the world of writing, of *escritura*, which consists in the meaningful permutation and alignment of signs according to inherent laws and not in the mere transcription of some prior, nonverbal reality.[26]

The chronicle of Tlön can also be seen as a partial allegory of the emergence of Borges' own fiction over the years. The narrator's involvement with the events indicates, first of all, that Borges views his work as something revealed to him, as the heritage of many other writings over the centuries, the interplay of many more or less related texts animated by a suprapersonal spirit, with himself, Borges, serving only as their momentary reader. This conception that the literary work is really generated by the interaction of other works "dans l'espace sans frontières de la lecture"—a conception reflected in the critical theories of Tlön, in the creative method of Pierre Menard, in the essays of *Otras inquisiciones*—constitutes what Gérard Genette has called Borges' "literary utopia."[27] But why do the last two pages of the tale so strangely combine notes of triumph and doubt, why does the narrator turn away at the end?

In his radio interviews with Georges Charbonnier in 1965, Borges said that all his stories are in the manner of games with two aspects, two sides of the same coin, one comprising the intellectual possibilities of a cosmic idea, the other the emotions of anguish and perplexity in the face of the endless universe. He added that any work, in order to last, must allow variable readings.[28] In a conversation with me two years later, referring specifically to "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," Borges stressed this story's emotional side, which he defined as "the dismay of the teller, who feels that his everyday

world . . . , his past . . . [and] the past of his forefathers . . . [are] slipping away from him." Hence, he claimed, "the subject is not Uqbar or Orbis Tertius but rather a man who is being drowned in a new and overwhelming world that he can hardly make out."[29]

As the story concludes, Tlön does far more than win great droves of converts: it assumes all the obliterating scope and impetus of historical change itself, virtually annihilating the narrator, who in a hundred years, when the full transformation of our world occurs, will long be dead. Here again is the effect of simultaneous proliferation and loss. Hence the pathos of "I pay no attention to all this," the irony of translating *Urn Burial*, that magnificent set of baroque paradoxes on immortality. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is the first of a number of Borges' fictions which place an image of himself (to use Kierkegaard's phrase) "as a vanishing peculiarity in connection with the absolute requirement"[30]: Borges and the Aleph, Borges and the Zahir, Borges and the fate of Pedro Damián. This "sacrifice" lends poignant urgency to the new order enveloping him, or rather it visibly culminates an insinuation that has grown throughout the work: the mental powers, vicissitudes and vertigos of Tlön are *our own world*, our world of reality as shifting symbol, of relentless time and unknown ultimate pattern, here paradoxically turned about and fabled to help us perceive it more acutely as such. (This, by the way, would explain the words "atrocious or banal" at the beginning.) Northrop Frye has observed that all utopias present "unconscious mental habits transposed into their conscious equivalents."[31] Borges concludes one list of Tlön's inroads with the words "already a fictitious past occupies in our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty—not even that it is false,"[32] a peril of all recollection, as the *hrönir* implied, as well as an ironic reference to the feigned memoir we are being offered.

Tlön grows by revisions toward a "third orb" (which in turn implies a fourth and a fifth and so on), sprawling like some horrible map aspiring to coincide totally with the incalculable terrain it set out to represent within manageable coordinates on another plane. But this same self-revision can also be seen as the difficult virtue of a world of lucid thought, of multiple views. Gérard Genot, in his little book on Borges, believes that the narrator's lack of attention at the end signifies a loss of interest, because Tlön, now "real," has fallen from its former wealth of fictive potentialities. To this I would reply that the narrator may be rejecting what he has repeatedly noted to be a vulgarization of Tlön by the general public, who confuse its games with some kind of sacred order (a clear warning to readers and critics), and that Tlön clearly continues to evolve (in our minds). Genot goes on to observe, however, that the narrator's refuge in translation only confirms the extent of Tlön's influence, for the union of such disparate figures as Quevedo and Sir Thomas Browne into one text is but another version of its critical practices.[33] Frances Weber, in her article on fiction and philosophy in Borges, claims that Tlön negates itself by replacing its variable theories and countertheories with an inflexible totalitarian order to enter our world. Again I would point to the popular misconceptions and continuing change, but I fully agree with the conclusions she draws from

this and other stories: they are all "self-reversing tales" in which initially opposing factors coalesce and dissolve by a process of "negative thinking" that keeps us "aware of the conjectural character of all knowledge and all representation."[34] The central focus we sense but cannot grasp in the midst of all these painful and playful contrapositions might be the true utopia, the true "no place," the supreme fiction.

Princeton University

[1] James E. Irby, "Encuentro con Borges," *Revista de la Universidad de México*, XVI, no. 10, June 1962, p. 8.

[2] Then the opening words of the postscript were "I reproduce the preceding article just as it appeared in number 68 of *Sur*—jade green covers, May 1940," i.e. the very issue the reader held in his hands: an interesting *mise en abime* Borges had to renounce when the tale was reprinted in book form.

[3] *Labyrinths*, Norfolk, 1962, p. 3.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

[7] Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*, New York, 1969, pp. 10–11. Perhaps this intricately genetic memory is not unrelated to the statement which at the beginning of the tale Bioy remembers (and modifies) from the spurious encyclopedia: "Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and disseminate . . . [the] universe" (*Labyrinths*, p. 4).

[8] See in Burgin, pp. 142–43, Borges' preference for the "haziness" of philosophy over "hard and fast things." See also, in *Labyrinths*, both his espousal of idealism's unreality (pp. 207–208) and his recognition of its chaos (p. 221).

[9] *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, Buenos Aires, 1926, p. 9.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46, 48–49.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[12] *El idioma de los argentinos*, Buenos Aires, 1928, p. 183.

[13] "Tareas y destino de Buenos Aires," *Homenaje a Buenos Aires en el cuarto centenario de su fundación*, Buenos Aires, 1936, pp. 530–31.

[14] On the constructive effect of nonspecification, he writes: "how admirable that Thomas More's first remark about Utopia should be his perplexed ignorance of how long one of its bridges 'really' is" (*Discusión*, 2nd ed., Buenos Aires, 1957, p. 70).

[15] "Adolfo Bioy Casares: *La estatua casera*," *Sur*, no. 18, March 1936, p. 85.

[16] *Macedonio Fernández*, Buenos Aires, 1961, p. 15.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Labyrinths*, p. 7.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[24] It is interesting to recall that Bishop Berkeley harbored the utopian dream of founding a university in the New World to propagate his philosophy unfettered by European prejudice, a plan unrealized for lack of funds. Note also the slightly distorted reflection of the name "Berkeley" in "Buckley," the sordid millions behind the ideal cause, the atheist's desire to offer God a rival creation, the faint echoes of Lazarus Morell's sinister schemes in *Historia universal de la infamia*.

[25] *Labyrinths*, p. 15.

[26] When at last Tlön appears by way of "things" rather than texts—the compass and the cone—these turn out to be signs so elaborately involved in a system of *simpatías y diferencias* that their ultimate referent seems to be that system itself. Both indicate unseen forces, the compass pointing to our magnetic north, the cone standing for the divinity in certain religions of Tlön. Both are circular metallic artefacts, one light and vibrant, the other exceedingly dense and inert. Both are paradoxically composite, the compass designating our directions with letters from Tlön, the cone not only combining very small size with enormous weight but also posing the even greater paradox of such ponderous matter emanating from an immaterial world. (This ironic inversion of our long standing verbal habit of conceiving the divine as purely spiritual recalls Olaf Stapledon's science fiction novel, *Last and First Men*, where cloudlike Martians venerate diamonds. See Borges' note on this work in *El Hogar*, 23 July 1937, p. 30.) Such a composite nature stresses the fact that all objects, all nouns, are precarious bundles of qualities which both attract and repel one another. Just as an apocryphal text is found interpolated into a known encyclopedia at the beginning of the tale, the compass and the cone are found amid various familiar objects which lend them a certain plausibility. Moreover, the network of their attributes is woven into the classic Argentine polarity between Buenos Aires and the hinterland, which in turn suggests civilization and barbarity, Europe and the New World, past and future, et cetera. Readers sometimes assume that the compass and the cone (especially the latter) are *hrönir*, an assumption nowhere substantiated in the tale but which reflects these two objects' seeming

emergence from the preceding discussion of mental duplication and from the series of more and more "concrete" references. It should also be noted, however, that the compass and the cone, coming between Erfjord's letter and the complete First Encyclopedia, are subordinated to a larger, continuing series of varying texts (including and growing out of Borges' own, of course), and that it is these which finally impress the public and transform the world.

[27] Gérard Genette, "L'utopie littéraire," in his *Figures*, Paris, 1966, pp. 123–32.

[28] Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Jorge Luis Borges*, Paris, 1967, pp. 20–21, 132–33.

[29] Conversation recorded in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 17 November 1967. Upon discovering the Eleventh Volume, the narrator says he will not describe his feelings, "for this is not the story of my emotions but of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius," but he then proceeds to suggest their nature by means of a mystical metaphor (*Labyrinths*, pp. 6–7).

[30] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton, 1944, p. 449.

[31] Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias," *Daedalus*, Spring 1965, p. 325.

[32] *Labyrinths*, p. 18.

[33] Gérard Genot, *Borges*, Florence, 1969, pp. 33–34.

[34] Frances Wyers Weber, "Borges' Stories: Fiction and Philosophy," *Hispanic Review*, vol. XXXVI, no. 2, April 1968, pp. 126, 139, 140–41.