

Totalization, Totalitarianism, and Flön: Borges' Cautionary Tale

Djelal Kadir

The archeology of the popular is to be found in devastation, in the shattered fragments and detritus of its Roman etymology. For Latin *populus* derives literally from the verb that means "to lay waste", "to devastate", "to ravage". If the popular lexically devolves to ruin, culture as lexis and practice rebounds to cultivation and edification. Given its antithetical etymons, then, the binomial "popular culture" figures as rhetorical catachresis, some would say as oxymoron, with contradictory impulses salient in the phrase and in human history that substantiates language.

Beyond Roman Latinity, or even within it, the popular and the cultural converge, though any commensurability between the two could only exist as ideological desideratum, as politically leveraged expediency, or as marketable commodity. No matter the assuaging conjugations of the *vulgari eloquentia*, an implacable tension between the two terms of the phrase "popular culture" persists.

In Jorge Luis Borges, the insoluble ambiguities of popular culture have and will always be re-enacted. Because, in the nearly century-long trajectory of a singular life and a no-less singular literary corpus, Borges would assiduously inscribe the desultory and serendipitous fragments of the *popularis*, though he would do so in highly cultivated and peculiarly self-conscious and reflective ways. He also would perennially scrutinize the precepts of culture, and he would be no less incisive, and, as with the popular, at times no less vehement, in questioning culture's presumptions. Thus, although Borges' distinguished career dwells in the common ground of the contingent and the incidental, the logically necessary and the calculus of reason would not be neglected in his corpus. But the light Borges throws on these would most frequently be slanted through the screen of ironic subtlety. And the high seriousness of rational cogitation, like the solemnity of orthodox conviction, would invariably encounter in Borges the alembic of knowing irony.

It is a Borgesian particularity, in this regard, that between the mathematical high ratiocination of a Lönnrot and the down-to-earth abacus of a Treviranus, Borges would opt for the wily arithmetic of a

Scharlach. Between the encyclopaedia and the mirror, Borges would tend to the mirage that simultaneously mitigates and dilates both mirror and encyclopaedia beyond the cultural and popular parameters that circumscribe them. Between abstract concept and concrete example, Borges would prefer the differential that renders both problematic. Between spectral reflection and somatic reasoning, Borges would gravitate to the copula of the Greek verb *estis* that enjoins the revenant from the past and the visitation from the future. And though he would oscillate between the detection of the phenomenal and the ideation of the nominal, Borges, more often than not, would pursue the elliptical misdirection of paralipomena. And he would often conjugate the orthodox and the heterodox in the ledger of the paradox. Between the normative and the anomalous, then, Borges would seek the hybrid. And rather than dwell on the paradigmatic or the exceptional, Borges would seek the suitable and the symptomatic. Between the authentic and the *Erzatz*, Borges would prefer the invented. And, like E. A. Poe, perhaps the author most frequently cited by Borges, he would yoke the esoteric to the obvious. Now, a decade and half after his death, Borges continues to gravitate toward enigma, which is the mystery of the apparent, as his mentor Macedonio Fernández would have it in a verse Borges invokes in one of his earliest essays, "La realidad trabaja en abierto misterio" (Fernández, s. p.). And ever weary of Freud, Borges would shun the *heimlich* as much as its dialectical complement, making his popular dwelling in *El Hogar*, with the *lares familiares*, his culture's commonplaces and the *locus popularis*, the catachrestic cultural vulgate where he would find, in his own words, "una virtud que se abre camino a través de una forma a veces vulgar" (*Prólogos* 11).

In that popular ladies' home journal which was *El Hogar*, Borges would engage in purveying international literary culture to a wide circle of Argentine society during the latter half of the decade of the 1930s. He would mediate for a popular readership, as reviewer and as translator, the work of some of international High Modernism's most elite literary figures, from James Joyce to T. S. Eliot.

Inimical as the popular may be to culture, culture is just as often defined by the popular; and cultural efficacy has often depended on a critical threshold of vulgate dissemination, what the Spanish term denotes by *divulgación*. The popular and the vulgate as social synonyms define a culture more often than not, and, historically, such cultural self-definition has been inalienable from collective identity. *Volkgeist* is a more resonant term, certainly a more historically and ideologically loaded designation that evokes the perils of such synonymy or political concomitancy between culture and the populace. For Borges, especially, these ambivalences become highly complex,

as they were for his on-again, off-again idol, the great Modernist poet Leopoldo Lugones (1874-1938).

While the relationship between Borges and his older compatriot Lugones was oedipally charged with ambiguities, their ways would part as early as 1926, and Borges would not return to outright pronouncement of admiration for his precursor until the necrology he read for him following Lugones' suicide in 1938, at which point Borges declared him "the first writer of the Argentine Republic". A serious psychobiography of Borges remains to be written, a difficult task, made more difficult by his literary cult status and because of the exemplary resistance and animadversion Borges himself displayed toward psychologization of character and subject agency. When we sufficiently forget about Borges and a psychobiography should then become plausible, his relationship to Lugones will prove most compelling. Son of a psychology teacher, Borges had little use for, and strong ambivalences toward psychiatry. He read Jung, of course, whom he preferred to Freud. But he read Dr. Jung as a philosopher rather than as a psychiatric clinician. His animadversions notwithstanding, Borges himself had what seems, at least in terms of literary productivity, the help of psychoanalysis for a three-year period, starting in what was for Borges Argentina's fateful year of 1946, under the care of a Dr. Kohan Miller of dubious psychiatric training as an analyst (Woodall 150-154; 222, n. 37). In the twentieth century, psychoanalysis itself forms an intriguing chapter in the history of Argentine popular culture, a racialized and ethnically charged subject that reveals much about the cultural history of that country and the political culture of Buenos Aires, especially.

In part, the complicated differences between Borges and Lugones during the older poet's life, and after his violent death, would be a measure of the different ways in which the two poets countenanced the role of the popular in their nation's popular culture and in the national mythologies that define Argentina's collective identity. Lugones, whose early socialist liberalism would turn conservative with Fascistic vehemence, saw popular movements as the clamor of the hordes, the tumult of the rabble, usually immigrant and parvenu, what he pejoratively referred to as "la chusma". As a nationalist essentialist, Lugones would deem the popular as vitiating a *Volksgeist* that had already found its apotheosis in an identity-forming national mythology of the nineteenth-century *gaucho* and the *payador*.

Unlike Lugones, Borges, in his capacity for irony, proved more capable of co-existing with ambivalence and less anxious to disambiguate national history and its contradictions, though he was not oblivious to the ironies of his country's national mythologies. Weary

of reified illusions and naturalized *Volksgeist*, Borges would always be chary of mass populism. And he would be implacably hostile to the peoples' gullibility to demagoguery following Perón's rise to power in 1946. The decade of Peronist rule between 1946 and 1955 would, as is commonly known, alter Borges irreparably, his vehemence against the banality of Peronist populism blinding him to the complexities of political life and of the popular culture of his time, in effect traumatically severing his intellectual biography in two, before and after Perón. Thereafter, Borges would harken to a popular culture of yore, to a twilight Buenos Aires fast disappearing under what he saw as the jackboot of Peronist Fascism and the banality of patriotic gore that, no doubt, had the patrician Lugones turning in his grave.

Borges would locate popular culture, instead, in the periphery, at society's margin that harbored the elegiac and the fugitive, as Beatriz Sarlo eloquently reminds us, a cultural locus of the popular in the Deleuzian minor key. It was there, at that vanishing edge of the popular and the outer rim of the canonical, that Borges had found the *eloquentia vulgari* of an Evaristo Carriego (1883-1912) and, through him, of Almafuerte, whose real name was Pedro Bonifacio Palacios (1854-1917), and, whose work, Borges says, caused him to feel for the first time the magical fever of poetry as physical experience.

The elegiac as the popular marked Borges' work from the very beginning, starting with his first poetry collection, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), his youthful elegy to a people's Buenos Aires fast disappearing. It is in that vanishing point and in what Henry James called the palpable imaginable *visitable* past (*Preface to The Aspern Papers*, 1888) that Borges would find the touchstones and multiple inscriptions of Argentina's popular culture. All too alert to history's ironies, however, Borges, unlike, say, Martin Heidegger, would not succumb to the nostalgia of a *Volksgeist* and a *Heimat*. Though capable of the most complex philosophical intricacy and receptive to the heft of national tradition, Borges was also imbued with the lucidity and the *leggerezza* of an Oscar Wilde, who, of course, occasioned Borges' first appearance in print when, at age eleven, Borges published his Spanish translation of Wilde's "The Happy Prince" ("El príncipe feliz"). Beyond that clarity, the only thing else that bound Wilde and Borges was their uncommon attachment to their respective domineering mothers, lest it be their shared suspicion of the masses as moral force and their weariness toward the popular as political impulse.

It was at a time of ascendancy of such *Volksgeist*, during the decades of the late 1930s and early 1940s, that Borges would write some of his most powerful interrogations of the popular, and it is to

one of these fables that I would like to devote the remainder of my remarks. I am referring to his masterpiece "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" as a fable, because it is in the nature of fables to be cautionary tales. The story, which dates from 1940, is historically inscribed, and, apropos the topic of popular culture, its admonitory message is critical.

Prior to its collection in Borges' *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1941), "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" had an avatar as a fantastic tale, having formed part of the *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, which Borges, Bioy Casares, and Silvina Ocampo had edited the previous year. Earlier that year, in May, 1940, the story appeared in the periodical *Sur*, with a dateline *Salto Oriental, 1940*. With no reductive intent or wish for undue simplification, the cautionary tale Borges' fable would tell us might be summed up as follows: If popular culture is centrifugal, fragmentary, inchoate, fractional, and often fractious, all inscribed in that etymological breakage and shattering denoted by the etymon of *populus*, the contrary form of culture, that is, culture that is not popular culture, though more cogent, more cohesive, more delineated, and culturally more neatly circumscribed, may carry greater peril than the popular. And this may well be so because of the determinative conditions, ideological predicates, political precepts, and reasoned, or rationalized, concepts that underwrite the cogency of culture, thereby displacing the less coherent, fragmentary, and disheveled nature of the popular. The result is the forceful displacement of the popular by the implacably cogent and uncompromisingly totalized impulses of culture, impulses that can easily shade into the totalitarian. In fact, a certain ingenious Uruguayan critic with numerological and abecedarian acumen has parsed the acronym of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" into the spectral palinode of its French homonym: TOUT (Block de Behar 88).

Such legerdemain, often provoked by the spectral Borges himself, notwithstanding, the historical conditions at the time of the tale's composition reveal the drift of popular culture and the manipulation of popular sentiment toward totalizing and totalitarian ends. In that environment, nine months prior to the appearance of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", Borges published his essay "La biblioteca total", which would become the precursor text to his "La biblioteca de Babel", finished in Mar del Plata in 1941, as the dateline of the original indicates, and collected into *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* of that same year. If not a cautionary tale, or monitory fable, certainly these texts are allegories of totalization, parables on the perils of overweening order. One of the "hexagons" of *The Library*, in fact, carries the title *Axaxaxas mlö*, the same Aristophanic-sounding phrase

Borges uses to illustrate the "conjectural *Ursprache* of Tlön" that has no nouns, only verbs and their adverbial permutations.

Totalization would become parodically instrumentalized by Borges five years later in the panopticon of "El aleph". In the beginning of the decade of the 1940s, however, populist tendencies would be narrativized by Borges into institutional fables in which the inexorable order and master-minded ubiquity of invisible agency left little doubt about the author's prescience into his historical moment. And though Borges has often been accused of embodying a political anachronism, especially the post-Perón Borges, at the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth decades of the century Borges wielded political allegory against mass psychology and popular sentiment as wickedly as had Dante, whom he was indeed reading at the time, as he shuttled between home and that dreary municipal library on Calle Córdoba, where he had his first employment as a Kafkaesque public servant.

In his review of *Ellery Queen* in an issue of *Sur* in July of 1940, Borges would note that the world resembled more and more a nightmare each day. With the fall of Paris to the Germans in 1940, like a number of other intellectuals, Borges waxed apocalyptically. The popular sentiment in Buenos Aires was decidedly echoing the ideological precepts of Germany's National Socialist Party and its bellicose rumblings in Europe. Political opportunism was indeed setting the stage for a totalitarian regime that would harness popular fractiousness into a new national order and a popular voice that howled in unison as political culture. Tlön, then, emerges as the hyperbolic exacerbation of an ordered and totalized world. The narrative time frame of the story sets its parenthesis between the beginning and the end of World War II, with the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* documented in the story as dating to another *annus terribilis* of the twentieth century, 1914. The trinity of key elements in the tale are the spectral mirror that haunts, the encyclopaedia and its asphyxiating circumscription, and copulation.

Despite his attributing the quip on the conjugation of mirrors and copulation to his friend Bioy Casares at the opening of "Tlön", Borges had already conjured with the combination of mirrors and copula as early as 1934 in his tale "El tintorero enmascarado Hakim de Merv", when he wrote, not without some irony, in the final section of that tale, "La tierra que habitamos es un error, una incompetente parodia. Los espejos y la paternidad son abominables, porque la multiplican y la afirman" (*OC* I 327). All three elements are integral to popular culture, of course, because popular culture is a hall of mirrors, refracting, when not fractured. And an encyclopaedia is the currency

in which a culture recognizes itself in its totality through its fungible *topoi*, or vulgate commonplaces. As for copulation, Borges has given us to understand its pandemic popularity in his parodic characterization of it ("La secta del Fénix").

Unlike the error which is the Earth we inhabit, as the passage from "El tintorero enmascarado Hakim de Merv", the 1934 tale from Borges' *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935) I have just cited, would have it, the world of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is far from erratic. And if its fearful symmetry should be an error, then it is a cosmic error, perfect in its consistency, incontrovertible in its uniformity, just like the unassailable convictions that drove orderly millennial dreams into harrowing nightmares in the darkest nights of the twentieth century.

For Borges, few, if any, writers of his century anticipated those nightmares as Franz Kafka had, and Borges' first of a number of essays dedicated to the Czech master is entitled "Las pesadillas en Franz Kafka" (*La Prensa*), an essay Borges published the same year as his *Historia universal de la infamia*. Borges would, of course, go on to translate a number of Kafka's stories into Spanish, but in the texts that exacerbate the irrationality of overweening reason and the terror of implacable order, Kafka would haunt as graphemic inscription and as citational ghost. The most Kafkaesque of these writings is "The Lottery of Babylon", a parable of totalitarianism, in whose awesome architecture the sacred latrine is called Qaphqa. It is in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", however, where Borges inscribes Kafka and himself in overtly aligned propinquity.

I am referring to the last paragraph of the story, just before the anachronistic 1947 Postscript, pre-scripted as post-script in 1940, of course. The paragraph reads:

Las cosas se duplican en Tlön; propenden asimismo a borrarse y a perder los detalles cuando los olvida la gente. Es clásico el ejemplo de un umbral que perduró mientras lo visitaba un mendigo y que se perdió de vista a su muerte. A veces unos pájaros, un caballo, han salvado las ruinas de un anfiteatro (*OC* I 440).

The "classic example" of the doorway that disappears with the demise of the beggar, of course, is Kafka's "First Parable". And the last sentence, about the saving of an amphitheater, is a verbatim citation from Borges' own story "Las ruinas circulares", which also dates from 1940.

The Germany Kafka prophesied in the terror of his tales before he died in 1924 was the Germany that captured the popular imagination of Argentine popular culture and politics at the end of the

1930s and in the next decade. This is the collective captivation Borges wrote against as early as 1937 in *Sur*, and most explicitly in the October 1939 special issue of that periodical devoted to the eminent World War ("Ensayo de imparcialidad"). For Borges, the possibility of a German victory was apocalyptic indeed. His last contribution to the popular magazine *El Hogar* was for the "Opinión" page, ("Definición del germanófilo"), and it was a scathing denunciation of Nazism, at home in Argentina and abroad. These were Borges' statements in the popular and literary periodicals that were coeval with the cautionary parables of his literary production at that time, including, of course, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius".

This story could be characterized as a narrative dramatization of a cultural mis-recognition Borges seeks to parody and to critique. The key elements of this dramatization are the popular mass's capacity for being duped and the capability of a determined cabal to engender a parallel universe to the world, one which suffuses historical life and displaces it. Popular culture under these conditions emerges as the symptom of a shared delusion, or what the more recent, post-Orwellian cyber-fiction initiated by such American writers as William Gibson refer to as "consensual hallucination" that serves as the mystified matrix of culture (Gibson 8). Collective delusion, though a mis-recognition, has the sanction and legitimacy of consensus and, hence, it can operate with impunity. Borges' cautionary tale dramatizes for us this form of popular fetishization of cultural and political reality.

With wicked irony, Borges, in fact, offers the tokens of such fetishistic valuation. They are called *hrönir*, and they serve as the objective correlative of a radical idealism, which Borges parodies as "hijos casuales de la distracción y el olvido" (OC I 439). In the Eleventh Volume of that apocryphal *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*, whose first page, without place or date of publication, carries the inscription *Orbis Tertius* stamped in a blue oval, we learn that these fetishes are the tangible tokens of a totalized system, albeit only in fragment, which is what saves Borges' own universe from tautology. We read,

Ahora tenía 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 sus minerales y sus pájaros y sus peces, con su álgebra y su fuego, con su controversia teológica y metafísica. Todo ello articulado, coherente, sin visible propósito doctrinal o tono paródico (OC I 434).

The linkage of such global totality to totalitarianism is wrought by Borges in prophetic mode of the future perfect tense in what masquerades as the "Posdata de 1947" to this 1940 story. In that sabbatical

leap, Borges tropes what will have been in chronology as what was, as if it had actually been already. In actuality, he is writing in 1940 as if he were writing with the certitude of retrospect from a future that, in reality, was still unknown, "Hace diez años bastaba cualquier simetría con apariencia de orden – el materialismo dilaético, el antisemitismo, el nazismo – para embelesar a los hombres. Cómo no someterse a Tlön, a la minuciosa y vasta evidencia de un planeta ordenado?" (OC I 442). The question is rhetorical, of course, and it is doubly so. First, because, we are told, the reality of Tlön's insidious penetration of all human life begs the question and, secondly, the question can be nothing but rhetorical posed as it is as ominous portent ten years in anticipation of what the narrative pretends to be recursively relating. And though Borges the narrator is somewhat cavalier about what he perceives as inevitable, namely, that the "el mundo será Tlön" (OC I 443), even as he goes on with his translation of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urne Buriall*, Borges the Argentine author does not escape the fate of his narrator's prognostication. As if to cast this inevitability into incontrovertible truth, the Argentine government minted a farthing, a two-bit, or two-peso, coin with Borges' likeness on it in 1999 in commemoration of the centenary of Borges' birth. With this token, or what has no doubt already become a Borgesian "zahir", Borges himself has imagistically become a *hrön*, a coin of the realm and of popular culture's most fungible commodity, its hard cash currency in quotidian circulation (Borges Images).

As I write these reflections, I receive further corroboration of the "tlönidad" of the world. One is from Barcelona, an announcement of a recording label called "Hrönir", under whose Series,

recogen el trabajo de VICTOR NUBLA con el Método de Composición Objetiva (MCO), un proceso de creación musical que en los últimos diez años ha producido varias decenas de bandas sonoras para cine, video, danza y teatro.

The announcement goes on to describe the process for production of sound for its recordings:

El Método de Composición Objetiva (MCO) es un sistema de composición basado en el rastreo de la radiofrecuencia por medio del azar. Los sonidos obtenidos son procesados mediante un sampler o muestreador. Esos sonidos "encontrados", son los hrönir sonoros. Este punto de vista relaciona también el trabajo de NUBLA con otros hallazgos contemporáneos del mundo del arte, desde el object trouvé de Marcel Duchamp hasta las operaciones alcatorias de John Cage (Hrönir).

The success of this compositional process is inevitable since the world is indeed Tlön. And, in an interesting reversal of cosmic genealogy,

the MCO announcement continues to note, *incidentally*, “los *hrönir* también son [...]”, and then it goes on to cite Jorge Luis Borges’ “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” as such an incidental exemplum!

A second reminder that the world has indeed become Tlön reaches me now from Salonik, as I complete the redaction of these remarks. It is the Catalogue of a photographic exhibit at the Museo Photographias Thessalonikis (Thessaloniki Museum of Photography), and it describes the “13th International Meeting of *Photosynkyria*”, in February and March of 2001. I am grateful to the Curator, Mr. John Strathatos, and the Museum’s Artistic Director, Mr. Aris Georgiou, for the beautiful catalogue of the photographs on exhibit and for Mr. Strathatos’ essay, which carries the same title as the title of the exhibition: “A Vindication of Tlön”.

Needless to say, the declaration of the title seems less than necessary, as the photographic images amply and incontrovertibly attest.

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