

UNINVITED INVERSIONS: BORGES, MACEDONIO AND THE GENESIS OF
“TLÖN, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS”

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In his “Autobiographical Essay,” written in English and published in *The New Yorker* in 1970, Borges introduces American readers to the name of Macedonio Fernández, whose acquaintance in 1921 he describes as “[p]erhaps the major event of my return to Buenos Aires.” Borges elaborates his now well-known judgment on Macedonio’s value and influence: “I don’t think Macedonio is to be found in his writings at all. The real Macedonio was in his conversation” (158). The supposedly oral nature of Macedonio’s genius, the myth of his identity as the Socrates of Buenos Aires and Borges’s role in constructing and perpetuating this myth have all come under the scrutiny of recent critics. They present evidence that Borges purposely downplayed Macedonio’s writing in favor of the myth and hid the true nature of Macedonio’s influence on his own poetics, which in fact incorporates many of the strategies and principles present in Macedonio’s prose and poetry.¹

These same scholars stop short of delineating a coherent strategy on Borges’s part or defining a specific objective in his treatment of Macedonio. This study will examine these scholars’ conclusions along with further signs, in the writings of both authors, that Borges’s strategy was dictated by his discomfort with the

¹ See for example: Horacio González, 173-74; Julio Prieto, *Desencuadrados* 122-24; Ana Camblong in Bueno, 19.

hermeticism, mysticism and “absolute idealism” so fundamental to Macedonio’s poetics. Borges’s concern about these metaphysical pillars, however, is counterbalanced by his desire to forge an aesthetics that incorporated aspects of these same philosophical antecedents: the questioning of established categories; the examination of the origins of linguistic and philosophical structures; the elaboration of fictions and histories across generations; the manipulation of the boundaries between reality and fiction, nature and fabrication, and the problem of positing an autonomous self.

All of these problems represent paradoxes integral to Macedonio’s poetics. As a result of his ambivalence, Borges performs an inversion of Macedonio’s poetics, allowing these paradoxes as fundamental inventions, but negating their transcendence as given properties. A critical ingredient in this inversion is Borges’s promoting Macedonio the philosopher as a transcendent presence in Argentine letters while hiding the role Macedonio’s writing played in inventing these paradoxes. “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*” is a paradigmatic example of this inversion.

The hermeticism present in Macedonio’s works and in Borges’s implicit critique connects them to a broad range of theological and philosophical movements. Its best delineation is found in “*Tlön*” itself, which, observes Didier Jaén, constitutes a summary of esoteric thought from pre-Christian times to modern transcendentalists, including gnosticism, the Kabbalah, Christian hermeticism, mysticism and the philosophical idealism of Leibniz, Hume and Schopenhauer (37). These movements share a reliance on divine or metaphysical mysteries, resistant to all forms of logic, communicable only through obscure and apparently arbitrary signs, and only imperfectly or vaguely apprehended by human reason. Accordingly, hermetic thought is heavily invested with emotion, affect and wonder.

Among the aspects of “*Tlön*” that suggest its secret genesis in Borges’s relationship with Macedonio is the older writer’s glaring absence from the story. Instead of naming Macedonio as his cohort in the discovery of *Tlön*, Borges opts for Adolfo Bioy Casares, his most important Argentine collaborator in literary invention as opposed to philosophical inquiry. Moreover, the story is replete with

names of other contemporaries of Borges, collaborators in literary, philosophical and scholarly pursuits, conspicuously omitting the master himself. Significantly, it was Macedonio who introduced to Borges's literary circle the inverted valuation of absence over presence, demonstrating that absence was the key to escaping the subjectivity in which language, armed with the pronoun "yo," traps us (Garth 37-41). Borges himself, during his youthful collective literary adventure of the 1920s, was the foremost promoter of Macedonio's reputation as an absent *recienvenido*, or newcomer, to this adventure.

Ana Camblong has identified numerous additional aspects of "Tlön" that demonstrate its genesis in Borges's relationship with Macedonio. She notes that the idealism that characterizes Tlön and the "*asombro*" that constitutes the sole objective of its philosophers is a direct retort to the stated principles of *No toda es vigilia la de los ojos abiertos*, Macedonio's first published book, released in 1928 (194). Camblong also adumbrates a long list of "typically Macedonian components" of the story, all referent to his perpetually unfinished masterwork, *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna* (195-96). Perhaps Camblong's most valuable observation, however, is the equating of the elaboration of Tlön with the creation of an "*umbral*," or threshold, and the revealing of Tlön as the irreversible crossing of that threshold (197).

For John Irwin, the paradigmatic Borgesian threshold is the mirror, entry to a world where fundamental earthly laws and their implications are inverted, exactly as in one of Borges's favorite tales, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (Irwin 75-84, 285-86). Irwin notes that in "Tlön" mirrors are both associated with chess (285) and gender-coded through the explicit association with fathers at the beginning of the story (287). The mirror that presides over the adventure into Tlön, and Tlön's venture into earth, is said to "*acechar*," or lie in wait, spying on the narrator and his companion, and to "*inquieta*," or disquiet them. Irwin interprets these conjunctions as signaling Borges's anxiety regarding his father (298).

An even more logical interpretation of this dynamic, however, recalls Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence. Bloom

argues that literary works emerge out of a generational struggle between writers, as younger (or “belated”) writers strive to suppress the influence of their literary predecessors while simultaneously reconfiguring the works of those predecessors. This anxiety is “achieved in and by the story, novel, play, poem, or essay” (xxiii). What is remarkable in the case of Borges and Macedonio is the fact that Borges’s reconfiguring of his predecessor not only operates on Macedonio’s poetics but is accomplished by means of devices that Borges appropriates from that same poetics. Precisely because Borges’s anxiety is provoked by Macedonio’s elaboration of a threshold to a world in which absolute idealism reigns—a world resting entirely on hermetic underpinnings that invert the Enlightenment principles of reality, such as logic and reason—Borges makes use of that same threshold in the form of a mirror, inverting its inversion, as a starting point for his fiction.

Carlos García pinpoints the moment that Borges’s anxiety produced a definitive corrosion in his relationship with Macedonio, a break known to their friends and colleagues and acknowledged in Macedonio’s correspondence. Not coincidentally, that moment came in 1928, the year that Macedonio published *No toda es vigilia*, and also the year marking a sea change in Borges’s posture regarding his own writing. Borges’s vigorous repudiation of the bulk of his early work was directed almost entirely at works published prior to 1928, while works written after that year were routinely republished in anthologies and re-editions. García reveals that the strain between the two men was the result of Borges’s failure to defend Macedonio against the withering disdain of Guillermo de Torre (“*Vigilia*” 47-51). This contretemps seems to have been complicated by Borges’s need to counter the insinuations of some of Buenos Aires’s *ultraístas* that he plagiarized his most important ideas from Macedonio (51-53).

Whether or not these accusations had any merit, it is undeniable that Borges not only developed many of the ideas central to his early works in his oral conversations with Macedonio, but also that these ideas were exchanged in writing. Borges read Macedonio’s first novel, *Adriana Buenos Aires*, written in 1921, and penned the introductory note. He also made notations in his

personal copy of *Vigilia* (García, “*Vigilia*” 45). Moreover, prior to 1928, Borges – in print and with youthful enthusiasm – repeatedly attributed much of his philosophical thinking to that unknown author, Macedonio (Camblong 143-44).

Most striking, however, is the fact that after their 1928 falling out, Borges and Macedonio continued *privately* to exchange ideas on metaphysical questions throughout the 1930s, simultaneous with Borges’s writing of some of his most enduring and characteristic philosophical inquiries. It is during this same period that Borges seems to have been most intent on hiding and *erasing* Macedonio’s presence in his own work. Only after Macedonio’s death in 1952 does Borges return to acknowledging his master’s voice, and then only as a purely *oral* source. Borges’s graveside eulogy to Macedonio, published in *Sur*, is a well known paean to his Socratic mentor; it is arguably also the moment at which Borges rekindles his active and open promotion of the myth of Macedonio.

The development of the myth is also well documented. The most pertinent testimony comes from Alicia Borinsky, who attests to Borges’s investment in the idea of Macedonio not only as a predecessor, but as a predecessor of mystic origins and hermetic nature:

“Maestro, teacher,” was the word Jorge Luis Borges used to refer to Macedonio Fernández [...] when I sat in Borges’s classes [...] at the University of Buenos Aires, the rediscovery of Macedonio had not yet taken place, and listening to Borges talk about him I felt that he was communicating a secret, a register for understanding his own thought, perhaps thought itself [...] When, years later, I found myself researching Macedonio’s work and life and went to consult with Borges, he urged me to hurry and complete the project because it was important to “construct the myth of Macedonio.” (ix)

This evidence, appropriately anecdotal, suggests the completeness of Borges’s technique of inversion. Borges actively reconstructs Macedonio as a hermetic, Socratic teacher, the mythic point of origin of the most esoteric principles of thought to be handed down, obscurely, from master to disciple, father to child. Yet he only pursues this project after he has, in his written project, thrown the validity and value of Macedonio’s hermetic metaphysics – his

absolute idealism—into doubt, while in the process expunging Macedonio the author from his written record.

A closer look at “Tlön” and its kinship to *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna* will illustrate the profundity of that process and the extent of its focuses on the hermetic aspects of Macedonio’s poetics. Buried amid the book’s fifty-six prologues, the central conceit of *Museo* bears an irrefutable likeness to the phenomenon of Tlön. A gathering of figures—wholly fictional and metaphorical in nature—inhabit the *estancia* La Novela, located within commuting distance to Buenos Aires. Presiding over them is their author, the *Presidente*, who functions as the benign but absolute dictator of their enclosed, displaced and metaphorical territory. The *Presidente*’s ineluctable charge to his characters is to enter Buenos Aires and transform it from a place of mere causal relations, of representable selves, histories and *noumena*, to a locus of pure beauty and *afección*, where causality, Cartesian logic and past are all eliminated.² Buenos Aires is to be made beautiful by making it fictional, “por milagro de novela” (*Museo* 200).

This plan is carried out by the strategic planting of bizarre objects, calculated to astonish, disorient and—literally—shock, throughout Buenos Aires:

llamadas telefónicas electrizadas; imanes poderosos distribuidos subrepticamente, que atraían invenciblemente todo lo metálico que llevan encima hombres y mujeres; y los sobrecartas, es decir cartas escritas en los sobres repartidas en todos los asientos de tranvías y ómnibus. [...] (El sobre-carta resucitaba una propaganda del autor iniciada ocho o diez años atrás, que se proponía lo mismo que el actual intento de conquista de Buenos Aires: dotar a Buenos Aires de misterio, que nunca tuvo.) (*Museo* 1982; 311)³

² *Noumena* is Kant’s term for “the thing in itself,” the autonomous, objective reality that causes the *phenomena* of human perception and sensation. At the heart of Macedonio’s metaphysics is a repudiation of the *noumena*’s existence and the Cartesian consciousness that perceives it (Monder 90-92). In this sense “idealism” is a misnomer for Macedonio’s metaphysics, since all German idealism prior to this point—including Schopenhauer—integrates, to some extent, a correspondence between subjective phenomena and objective forms (Attala 238-29; Wicks, par. 4.3)

³ This passage is found in all three posthumous editions of *Museo* but is omitted from the critical edition.

These objects are designed to disrupt normal institutions and practices of relations, communication and exchange (the "*metálico*" in question would unavoidably include money). As such, they aim to throw doubt on the nature of human perception and interaction, contorting how people apprehend and process what they understand to be reality as well as their place in that reality. It bears noting, however, that Macedonio's objects are fantastic in their *effect*, not in their composition.

This passage also alludes to the fact that the Presidente's plot has a precedent in Macedonio's own legendary campaigns, in 1922 and 1927, for the Argentine presidency. Borges himself, in his essay entitled "Macedonio Fernández," first published in 1961, recalls this "vasto y vago proyecto," which included the difusión of the "candidate's" singular name by the same means as described in *Museo*: "escribían el nombre de Macedonio en tiras de papel o en tarjetas, que cuidadosamente olvidaban en las confiterías, en los tranvías, en las veredas, en los zaguanes de las casas y en los cinematográficos" (4: 58). Numerous other members of the Martínfierrista Generation also describe the weird and provocative strategies dreamed up as part of this collaborative campaign; Enrique Fernández Latour later put these anecdotal reports into writing: "El argumento consistía en lo que hubiéramos realizar: inundar la ciudad de artefactos de nuestra invención destinados a hacer la vida cada vez más incómoda e indeseable para que, cuando la desesperación general llegara al colmo, interviniera Macedonio, todopoderoso restaurador de agrados y placeres" (22-23).

Curiously, it is Borges who asserts the preponderantly literary nature of this endeavor, recalling that the campaign eventually morphed into Macedonio's "novela salida a la calle," a writing project begun collectively and whose execution was envisioned as a series of publicly staged happenings that contort the boundaries between fiction and reality. With his characteristic backhand, however, Borges uses this recollection of a literary project to reinforce his portrait of a Socratic thinker who made no investment in his written texts: "Macedonio fue demorándola, porque le agradaba hablar de las cosas, no ejecutarlas" (4: 58).

The truth is more complex. What began in 1921 as a fanciful group experiment in the mechanics of power and public influence had, by 1927, been absorbed into Macedonio's literary work (García, *Correspondencia* 32-37, 41n, 43-44; Abós 103). Its most fully developed expression is found in *Museo*, which continued to evolve through the 1920s and 1930s, incorporating many of the ideas and experiences Macedonio elaborated—in both conversation and writing—during his most fervent and productive years.

La Novela's invasion of the city resonates loudly in Tlön's takeover of earth, and Borges's own testimony provides evidence of that resonance. Further describing the original presidential campaign-turned collective fiction, Borges details the proposed mechanisms to "socavar y minar la resistencia de la gente mediante una serie gradual de invenciones incómodas" (4: 59). Among his recollection of perturbing inventions are devices that will sound familiar to readers of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius": "los enseres elaborados con dos nuevas materias antagónicas, de suerte que las cosas grandes sean muy livianas y las muy chicas pesadísimas, para burlar nuestra expectativa; la multiplicación de párrafos empastados en las novelas policiales; la poesía enigmática y la pintura dadaísta o cubista" (4: 59).

In "Tlön," these devices, performing the analogous function of simultaneously heralding the arrival of a new world and fomenting the confusion and discontent prerequisite to the embracing of that world, take the form of *hrönir*. These inexplicable objects—including impossibly heavy tiny metal cones and the random, yet predictable, repetition of artifacts—embody the Tlönian repudiation of logic, of causality and of the inviolability of space and time. They also serve as the medium of the invasion by Tlön's wholly hermetic and phenomenological cosmos, which takes shape as physical objects, invading and corrupting the reality that frames them. Borges's *hrönir* are the decisive step in the work of an esoteric sect over generations, the critical implements needed to make fiction real. They also are Borges's most concrete manifestation of his inversion on Macedonio's campaign to make reality fictional.

One conception of the cosmos in the world of Tlön focuses on the fallacy of time (1: 436-37) and the assertion of the eternity and

unity of all thought and knowledge (1: 439). These are among the most indelible concepts saturating Macedonio's writing, particularly *Museo* (272-75).⁴ The world that results from the "novelization" of the city, the invasion of reality by the denizens of "La Novela," will live a continuous present, unburdened by a duty to honor the past and its icons. Macedonio banishes all monuments to that past, with special scorn reserved for statues, calendars, and street names (*Museo* 195, 204). The resultant metamorphosis wrought on history renders it very like Borges's description of the post-Tlönian earth in which "su historia armoniosa (y llena de episodios conmovedores) ha obliterado la que presidió mi niñez" (1: 443). The history lesson offered in *Museo* could easily have inspired Borges's vision. Eterna "casts a spell" that erases "el fusilamiento de Dorrego; el martirio de Camila O'Gorman," in favor of enshrining any "magnífica obra de madre [...] (y) gracia fantástica de niño," thus consolidating "la belleza de la no-Historia" (203).

For Macedonio, moreover, the extirpation of the past is prerequisite to the integrity of the individual soul and its unity with the cosmos. This requirement, coherent with his negation of time, is in keeping with his insistence on the fallacy of the Cartesian self as a fundamental, discrete and representable entity. Macedonio's individual rests entirely on his "*almismo ayoico*," a conception of individual identity accessible only through the individual's "affective" relations with others and through individual sentience, which, as Daniel Attala points out, in turn is limited to the unrepresentable and wholly subjective phenomena of pain and pleasure (237-39).⁵ For example, one of *Museo*'s principal figures, Dulce Persona, is flawed only by her inability to free herself of a disturbing event in her personal past. This anchor to the past, represented by

⁴ This assertion of unity and timelessness and the rejection of individuation is Macedonio's most basic nexus to the philosophy of Schopenhauer (Wicks, par. 4.18-19), which Macedonio modifies by eliminating the role of Platonic forms and of their representation, leaving the cosmos as consisting of pure "will" or *phenomena*.

⁵ Attala also suggests, however, that Macedonio must confront the oxymoron resulting from this approach: the incapacity, in a purely "affective" existence, to account for his own body (Attala 271-73).

images in her mind, prevents Dulce Persona from achieving full “unreality” (65). Only total liberation from the past, itself a form of mimesis, will convert individuals to the living fantasy of “almismo,” a state analogous to Tlön’s eternal and absolute unity.

More fundamentally, Macedonio’s vision of the cosmos coincides with Borges’s description of the Tlönian universe as a “serie de procesos mentales” (1: 436). This Tlönian principal is in keeping with Macedonio’s “fantasismo esencial del mundo” (*Museo* 85), which negates the existence of any *noumena* independent of human ideas, apperception or imagination. The world is coterminous with the mental processes of humans, and contained in “tu espíritu o mente, o si quieres en las fibras de una molécula imperceptible de tu corteza gris” (85). Indeed, the material brain itself is a mere image produced by human thought. Macedonio’s systematic idealism has the logical consequence of negating causation, since, as Borges tells us obtains in Tlön, connections between phenomena—cause and effect—are merely a question of the association of ideas (436). For Macedonio, as in Tlön, causality is a specious concept (*Museo* 305).

But it is the manner in which Tlön invades, and, ultimately, supplants earth, that most resonates with Macedonio’s “Belarte,” and Borges inverts the dynamics of Macedonio’s collective fiction to a remarkable degree. In *Museo*, the metaphysical residents of La Novela, directed by a fictional author, cross the threshold between the imagined *phenomena* of the novel and the reasoned *noumena* of the city, working in the open, not attempting to conceal their purpose. The unexpectedness of their project is owing to the divide between city and novel—between *phenomena* and *noumena*—and to the fact that, as Borges notes in “Tlön,” in an idealist universe the only true aesthetic value can be that of astonishment. As Macedonio suggests both in *Museo* (14) and in “Continuación de la nada” (4: 91), his campaign for Belarte can succeed only *because* of the effects of astonishment, producing those critical moments of magically crossing that threshold, where the people of the city feel themselves to be fictional characters.

In contrast, in “Tlön,” a group of historically defined—that is, “real”—individuals, working in absolute secrecy and obscu-

rity, elaborates a fiction designed as an imagined alternative to Western existence. The world of Tlön is not intended to replace reality – it is conceived of as pure fiction. Whereas the bizarre and disorienting objects of Macedonio’s campaign are to be placed about the city strategically and purposefully to a calculated effect, the alternative universe of Tlön, heralded by its *hrönir*, seeps into the real world by means of a hermetic – and thoroughly eerie – process, allowed but not intended or foreseen by its creators.

The apparatus of publicity also takes inverse roles in Borges and Macedonio. Macedonio’s campaign pointedly exploits news media. In correspondence from the 1920s, Macedonio explains his plan to perform scenes from the novel in public spaces as if it were real life:

y anunciándolo así en la Conferencia teatral, y publicar la novela simultáneamente en folletín diario, en *Crítica* preferentemente o en *La Nación* [...] Es necesario un previo período intensivo de hacer sonar mi nombre, para que se espere algo de cualquier actuación en que yo parezco como dirigente. (2: 38)

Thus the media *primes* the populace of the city for the novelization of the world and ultimately is absorbed into it, since eventually there will be no “reality” left for the media to report (*Museo* 43). The campaign’s publicity strategy simultaneously incites a demand for this new dimension, pronounces the cryptic name to be applied to it, foretells its advent and yields to it. Borges’s “Tlön,” however, portrays a media that *unwittingly* abets the self-fulfillment of the new cosmos’s advent:

Hacia 1944 un investigador del diario *The American* (de Nashville, Tennessee) exhumó en Memphis los cuarenta volúmenes de la Primera Enciclopedia de Tlön [...] El hecho es que la prensa internacional voceó infinitamente el “hallazgo”. Manuales, resúmenes, versiones literales, reimpressiones autorizadas y reimpressiones piráticas de la Obra Mayor de los Hombres abarrotaron y siguen abarrotando la tierra. Casi inmediatamente, la realidad cedió en más de un punto. (1: 442)

The press sets in motion a snowball effect, by means of which the populace comes to accept and internalize the presence of Tlön.

By spreading the news of its advent, the media helps make Tlön real; as the world of Tlön reifies, the media present it as accepted reality. The process accelerates with a geometric progression to its inexorable end.

Borges's overall motive for the inversion performed on Macedonio's poetics and the simultaneous erasure of Macedonio's status as author is consistent with his efforts to found a distinctly Argentine mythical dimension linking *rioplatense* history and literature (including his own) to a universal history and a world literature. Macedonio fills the need for an Argentine father of modern discourse: a metaphysical Socrates, absent from written archive. But the specific nature of this inversion in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," its comprehensive skeptical sweep of all hermetic thought and the implicit attack on modern relativistic and idealist philosophy, also has roots in Borges's fears. Macedonio's adherence to a complete dissolution of the Cartesian self, for example, meets with an uneasy reception by Borges, whose approach to the self is imbued with skepticism and ambiguity but refuses an outright denial of the autonomous self.⁶ Irwin associates Borges's use of mirrors with the dissolution of self (92-93), but these same mirrors can also serve as the threshold back *from* the inverted labyrinth of wonderland. Borges's mirroring of Macedonio's inversion is a skeptical inquiry, an adventure into ambiguity, which emerges into a reordering of subjectivity in place of Macedonio's negation of selfhood.

More ominously, "Tlön" foretells a neo-Nietzschean universe, built on Schopenhauer's assertion of absolute cosmic chaos, ripe for the actions of a race of "overmen," vulnerable to the most pernicious consequences of Nietzsche's "festive cruelty" (Nietzsche 502-03). Macedonio's uncompromising absolutism is far too susceptible to this perversion of idealism for Borges's comfort. The solution is to preserve Macedonio's metaphysical legacy—his "absence"—while excising his authorial presence, and to sound the alarm against a literal realization of Macedonio's vision. An

⁶ Julio Prieto characterizes Borges's "Nueva refutación del tiempo," a text which contains his most explicit questioning of the self as well as of time, as a literal parody of *No toda es vigilia* ("El saber" 128).

anxious Borges, in between his youthful adulation of his elder's genius and the revisionist, posthumous construction of a mythic father, executes his solution with mirrors: in an inversion of Macedonio's vision that comes to be known as the world of Tlön.

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