

TLÖN AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF “AS IF”



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The initial action of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (TUOT) takes place in a *quinta* of Gaona street in Ramos Mejía, a suburb of Buenos Aires. In a conversation between the narrator and Bioy Casares, by sheer serendipity, the latter quotes an *heresiarca* of Uqbar as saying: “los espejos y la cópula son abominables, porque multiplican el número de los hombres.” When they try to check out the source of such a bizarre statement in the Anglo-American Cyclopedia (New York 1917), a literal and morose reprint of the 1912 edition of Britannica, the characters find that the book contains no indication of Uqbar. Bioy, confused, says he believes the region to be located in Iraq or perhaps Asia Minor. The day after, he calls the narrator to confirm the quotation. Now he has before him the XXVI volume of the encyclopaedia; the notice reads:

For one of those gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are hateful because they multiply and proclaim it.¹

¹ “Para uno de esos gnósticos, el visible universo era una ilusión o (más precisamente) un sofisma. Los espejos y la paternidad son abominables (mirrors and fatherhood are hateful) porque lo multiplican y lo divulgan” (OC 1: 431-432). The English versions

The perusal of the book reveals that it has 921 pages and not 917 as the one kept in the *quinta*. Those four pages are devoted to Uqbar and its literature and the imaginary realms of Mle'khnas and Tlön. As TUOT unfolds, we learn of the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the XI volume of the Encyclopaedia of Tlön. The narrator meets the engineer of the southern railways, Herbert Ashe, a frequent visitor to the Adrogué Hotel. Ashe occupies himself with mathematical equations. In September 1937 an aneurysm causes his death. Some days earlier, he had received a parcel from Brazil containing the mysterious volume. The book appears to be the work of a secret society which has laboured for centuries in the task of minutely describing the history, geography and culture of an unknown planet. The story progresses describing Tlön and all seems explicable, if rather odd, until objects begin to appear in the real world, just as mysteriously as the books did:

From the vast innards of a packing case emblazoned with international customs stamps she removed, one by one, the fine unmoving things: plate from Utrecht and Paris chased with hard heraldic fauna, a samovar. Among the pieces, trembling softly but perceptibly, like a sleeping bird, there throbbed, mysteriously, a compass. The princess did not recognize it. Its blue needle yearned toward magnetic north; its metal casing was concave; the letters on its dial belonged to one of the alphabets of Tlön.²

Some months later, the author comes across a drunkard lying dead with a few coins and a small metal cone of the diameter of a die, which weighs almost more than a man can lift. These small and

of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", "Funes el memorioso" and "Una rosa amarilla" belong to Andrew Hurley. The translation of *Sobre el Vathek de William Beckford* is by Eliot Weinberger. The translation of *El otro tigre* is by Norman Thomas di Giovanni.

² "Del vasto fondo de un cajón rubricado de sellos internacionales iban saliendo finas cosas inmóviles: platería de Utrecht y de París con dura fauna heráldica, un samovar. Entre ellas—con un imperceptible y tenue temblor de pájaro dormido—latía misteriosamente una brújula. La princesa no la reconoció. La aguja azul anhelaba el norte magnético; la caja de metal era cóncava; las letras de la esfera correspondían a uno de los alfabetos de Tlön" (OC 1: 441).

extremely heavy cones are images of divinity in certain religions in Tlön.

In 1944, the forty volumes of *The First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* are finally found in a Memphis library.

Suddenly everyone wants to believe in Tlön, to write about it, to study its philosophy, etc. Reality caves in under the onslaught of publications from and about Tlön. History and the sciences are reformed according to the ones existing in the no longer imaginary planet. Contact with Tlön and the ways of Tlön start eroding this world. At the end of the story, the narrator realises that Tlön has taken over:

Contact with Tlön, the habit of Tlön, has disintegrated this world. Spellbound by Tlön's rigor, humanity has forgotten, and continues to forget, that it is the rigor of chess masters, not of angels. Already Tlön's (conjectural) 'primitive language' has filtered into our schools; already the teaching of Tlön's harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has obliterated the history that governed my own childhood; already a fictitious past has supplanted in men's memories that other past, of which we now know nothing certain –not even that it is false. Numismatics, pharmacology, and archaeology have been reformed. I understand that biology and mathematics are also awaiting their next avatar... A scattered dynasty of recluses has changed the face of the earth –and their work continues. If my projections are correct, a hundred years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of *The Second Encyclopaedia of Tlön*. At that, French and English and mere Spanish will disappear from the earth. The world will be Tlön.³

³ "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 ajedrecista, no de ángeles. 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; ya en las memorias un pasado ficticio ocupa el sitio de otro, del que nada sabemos con certidumbre –ni siquiera que es falso. 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. Su tarea prosigue. Si nuestras previsiones no erran, de aquí cien años alguien descubrirá los cien tomos de la Segunda Enciclopedia de Tlön. Entonces des-

With the extent given to the terms here, TUOT is a circuitous fiction, an artifice (the story heads the volume *Fictions* which comprises two books; the second one has as its title *Artifices*). In order to explain this statement we have to turn briefly to a philosopher whose work Borges alludes to in TUOT, Hans Vaihinger: “the fact that every philosophy is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has allowed them to proliferate”.⁴

Hans Vaihinger (1852-1933) was a German philosopher who contributed to the renewal of interest in Kant.⁵ He saw in the heuristic fictions posited by the latter, a general explanation for discursive thought. Although Kant had denied epistemological value to metaphysical notions like the soul as a simple substance, he concluded that they served as a regulative idea: we must act *as if* the soul were indivisible. We also act as if we were free agents and this fiction is justified by the moral actions resulting from that belief. Extrapolating from ethical postulates, Vaihinger argued that fictions are all-pervasive in discursive thought. Sensations only are real; the rest consists in justified fictions which are only a means aimed at facilitating our ideational capacity. When thought deviates from this aim and becomes itself an end, it throws up problems which are in themselves senseless, such as the meaning of the world or the purpose of life. Because thought is regarded as a biological function, these are impossible problems beyond its natural boundaries. The *quidditas* of the world is unknowable and incomprehensible, and should be seen as the line where all dogmatic speculation stops. The object of our psychological activity is not to portray reality but rather to provide us with an instrument for finding our way about in the world. When thought deviates only partially from reality (only some elements are neglected), it operates with semi-fictions; full fictions, on the other

aparecerán del planeta el inglés y el francés y el mero español. El mundo será Tlön" (OC 1: 443).

⁴ “El hecho de que toda filosofía sea de antemano un juego dialéctico, una *Philosophie des Als Ob* [Philosophy of ‘As if’], ha contribuido a multiplicarlas” (OC 1: 436).

⁵ Borges’ association with Vaihinger has been discussed by Carter Wheelock and, more recently, by Floyd Merrell. All the citations from Vaihinger’s *Die Philosophie des als-ob* (1911), correspond to its English version, *The Philosophy of ‘As if*.

hand, not only are opposed to facts but they are also self-contradictory.

Discursive thinking operates with symbols in the mathematical sense. All knowledge gained thereby constitutes a sort of simile or image of reality, but it does not provide us with knowledge of reality itself. In these fictions a new intuition is prompted by an ideational construct in which there is a similar relationship, an analogous proportion to that existing in the observed series of perceptions. In such cases a relationship advances the *apperceiving power*. According to Vaihinger, all knowledge that goes beyond succession or co-existence, can only be *analogical*, that is to say, the apperception of one thing through another. All categories should be regarded as analogical fictions. They are simple representational constructions for the purpose of apperceiving what is given. Actual phenomena can be regarded as if they behave in such and such a way, but there is no justification for assuming any dogmatic attitude in which the "as if" turns into "it is". That is the case when fictions are interpreted as hypotheses. Fictions and hypotheses are methodologically different. Hypotheses are directed towards reality and claim to coincide with it; they demand verification, for they want to be an expression of that reality. Of all possible hypotheses related to a given problem, the most *probable* one is selected. In the case of fictions, the most *expedient* one is chosen; there are no truth-claims in this selection process. Fictions then are a circuitous approach, scaffoldings to be demolished. What is untenable as a hypothesis can often render excellent service as a fiction. Hypotheses try to eliminate contradictions; fictions, on the contrary, call logical contradictions into existence.

Fictions such as categories and general ideas intervene in any assertion that we make about reality. Vaihinger explains the formation of categories in these terms:

The factor common to all fictions in this class [*abstractive fictions*] consists in a neglect of important elements of reality. As a rule the reason for the formation of these fictions is to be sought in the highly intricate character of the facts which make theoretical treatment exceedingly difficult owing to their unusual complexity. The logical functions are thus unable to perform their work undisturbed, because it is not possible here to keep the various threads out of which

reality is woven, apart from one another. Since, then, the material is too complicated and confused for thought to be able to break it upon its component elements, and since the causal factors sought are probably of too complicated a nature for them to be determined directly, thought makes use of an artifice by means of which it provisionally and temporarily neglects a number of characters and selects from them the more important phenomena. (19)

The subsumption of one individual into the category reserved to another, constitutes an *unjustified transference*. According to Vaihinger, mathematics deliberately makes use of unjustified transferences in the manner of ideational constructs. It occurs, for instance, when we treat the curve as if it were a straight-line or a circle as if it were an ellipse. These fictions are examples of purely artificial constructs that advance operations of thought. A straight-line is a curve whose radius is said to be equal to zero; the circle is an ellipse whose two foci are separated by a distance equal to zero. Both constructs are based on the assumption that zero constitutes a real magnitude, which is a self-contradictory notion, a fiction. The same method is used in the formation of negative, irrational and imaginary numbers in mathematics. It is worth noting that the expediency which justifies fictions is very often the sole path to attain results. The area of the circle can be measured if we treat the circle as a limiting case of a regular polygon with an infinite number of infinitely-small sides (fiction of the infinitely small). We should never be able to arrive at the formula for the area of the circle from a study of the circle as a circle. Because the formula cannot be calculated, the circuitous (and fictive) path is justified.

Fictions contradict reality or even logically contradict themselves, but nevertheless they successfully guide our thoughts to important findings. This is possible on account of the corrections that we are able to make to eliminate such disagreements. Vaihinger called this procedure *The Method of Antithetic Error*. The method prescribes that the error made by thought has to be balanced by one made in the other direction. In the case of Utopian fictions (like the *Orbis Tertius*), the conceptual constructs only possess a value for an understanding of reality when real values are substituted for ideal representations. The correction consists in the dropping out of the fic-

tively introduced construct. Only because a man is seen as a free agent can he be liable to punishment. The premise whether men are really free, is not examined by the judge. Likewise, only because it is assumed that every inhabitant of a state has tacitly entered into a pact with society, is he asked to obey the laws (fiction of the social contract). The power of the state to enforce the law ultimately rests on a fiction. The procedure is even more evident in cases of unjustified transferences in mathematics and geometry, e.g., the case mentioned earlier in which the circle is defined as an ellipse (see Figure 1). The fictional element in this case is not the first error: "the circle is an ellipse", for this statement is logically self-contradictory, but the second error: "the distance between A and B is equal to zero".

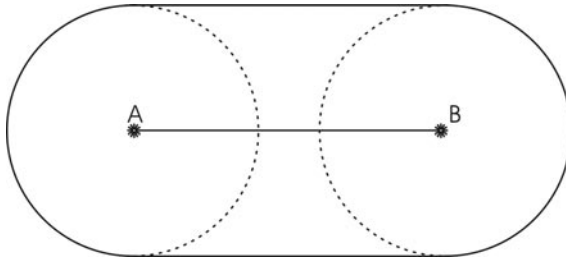


Figure 1

But it is precisely by means of the latter fiction that the first statement ("the circle is an ellipse") becomes intelligible. And it is a fiction because a distance 0 is nonsense; it means no distance at all. Nevertheless the result of these two errors leads us to the right result. Mathematical examples happen to be the most transparent because they show how thought progresses precisely *because* of deviations from reality. Besides, the deviations are immediately corrected whereas in other fictions, antithetic errors take place later and therefore are more prone to go unnoticed. The heuristic value of such fictions reveals the nature of our process of ideation; the apperceptions that we are able to make are largely based upon these contrastive operations. Contradictions result in positive knowledge; by means of subsuming entities under entirely different categories, we are able

to see their constituent traits. The whole progress of thought rests entirely upon such antithetic operations or errors:

Fundamentally, we are dealing with a variation of one and the same basic process, the formation of ideational constructs that are interpolated in the stream of thought in order to assist and facilitate it. And in so far as all thinking ultimately aims at an equation, fictions enable this equation and comparison to be effected where otherwise they would be impossible. (105)

Although Vaihinger's influence on Borges remains somewhat nebulous, both authors, I believe, are in perfect accord about the epistemological value of fictional discourses; the main contention being that *fiction is instrumental to knowledge*. In TUOT the thusness of the world accesses consciousness through fiction. By means of the "as if" strategy, idealism -which in TUOT fills the gap between the "as" and the "if"- is empowered by fiction; the result is the apperceiving act we are able to effect whereby an idea of the world is revealed.

Thought is a pliable mechanism that operates by bringing together disproportionate elements in order to show their intimate nature: "all cognition is the apperception of one thing through another" (Vaihinger 29). Thus fiction makes it possible to draw two elements into a comparative apperception; the "as if" guides the procedure. Tlön is the circle that is the ellipse; by increasing the distance between the foci, the world's constitutive traits are shown.⁶ Tlön is an imaginary planet only *modus dicendi*, and only as long as Tlön and Earth are at odds with each other. When Orbis Tertius evaporates, Tlön reunites with reality. And this also points to the provisional nature of the third orb (and all our propositions about the world); it is a construct, like Wittgenstein's ladder, which must be thrown away after we have climbed up it. Propositions about reality are to be transcended.

⁶ On the first page of the Encyclopaedia of Tlön (Vol. XI) there is a blue oval with the inscription "Orbis Tertius". An oval figure or ellipse aptly represents the planet whose characteristics have been "elongated".

In Vaihinger's view representations of the world are themselves events, a part of the cosmic process:

The world as we conceive it is only a secondary or tertiary construction, arising in our heads through the play of the cosmic process and solely for the furtherance of this process. This conceptual world is not a *picture* of the actual world but an *instrument* for grasping and subjectively understanding that world. (63)

(Note the conceptual and even lexical similarities between Vaihinger's "tertiary construction" and Borges' *Orbis Tertius*; the scaffoldings that are destroyed once the apperceiving act has been carried out). Our conceptual world is a product, something *added* to the real world and, therefore, it cannot be itself a reflection of the world. Borges restates this contradiction in several writings; words to this effect, for instance, can be read in "El hacedor": "

(...) the tall, haughty, volumes that made a golden dimness in the corner of his room were not (as his vanity had dreamed them) a mirror of the world, but just another thing added to the world's contents.⁷

Likewise, in TUOT the Encyclopaedia is the thing added to the world; an event of the world that cannot contain its own event.

The stated intent of Tlön is to substitute randomness for order (men cannot make out the rationale behind the actual world). Humanity, enchanted by Tlön's rigour, Borges declares, keeps on forgetting that it is the discipline of chess players, not of angels. In a similar vein, Vaihinger refers to our infatuation with orderly reality in these terms: "Only we must not put any philosophical system in the place of reality, led away by the fact that it seems to us enchanting, ideal, glorious and noble." (161). Because the laws that govern the real are alien to the human mind, Tlön eventually gravitates on

⁷ "(...) los altos y soberbios volúmenes que formaban en un ángulo de la sala una penumbra de oro no eran (como su vanidad soñó) un espejo del mundo, sino una cosa más agregada al mundo" (OC 2: 173).

men to the extent that all scientific disciplines are reformed accordingly.

Order as well as classifications in general are attained, according to Vaihinger, on the basis of the falsification of reality as given (or rather taken). The same idea is expressed in TUOT as follows: "Every mental state is irreducible: the simplest act of giving it a name -i.e., of classifying it- introduces a distortion, a 'slant' or 'bias'".⁸

Abstractive thinking cuts its way by suppressing aspects of the real. Similarly, a system consists in subsuming the multiplicity of factors to one type only (a type, which in turn, has been obtained likewise). The same holds for categories, which are formed by selecting certain aspects or cases while ignoring others; the selection being made upon the criterion of expediency (we do not put together alembics with crabs and volcanoes to form a category or class, although, in principle, that would also be possible). This is the main idea that informs the many systems conceived by the metaphysicians of Tlön: "a system is naught but the subordination of all the aspects of the universe to one of those aspects -*any* one of them".⁹

The powerful image of a transparent tiger and a tower of blood (OC 1: 435) is obtained by a procedure similar to categorisation: one aspect of the real has been lifted above the others, as when we draw a transparent flower in order to show the parts that interest us. In like manner, a transparent tiger can exhibit its skeleton under the splendid and quivering skin:

entre las rayas del bambú descifro
sus rayas y presiento la osatura
bajo la piel espléndida que vibra. (OC 2: 202)¹⁰

⁸ "Todo estado mental es irreductible: el mero hecho de nombrarlo -id est, de clasificarlo- importa un falseo" (OC 1: 436).

⁹ "un sistema no es otra cosa que la subordinación de todos los aspectos del universo a uno cualquiera de ellos" (436).

¹⁰ "Among the bamboo's slanting stripes I glimpse / The tiger's stripes and sense the bony frame / Under the splendid, quivering cover of skin".

Borges' imagery confirms the fictional status of TUOT; transparent tigers and towers of blood have to be seen as pure diversions of the narrator's imaginative power. They can also be related to drawings, figures and similar *schematic fictions* where: "The assumption of something unreal -transparency- serves the purpose of making possible a convenient representation of the whole situation." (Vaihinger 216).¹¹

As we have seen, Vaihinger argues that an explanatory system of the world always raises certain attributes of the real while suppressing others. In TUOT, Borges reinstates the suppressed, disrupting the order previously achieved. Endowing Funes with a voracious memory, he proceeds in like manner: *all* the memories are reinstated making the remembering of the past and the living of the present, impossible:

Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day; he had never once erred or faltered, but each reconstruction had itself taken an entire day.¹²

And again, the result is self-defeating, for an all-encompassing record of the past would make remembering impossible. But a further implication of the fact that total history is unattainable (and perhaps more important and yet, more elusive) is the plurality of historical accounts that co-exist without aggregating or displacing each other. The principle can be found in the following text:

So complex is reality, and so fragmentary and simplified is history, that an omniscient observer could write an indefinite, almost infinite, number of biographies of a man, each emphasizing different facts; we would have to read many of them before we realized that the protagonist was the same. Let us greatly simplify, and imagine that a life consists of 13,000 facts. One of the hypothetical biographies would record the series 11, 22, 33...; another, the series 9, 13,

¹¹ A "tower of blood" is a hypallage that implies transparency; the effort of ascending can be viewed.

¹² "Dos o tres veces había reconstruido un día entero; no había dudado nunca, pero cada reconstrucción había requerido un día entero" (OC 1: 488).

17, 21...; another the series 3, 12, 21, 30, 39... The above may seem merely fanciful, but unfortunately it is not.¹³

TUOT posits a similar conception: odd and even series of facts make up the real. Idealism, realism or any system of thought gives pre-eminence to a certain series, while suppressing others. The world's intelligibility is dependent upon these suppressions. If fiction compresses all the series into one account, making different worlds meet, reality becomes extremely dense to the extent that a tiny cone increases its weight unbearably.

The *As if* strategy allows Borges to disjoin and conjoin again; the result being Tlön, where fiction-making and world-making coincide. Everything within Tlön belongs to fiction. Since the beholder of Tlön is able to step out, order is granted; the order imposed by limits. The phenomenological value of TUOT lies in evincing what is appended to the world in every act of perception; although we also see the world "framed", there is no stepping out from the world to show the borders of our perception. By relating to Tlön we make the borders that frame the world explicit.

Finally, TUOT reflects the human symbolic and linguistic ability to construct logically coherent worlds. The only reality is the activity of the *ens cogitans*; the world is a series of acts (not objects) arranged

¹³ "Tan compleja es la realidad, tan fragmentaria y tan simplificada la historia, que un observador omnisciente podría redactar un número indefinido, y casi infinito, de biografías de un hombre, que destacan hechos independientes y de las que tendríamos que leer muchas veces antes de comprender que el protagonista es el mismo. Simplifiquemos desafortadamente una vida: imaginemos que la integran trece mil hechos. Una de las hipotéticas biografías registraría la serie 11, 22, 33; otra la serie 9, 13, 17, 21; otra la serie 3, 12, 21, 30, 39... Lo anterior puede parecer meramente quimérico; desgraciadamente, no lo es" (OC 2: 107).

Although Borges, as a result of his pantheistic views, is willing to accept the central unity of the History of the Spirit, he rejects the possibility of a historiographical representation of such totality (however, it has to be said that his very rejection implies already the idea of a totality). Furthermore, since historical facts are *de dicto* not *de re* -Cf., for instance, "El falso problema de Ugolino" (OC 3: 351-353) - the story of the past not only needs to be communicated but also constructed; there can in fact be no untold stories at all, just as there can be no unknown knowledge.

in temporal succession; there is no space; there are no material substances and since no substance persists through time, there is no identity either; things exist as long as they are perceived and tend to disappear when people are oblivious of them; expectations can make us bring "new" things from the past; the idea of the Subject is undetermined; things are mainly constructed through language, etc. These principles are both implicated by and deduced from one another and although being discernible to the mind, it is clear that operating under them alone would make mental activity impossible. Indeed, if things neither exist beyond mental activity nor persist beyond our acts of perception, no statement can be made about them. It would be impossible to refer to phenomena, let alone know anything. Reality, whatever that might be in Tlön, would dissolve itself in a flux of personal impressions that can neither be seized, nor be communicated by the individuals. Even the notion "individuals" remains questioned if not suppressed by this extreme mentalism which ultimately leads to sheer solipsism. Thus carrying all principles of Tlön to their logical conclusions would result in self-refutation. As an imaginative exercise, it demands that the bizarre categories of time, language, duration, etc., that obtain in Tlön, be deprived of all their effects but one at a time. Conversely, the unlimited and permanent effects of them all makes the exercise impossible, for Tlön grafts its configuration onto the real world and can only be understood if we take the real world as background. In other words, Tlön demands a fictional effort on our part.

And yet, and yet... The same can be predicated about any categorisation of the real; empirical phenomena are so complex that in order to explicate them we have to suspend or exclude subsidiary factors that are always at work. As Vaihinger rightly observes:

The schematic isolation of a single body in motion presupposes a case which never occurs in reality, can never be observed, and, given the existing organization of the world, is absolutely impossible. But it is only through the neglective method, by means of the fiction of 'simple cases,' that the simplest laws can be maintained. (195).

The background-world also demands fictional handling.

The Louvre's Pyramid designed by I. M. Pei is a very interesting topographic object. Coming from L'Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel, we are obliged to walk along the steel and glass structure. In so doing, we cannot help thinking of things like Napoleonic campaigns and Egyptian obelisks, ritual masks and men's deeds inscribed in marble; the inside of so many marvels treasured at the heart of Culture. A long enumeration Aleph-like could follow. These or many others are the things that the pyramid may prompt in us, for it stands for a perpetual possibility. But the pyramid might not have been and we would have walked in a straight line over the empty and luminous space. Similarly, Tlön is the thing added to the world. Something fabricated that did not exist before but will exist afterwards, as a fictional discourse, as an artifice capable of producing effects of truth.

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