

## AN APPALLING OR BANAL REALITY



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Jorge Luis Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" opens with a conversation between its narrator and Bioy Casares, who was both a friend of Borges and an Argentinian writer of independent importance. Bioy and the narrator had, we are told, "become caught up in a vast argument concerning the composition of a first-person novel whose narrator would omit or disfigure facts and develop various contradictions in a manner that would allow a few – a very few – readers to divine an appalling or banal reality" (Borges, *OC* 1: 431/*CF*: 68). That the story itself then develops precisely as a first-person account that omits and disfigures facts and develops various contradictions suggests that it may conceal such a reality. This suggestion is strengthened by a remark made by Borges in a 1979 interview: "there is also that idea of something prodigious that finally turns out to be appalling. [...] And I have been rewriting this story. The first form was perhaps the best: 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'"<sup>1</sup> (*80 años*).

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Nick Borja, Jennifer French, and Jennifer Austin for help with the transcription. Additional thanks to Jennifer French for teaching the class that triggered the reflections that have resulted in this article. Thanks also to Will Dudley for thoughtful and thorough comments.

In this essay, I attempt to become one of the very few readers to divine Borges's appalling or banal reality. My attempt differs from those of the story's many other interpreters<sup>2</sup> in linking Uqbar to Ur, and according a central significance to the French philosopher Descartes. These connections make possible the revelation of Borges's appalling or banal reality: we have replaced the Biblical myth of a pristine origin (an "Ur" in two of the relevant senses of the word) with the dream of a pristine end, a world transformed and dominated by science and technology. To support this as revelation rather than invention requires, of course, careful consideration of the story's details.

### 1. UQBAR

Borges's story is divided into three parts, the first two numbered, and dated 1940, the third presented as a Postscript added in 1947, although included in the original (1940) publication. As many commentators have noted, the three parts correspond, relatively smoothly, to the three terms in the story's title, although the order is altered: Part I focuses on Uqbar, Part II on Tlön, and the Postscript on Orbis Tertius.

Uqbar enters the story through its opening conversation. The interlocutors having concluded that "there is something monstrous about mirrors," Bioy recalls a statement he attributes to "one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar": "Mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they multiply the number of men" (*OC* 1: 431/*CF*: 68). More will have to be said about this statement, but worth noting at the outset are two points: (1) if the statement is heretical, then it arises in opposition to an orthodoxy within which there is nothing abominable about the multiplication of men; (2) the statement makes no distinction between the multiplication of actual men, by means of copulation, and that of images of men, by means of mirrors.

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<sup>2</sup> "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" has "generated more critical discussion than any of Borges' stories" (Jaén 185); "From its enigmatic title to the pathos of its final paragraphs, few texts of Borges have elicited more critical attention or have confounded more readers than 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'" (Stabb 58).

In response to the narrator's query, Bioy identifies, as the source of the statement, an article on Uqbar in *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. The rented house wherein the discussion takes place contains a copy of this reference work, but a search fails to reveal any entry for Uqbar, despite attempts made with various alternative spellings. Volume 46 of the *Cyclopaedia* is found to end with an article on Upsala, and Volume 47 to begin with one on Ural-Altai Languages. The following day, however, Bioy calls from Buenos Aires to report that his recollection had not been faulty: his own copy of the *Cyclopaedia's* Volume 46 does cover Uqbar. Before Bioy returns with this copy in hand, the narrator searches in vain, through "one of the atlases of Justus Perthes" and "the scrupulous cartographic indices of Ritter's *Erdkunde*," for additional references.

That the narrator reports having consulted these other sources indicates a serious interest and suggests significant research, but the suggestion may be misleading. Whereas he might well have consulted one of the many atlases published by Perthes, he cannot have examined relevant indices in the *Erdkunde*, for the simple reason that that work *has* no such indices: it has *no* cartographic indices (or, for that matter, maps), and no index at all for its two volumes on Asia. Those two were the first of a projected four, but Ritter never completed the work, and what he did complete has no treatment of that part of the world – "a region of Iraq or Asia Minor" (431/69) – where, according to Bioy, Uqbar was supposed to be located. Here, then, a first irregularity – an inconsistency or contradiction, of a sort – that may be relevant with respect to divining an appalling or banal reality.

Upon Bioy's return, comparison of the two exemplars of the *Cyclopaedia* reveals a single difference: whereas both copies of Volume 46 are labeled "Tor-Ups," one ends with the article on Upsala, on page 917, whereas the other adds Uqbar, via four additional pages whose presence is masked by the spine's identification of the volume's contents. Before turning to other matters, the narrator provides a reminder about the two sets of the *Anglo-American*: "Both (as I believe I have said) are reprints of the tenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*." In fact, in the story's opening paragraph, the narrator has told us a bit more: the *Cyclopaedia*, published in New York,

is dated 1917, and is “a literal (though also laggardly) reprint of the 1902 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.” The *Cyclopaedia* is laggardly in that it replicates an outdated original: six years before the *Cyclopaedia*’s putative appearance, the tenth *Britannica* edition was supplanted by the far superior eleventh (1910-11), the version owned, and regularly consulted, by Borges himself (Fishburn 82).

At the close of Part I, we learn that our narrator has been sufficiently intrigued by the *Cyclopaedia* to have discussed the matter with a second friend, who located a third copy in a bookstore, still for sale despite the interim appearances of the twelfth (1922), thirteenth (1926), and fourteenth (1929) editions of the *Britannica*. The narrator also reports having joined with Bioy in examining, in vain, “atlases, catalogs, the yearly indices published by geographical societies, the memoirs of travelers and historians” – this in addition to his earlier consultation of the Perthes atlas (for which no date is provided) and the *Erdkunde*, whose last edition is dated 1822. His research thus appears to be extensive, but it is far not only from being exhaustive, but even from being reasonable. Having discovered that two texts initially believed to be identical both to each other and to a third, from which both are copied, are in fact different, the obvious question is, which (if either) is true to the purported original? This question seems not to occur to the narrator. A second reasonable question would be this: does Uqbar appear in later editions of the *Britannica*? Why consider instead the *Erdkunde*, whose information is dated by nearly a century? The reader seeking a reality behind the story’s inconsistencies and contradictions should not, I think, ignore these peculiarities.

(EN)CYCLOP(A)EDIAS: FROM UQBAR TO UR

Of the narrator’s first source for information about Uqbar, *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, Fishburn and Hughes, in their valuable reference work *A Dictionary of Borges*, report the following:

Many pirated and mutilated editions of the ninth and tenth editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* were printed in America, but none has been found with the title ‘*Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*’ or published in New York in 1917, as stated by the narrator of ‘*Tlön...*’. The 1902

edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [...] consists of 35 volumes [...]: the story's alleged vol. 46 is obviously fictitious [...]. In private conversation with the present writers, Borges maintained that he owned a copy of the untraceable 'cyclopaedia'. (16)

Here, we have a new inconsistency: on the one hand, it is a least surprising that a literal reprint of a 35-volume work would contain at least 46 volumes; on the other hand, given that Borges tended, in interviews, to discuss his work relatively straightforwardly, it is noteworthy that he insists on the reality of the *Cyclopaedia*. It is not clear what steps Fishburn and Hughes took, in addition to comparing numbers of volumes, before deeming the *Cyclopaedia* untraceable, but be that as it may, thanks to internet sources likely unavailable to them, it is untraceable no longer: as of December 2001, a search via the WorldCat database of the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) seeking works published in New York in 1917 and containing "encyclopaedia," "encyclopedia," "cyclopaedia," or "cyclopeda" in the title, would yield the unhelpful *An Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, but also an *Anglo-American Encyclopedia*, a work of 50 volumes.<sup>3</sup> Further investigation would reveal that its volume

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<sup>3</sup> My reaction at discovering this work was perhaps anticipated by Borges via his narrator: "On one particular Islamic night, which is called the Night of Nights, the secret portals of the heavens open wide and the water in the water jars is sweeter than on other nights; if those gates had opened as I sat there, I would not have felt what I felt that evening" (*OC* 1: 434/*CF*: 71).

The reality of the *Anglo-American* is announced, relatively persuasively, as early as 1942, in a review by Bioy Casares:

The combination of persons real and unreal, of Martínez Estrada, on the one hand, and of Herbert Ashe or Bioy Casares, on the other, of places like Uqbar and Adrogué, of books like *The Anglo-American Encyclopedia* and *The First Encyclopedia* of Tlön, suits the formation of this country where the arguments of Berkeley would have been open to replies but not to doubts, and of its convincing image in readers' minds. (63)

Here, Bioy provides the correct spelling (although the hyphen is omitted), and the accuracy of his pairing of places – one real (Adrogué) and one not (Uqbar) – at least suggests that the *Anglo-American*, here contrasted with *The First Encyclopedia*, would be real. Doubt might have been cast, however, by his collection of persons: Martín Estrada (real) appears to be opposed not only to Herbert Ashe (fake, I believe and Bioy implies) but also to Bioy Casares.

46 is labeled “Tot-Ups” rather than “Tor-Ups”, but also that, like its counterpart *Cyclopaedia*, it concludes with an article on Upsala ending on page 917,<sup>4</sup> and its volume 47, like that of the *Cyclopaedia*, begins with one on Ural-Altai languages. That the *Anglo-American Encyclopedia* contains more volumes than did the tenth edition of the *Britannica* does not – *pace* Fishburn and Hughes – rule out the possibility of its being an exact copy, for the simple reason that its volumes contain fewer pages: its volume 46, for example, contains numbered pages 497-917, whereas volume 23 of the tenth (and ninth) edition of the *Britannica*, “T-Ups”, is numbered 1-860. The break between Volume 47 and Volume 48 of the *Anglo-American* interrupts not only an article – that on the wave-theory of light – but even a sentence.

Nevertheless, the *Anglo-American Encyclopedia* is *not* a literal copy of the *Britannica*'s tenth edition. The latter consists of the 24 volumes of the ninth edition, plus an 11-volume supplement; it thus covers the span from A through Z twice (once in volumes 1-24, again in volumes 26-33<sup>5</sup>), whereas the *Anglo-American* moves from A through Z in a single series. Moreover, from volume 46 of the *Anglo-American*, the correspondence is not directly to the tenth *Britannica* edition. The relevant volume unique to that edition is 33, which ends with page 945, covers Str-Zwo, and includes, following its article on Upsala (pp. 608-609), one on the Ural Mountains and one on Uralsk, but none on Ural-Altai Languages.<sup>6</sup> The correspondence is instead to the ninth *Britannica* edition, whose 23rd volume ends, as it should, with “Upsala,” and whose 24th begins with “Ural-Altai Languages”. Spot-checking supports the suspicion that the *Anglo-American* is an exact reprint of the ninth edition, but in twice the

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<sup>4</sup> For the record: although 917 is the highest numbered page in volume XLVI of the *Anglo-American*, that page is followed by a biographical supplement that concludes in XLVIII (after not appearing in XLVII).

<sup>5</sup> Volume 25 is an index; Volume 34 contains maps, Volume 35, a comprehensive index.

<sup>6</sup> Information on the specific contents of the tenth edition of the *Britannica* generously provided by Colin T. Clarkson, Head of the Reference Department, Cambridge University Library.

number of volumes (perhaps to make it appear both distinct and more extensive).<sup>7</sup>

From these comparisons, I conclude that Borges did own the *Anglo-American Encyclopedia*, and that he did consult its 46th and 47th volumes: for him to have hit by chance upon its 917 pages, or upon its volume break between “Upsala” and “Ural-Atlaic Languages,” would be – as his Lönnrot might note, at this point – not only uninteresting, but also virtually impossible (cf. *OC* 1: 500/*CF*: 148). Moreover, it is not only possible but, in my view, highly probable that he also consulted the eleventh edition of the *Britannica*, to which my attention was drawn precisely by his narrator’s surprising failure to consult it. And if one does consult it, one discovers something intriguing: it contains a counterpart for the mysterious treatment of Uqbar. Between its entries on Upsala and Ural-Altai Languages, there is one on Ur, the Chaldean city in the heart of the area – also the putative geographical location of Uqbar – often described as the cradle of civilization.<sup>8</sup>

Seeking Uqbar, the narrator should have found Ur: in Borges’s favorite edition of the *Britannica*, it occupies precisely the spot held by Uqbar in Bioy’s copy of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, and on our earth, it occupies the geographical spot where the *Cyclopaedia* locates Uqbar. The quest for a reality behind the story’s contradictions and inconsistencies thus leads from Uqbar to Ur. But what is Ur? First – but only first – it is a city, but even as a city, it is singular. According to the articles on Babylonia in the 1890 *Britannica*, the 1917 *Anglo-American*, and Borges’s 1911 *Britannica*, “Ur” means simply “the city” (strangely enough, this fact is not included in the 1911 article on Ur). This signification, particularly in conjunction with its location in the cradle of our civilization, suggests that Ur is somehow foundational, and this suggestion is strengthened by the fact that, as Borges obliquely reminds us by twice using the word “*Ursprache*” (435/73), “*ur*” is also a German prefix meaning “primal” or “originary” (hence Borges’s translation of *Ursprache* as “primitive lan-

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<sup>7</sup> My thanks to the University of Texas for making volumes of the *Anglo-American* available to me via interlibrary loan.

<sup>8</sup> My discovery of Ur in place of Uqbar was a second “Night of Nights” experience.

guage" [*idioma primitivo*] (443/81)). Yet the story itself also challenges the notion of the "ur-" as primal or originary, when it transforms the prefix into a noun. On Tlön, we are told, objects are created by being thought; such objects are called "*hrönir*." Initially, *hrönir* were duplicates of lost objects: "Two persons are looking for a pencil; the first person finds it, but says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but more in keeping with his expectations." Because any object can be lost, and because *hrönir* themselves are objects, there are also *hrönir* of *hrönir*, and thus series of *hrönir*, whose members differ in predictable ways, e.g., "*hrönir* of the second and third remove ... exaggerate the aberrations of the first; those of the fifth are almost identical." The account of these differences concludes as follows: "Sometimes stranger and purer than any *hrön* is the *ur* - the thing produced by suggestion, the object brought forth by hope" (440/78).

Whereas *hrönir* are parasitical - albeit possibly at several removes - on objects that are not *hrönir* - there would be no *hrön* pencils had there never been a real (non-*hrön*) original - the *ur*, it seems, springs full-grown from the brow of the one who imagines it.<sup>9</sup> This arouses the suspicion that Ur, conceived as our own pristine origin (German *ur-*) in the cradle of civilization (geographical Ur), is just such a thing: produced by suggestion, brought forth by hope (Tlönian *ur*). And this suggestion, in turn, is strengthened by the existence of yet another Ur, one like the Tlönian in being (at least arguably) produced by suggestion and brought forth by hope, but also like the German and geographical in being clearly situated on our earth, and in being, in a significant sense, originary: according to one Gnostic sect - and Gnostics, as we are about to see, play a significant role in Borges's story - Ur is the sub-deity, many emanations away from the true creator, responsible for the existence of our solar system - the

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<sup>9</sup> Worth noting, particularly in anticipation of the central thesis of this article, is that all artifacts might qualify as "ur," particularly for Aristotelians. Thomas Edison, familiar with candles and noting that heated wires emit light, most plausibly came up with the notion of the light bulb by combining ideas of objects of this sort - not by a mystic vision of the Ur-bulb in its Platonic heaven. The first bulb he produced would then indeed be the original light bulb, like the Tlönian *ur* in not being the copy of another, and having its own origin (although not its completion) in suggestion and hope.



“world of darkness” we inhabit while our souls are encaged in our bodies, separated from the divine world of light.<sup>10</sup> Like items deserving the German prefix, then, this Ur suggests an origin but, we might say, one that is derivatively originative: it is the source of our world, but it has its own source in a true deity far removed from it.

The hope that arguably engenders this Ur is precisely the human hope of escape from entrapment within the body and death along with it, the hope of immortality or even of apotheosis, a hope whose realization requires knowledge of Ur and, specifically, of his name:

Gnosticism is to a great extent dominated by the idea that it is above all and in the highest degree important for the Gnostic’s soul to be enabled to find its way back through the lower worlds and spheres of heaven ruled by the Seven to the kingdom of light of the supreme deity of heaven. Hence, a principal item in their religious practice consisted in communications about the being, nature and names of the Seven (or of any other hostile daemons barring the way to heaven), the formulas with which they must be addressed, and the symbols which must be shown to them. (EB 12: 155c)

#### HERETICS AND GNOSTICS: VEILED PROPHET AND MASKED DYER

The Uqbarian civilization – and, to the extent that Uqbar is Ur, our civilization – as Bioy first recalls it, includes (as I have noted) an orthodoxy opposed by a heresiarch who loathes copulation and mirrors. When Bioy consults his *Cyclopaedia*, he discovers that his recollection had been faulty. What he had recalled was – as the narrator now tells us, providing the English of the putative original – “copulation and mirrors are hateful.” The passage itself is both more extensive, and differently worded:

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<sup>10</sup> Borges might have known of this Ur from the 1911 *Britannica*’s articles on Gnosticism and/or the Mandaean, but will undoubtedly have gained detailed information – including two pictures – from E. S. Drower’s *The Mandaean of Iraq and Iran*, which he reviewed on 18 February 1938 (OC 4: 344-45). My discovery of the pictures provided a third Night of Nights.

For one of those Gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or (more precisely) a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and divulge it. (OC 1: 432/CF: 69)

Here, (1) the source of the assertion is identified not as a heresiarch, but as a Gnostic; (2) the abominable replication is not specifically of men, but of the entire visible universe; (3) a reason is given for deeming the replication abominable: the visible universe is, the more precise "sophism" suggests, an illusion designed to deceive or mislead; (4) the possibility arises for non-abominable copulation; (5) although it is no longer only men whose multiplication is abominable, the focus remains on men, in that only fatherhood is specified as abominable; and (6) mirrors and fatherhood are abominable not only for multiplying the visible world, but also for divulging it – that is, taken literally, for making it common, or spreading it among the people (*dis-vulgare*).

Here, there is much to unpack, but persuasive unpacking requires first that more be packed in. As Fishburn and Hughes (among others) note, one "original" source for the aphorism is Borges himself, in "The Masked Dyer, Hakim of Merv," which is contained in *A Universal History of Iniquity*. There, we read:

The earth we inhabit is an error, an incompetent parody. Mirrors and paternity are abominable, because they multiply and affirm it. Revulsion, disgust, is the fundamental virtue, and two rules of conduct (between which the Prophet left men free to choose) lead us to it: abstinence and utter licentiousness, the indulgence of the flesh or its chastity. (43/327)

Although Fishburn and Hughes describe "The Masked Dyer" as a "story," Borges presents it in terms different from those he uses for "TUOT." In his Prologue to *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), he first includes "TUOT" among the seven of the collection's pieces that are "tales of fantasy," and then as one of two that consist of "notes on imaginary books" (although, as we have seen, not all the books it notes are imaginary). "The Masked Dyer," on the other hand, is described in the Preface to *Iniquity's* initial (1935) edition first as one of its "exercises in narrative prose," and then as one of its "examples of magic." In the Preface to the 1954 edition, Borges in-

cludes "The Masked Dyer" among the pieces that are "the irresponsible sport of a shy sort of man who could not bring himself to write short stories, and so amused himself by changing and distorting (sometimes without aesthetic justification) the stories of other men" (291/5). From these he explicitly distinguishes the single "straight-forward short story" of the collection, "Man on Pink Corner."

The obvious candidate for the story distorted by reader Borges into "The Masked Dyer" is the one Borges identifies in his second paragraph: "The fame of the Prophet in the West is owed to a garrulous poem by Moore, laden with the Irish conspirator's sighs and longings" (324/41). The poem can only be *Lalla Rookh* (Hurley names it in his translation), and yet, as nearly always with Borges, matters are not so simple. Before introducing Moore, Borges first – in his opening paragraph – identifies four original sources of information on Hakim, but the bibliography at the end of *Iniquity* undermines the implication that he actually consulted any of the four (assuming that any exists). Instead, his Index lists two different reference works, an apocryphal German version of the Prophet's putative work *The Annihilation of the Rose* (which has left no trace I can detect in Fishburn and Hughes or in OCLC, in German translation or otherwise), and Sir Percy Sykes's *A History of Persia*. The latter contains some information, and points towards more:

The Veiled Prophet of Khorasan, A. H. 158-161 (774-777). – To the beginning of Mehdi's reign belong the incidents made familiar to English readers in Moore's well-known poem. Its hero, Mokanna, known as Hakim Burkai, or "the Physician with the face-veil," was born at Karez, which is now a squalid village on the road between Meshed and Heart. He taught the immanence of the Deity in Adam, in Abu Muslim, whose name was still intensely revered, and in himself. For four years he held Central Asia, until, being besieged and seeing no hope, he cast himself into a tank of vitriol. (2: 66-67)

Noteworthy, first, is that Moore and Sykes cannot have been Borges's sole sources of information on the Veiled Prophet, for whereas Borges presents Merv as the Prophet's birthplace, Moore says noth-

ing about that matter,<sup>11</sup> and Sykes has him born in Karez. Borges might have found Merv as the birthplace in his eleventh edition of the *Britannica* (the information is indeed there), but there is an additional source, perhaps yet more probable. To the passage just quoted, Sykes appends a single footnote: "Browne points out the essential identity of all these sects and gives details in vol. I, chap. ix. of his work." The Browne in question is Edward Granville, the work, *Literary History of Persia*, and the likelihood that Borges actually consulted it is increased by the fact that the title of the relevant chapter – "The Great Persian Heresiarchs of this Period" – uses the term Bioy will mistakenly recall having read in the article on Uqbar.<sup>12</sup> "Heresiarch" is not to be found in the relevant article in the *Britannica*.

What is most striking about Borges's Masked Dyer, in contrast with the Veiled Prophet of Sykes, Browne, and Moore, is that the former is a Gnostic rather than one of the "great Persian heresiarchs" of his period.<sup>13</sup> Borges himself describes his Dyer as recording "the articles of a personal religion (a personal religion that bore the clear influence of his Gnostic forebears)" (327/43), but does not stress how thoroughly Gnostic his Dyer is.<sup>14</sup> According to Browne, the Persian heresiarchs are united by their shared commitment to "the same essential doctrines of Anthropomorphism, Incarnation, Re-incarnation or 'Return,' and Metempsychosis" (I: 310); none of these doctrines is professed by Borges's Hakim. Whereas the Veiled Prophet presents himself as the reincarnation of God – or his body as the current host of God's transmigrating soul – the Masked Dyer has, in good Gnostic fashion, had a mystical or magical meeting with God (325/42). Also in good Gnostic fashion, the Masked Dyer affirms a doctrine of emanation, and insists upon the inferior-

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, I find nothing in Moore that is of relevance to the Borges story.

<sup>12</sup> That Borges read Browne's history at some point in his life is established by his reference to it in his second Norton lecture, "Metaphor."

<sup>13</sup> Details concerning Gnosticism in the following account are all taken from the eleventh edition of the *Britannica*.

<sup>14</sup> On the Prophet's Gnosticism, see also di Giovanni 10, Callois 29-32, and Jaén 187-88.

ity of our world. With respect to the latter, the *Britannica* makes clear the distinction between the Gnostic and Persian views:

When Gnosticism recognizes in this corporeal and material world the true seat of evil, consistently treating the bodily existence of mankind as essentially evil and the separation of the spiritual from the corporeal being as the object of salvation, this is an outcome of the contrast in Greek dualism between spirit and matter, soul and body. For in Oriental (Persian) dualism it is within this material world that the good and evil powers are at war, and this world beneath the stars is by no means conceived as entirely subject to the influence of evil. Gnosticism has combined the two, the Greek opposition between spirit and matter, and the sharp Zoroastrian dualism, which, where the Greek mind conceived of a higher and a lower world, saw instead two hostile worlds, standing in contrast to each other like light and darkness. (154c)

For the heresiarchs, then, good and evil are at war within our world. For the Gnostics, and for the Masked Dyer, our world is simply evil; the good is above and beyond it.

The Masked Dyer's treatment of sexuality, too, is clearly Gnostic. He abominates paternity, but not copulation, just as, according to the *Britannica*, "unbridled prostitution appears as a distinct and essential part" of the Gnostic cult of the mother of the Gods, and "by this unbridled prostitution the Gnostic sects desired to prevent the sexual propagation of mankind, the origin of all evil." Similarly, just as the Masked Dyer offers his followers the choice between "abstinence and utter licentiousness" (*OC* 1: 327/*CF*: 43), among the Gnostics, "carnal pleasure is frequently looked upon as forbidden," but this "asceticism sometimes changes into wild libertinism" (*EB* 12: 157d).

In terms of biography as well as teachings, the Masked Dyer is more Gnostic than Persian heresiarch, in at least three important respects. First, whereas the Veiled Prophet is described both by the *Britannica* and by one of Browne's sources as a fuller (*EB* 18: 651d, *Browne* 1: 320), his Borgesian counterpart is a dyer who at first "deformed the true colors of the creatures," and then concluded that "all color is abominable" (*OC* 1: 324-25/*CF*: 41); I find no basis for attributing to the Veiled Prophet any objection either to colors or to

their deformation.<sup>15</sup> Second, whereas the Masked Dyer also abominates mirrors, the one miracle or illusion most consistently attributed to the Veiled Prophet is the production of a “false moon,” attributed by one of Browne’s sources to a mirroring:

“al-Hakím al-Muqanna’ ... made a well at Nakhshab whence there rose up a moon which men saw like the [real] moon. ... The common folk supposed it to be magic, but it was only effected by [a knowledge of] mathematics and the reflection of the rays of the moon; for they [afterwards] found at the bottom of the well a great bowl filled with quicksilver.”

The third difference between Prophet and Dyer is that whereas the former is famous for committing suicide in a manner that would obliterate all trace of his body, so that it might be believed that “he had disappeared and would return again,” the Dyer allows himself to be taken alive and then unmasked (Browne I: 319).<sup>16</sup>

Assuming that the evidence cited establishes that at least one central way in which Borges changes or distorts the Veiled Prophet is by making him into a Gnostic, the question arises whether anything helpful emerges from this observation. I believe that something does. First, whereas Bioy’s reference to heresiarchs, albeit mistaken, suggests the possibility of multiple heresies, both Sykes and Browne confirm that in at least some cases – including that of the Veiled Prophet – the multiplicity is merely apparent: the heresiarchs are in fundamental agreement. Second, the Gnosticism that is the source of

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<sup>15</sup> The Veiled Prophet, like the Masked Dyer, had white-clad followers, but the latter’s “fourfold veil of white silk” differs markedly from the two coverings – both colored – regularly attributed to the former, i.e., a mask of gold or a veil of green silk (Browne I: 319).

<sup>16</sup> A fourth difference, less marked than the three just listed, concerns what the mask or veil conceals. The Dyer is unmasked as a sufferer of leprosy, and thus as one who has become deformed during the course of his life. According to Browne, some accounts report the belief, among the Prophet’s opponents, that he was concealing “his deformed and hideous aspect” (1:319) others, that he was “ill-made and one-eyed” (320).

the aphorism concerning paternity and mirrors is rooted in Platonism<sup>17</sup>:

Throughout this mystic religious world it was above all the influence of the late Greek religion, derived from Plato, that also continued to operate; it is filled with the echo of the song, the first note of which was sounded by the Platonists, about the heavenly home of the soul and the homeward journey of the wise to the higher world of light. (EB 12: 155c)

This connection suggests that the heresy, both of the Dyer and in Uqbar, is Platonistic, and if that is the case, then the orthodoxy, for Borges, would most plausibly be Aristotelian, for he is fond of endorsing Coleridge's claim that "all human beings are born either as Aristotelians or as Platonists" (OC 1: 580, OC 2: 96, 123).

#### PLATONISTS AND ARISTOTELIANS

The relationship of Platonists and Aristotelians is extremely complicated, even within the somewhat restricted context of the works of Borges. For my purposes, however, only two points of difference need be introduced. The first is one that Borges nowhere (to my knowledge) stresses, but one of which he cannot have been unaware: the Platonist, in comparison with the Aristotelian, places an incomparably higher value on mathematics. This point is stressed repeatedly by Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*, the book Borges identifies, late in his life, as the single volume he thinks he might choose to have with him were he stranded on a desert island (*Diálogos* 218).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Russell asserts, "Plato, under the

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<sup>17</sup> Throughout this article, references to "Platonism" are to doctrines traditionally attributed to Plato and/or to his purported followers. My own view is that Plato does not mean to espouse most of these doctrines, but this is not the place to defend that view. That Borges does not see Plato and Aristotle as irreconcilably opposed is perhaps suggested in an interview: "Perhaps it would be dangerous to distance ourselves from Plato. Or from Aristotle, no? Why not accept them both? They are both our benefactors" (*Diálogos* 49).

<sup>18</sup> On Plato and mathematics, see Russell's *History*, 105, 120, 124, 130-32, 159, 208. Given my own assessment of the quality of Russell's *History*, I am saddened to think of Borges valuing it highly; some consolation is provided by the fact that, at the time of

influence of the Pythagoreans, assimilated other knowledge too much to mathematics" (159).

Second, and less directly supportable but no less, I believe, ultimately undeniable: to Platonism, as opposed to Aristotelianism, must be ascribed a greater appreciation not only of mathematics, but also of technology. To be sure, neither Plato nor Aristotle champions the efforts of the builder or cobbler, and both argue that the best life, for human beings, is that of the philosopher or theoretician. At the same time, however, there are at least two good reasons for including the technocrat among the Platonists. First, the God in Plato's *Timaeus* – his "demiurge", the term appropriated by Borges to describe those responsible for Tlön (441/79)<sup>19</sup> – is a creator, whereas Aristotle's is not: for Aristotle, there is nothing divine about transforming the world as we find it. Second, Plato's *Republic* is often (and not wholly unreasonably) taken to advocate drastic political activity for the sake of establishing a utopia; the dialogue thus at least suggests, as Aristotle nowhere does, that the world is not as it should be, and that human activity both could and should improve it by means of drastic transformation.<sup>20</sup>

Returning now to "TUOT," the identification of the Uqbarian Gnostics as Platonists clarifies some initially puzzling details of the text. Within the context of Platonism, the "mirrors of stone" purportedly found in Uqbar are reminiscent of the famous cave allegory in the *Republic*,<sup>21</sup> wherein the experience of the chained prisoners is

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the interview in which he refers to it, he had long been blind and thus had access to the Russell volume only in memory, which, as he notes in the same series of interviews, "changes things" (49).

<sup>19</sup> In *Vox*, "demiurgos" is defined as, first, "in the Platonic philosophy, creator and arranger of the universe" and, second, as "in the Gnostic school, the active principle of the world."

<sup>20</sup> Early in his *Metaphysics* (982b22-25), Aristotle suggests that he and at least some others have the luxury of being able to philosophize only because not only their needs, but even their wants, have been fully satisfied. He foresees no technological progress that could improve his life.

<sup>21</sup> To my knowledge (guided by Balderston's index), Borges never directly refers to anything from the *Republic* save Book X and, albeit both late in his life and obliquely, Book II (*OC* 4: 464). Nevertheless, the evidence that he read *Ion*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, and *Timaeus* leads me to deem it likely that he would have read at least the cave allegory, to



limited to the shadows and sounds accessible to them by reflection from a wall of stone (515a). The thought of the cave allegory brings with it recollection of the immediately preceding account of the divided line, an image of which the allegory is itself an image.<sup>22</sup> The central division on Plato's line is between the visible and the intelligible – a distinction recalled by the specific wording of the *Cyclopaedia's* article on Uqbar, which presents the "visible world" as a sophism. The "visible world" of the prisoners in the cave is, of course, precisely such a sophism: for them, "the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things" (515c); they are tricked into believing that the shadows are the true reality.

This notion of "shadows of artificial things" points us again towards the divided line: the division between the intelligible and the visible is also that between being and becoming, and thus between knowledge and mere belief. Within the realm of the visible, the realm of becoming, we find both images and things; their pairing clarifies the lack of distinction, for the Uqbarian heretic, between mirrors and fatherhood, with their respective multiplications. The entities propagated through both sorts of reproduction come and go

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which Russell refers as "the most famous passage in Plato" (57). He will in any case have known it through Russell's summary (125-26).

As Luce Irigaray has noted – albeit in a circuitous, obscure, and often baffling fashion – Plato's cave is also Plato's womb, in at least two important senses: it is both an image of the human womb, and the womb through which Plato gives birth to the Western intellectual tradition, dominated, as it has been, by Platonism and Christianity (the latter being, in Nietzsche's characterization, "Platonism for the people"). Within the *Republic*, the earth is characterized as mother (414e), the sun as father, and the latter is presented as "providing what is seen with the power of being seen, [and] also with generation, growth, and nourishment although it itself isn't generation" (509b). Given this understanding, it makes sense to classify paternity, but not maternity, as abominable, because maternity contributes nothing to the offspring (not generation, not growth, not nourishment).

That influential books, including those of Plato, contribute to making us who we are is recognized by Borges, specifically with reference to "TUOT." Having described this story as perhaps his "most ambitious," he attributes to it "the idea of reality transformed by a book... the idea of a book that transforms all reality and transforms the past. I noticed that this has always happened. Because finally, we are the works of the Bible and of the Platonic dialogues" (Carrizo 222).

<sup>22</sup> From Russell's *History* (124), Borges would also have been pointed towards Plato's line, if he were not already aware of it.

and are thus, in terms of line and cave, mixtures of being and non-being. They are comparably misleading or distracting, in that both veil from us the realm of intelligibility, being, and truth, and thus help to restrict us to the realm to which we are bound by what Plato's *Phaedo* presents as our imprisonment in our bodies (82e),<sup>23</sup> which are thus, in their truth, as repellent as is the leprosy-ridden body of the Masked Dyer.

Rephrasing this point, we could say that for the Platonist, truth and being are present only in the (German) *Ur-*, the original (be it good or justice, table or bed<sup>24</sup>). For the Platonist, every actual cat – every cat that lives and breathes – is a copy, defective to a greater or lesser degree, of an unchanging original. For the Aristotelian, on the other hand, because introducing the *Ur-cat* explains nothing, we have no reason to deny that my cat – for example – could be as perfect a cat as could be. She traces her origin not to some primal idea, but to a complex and in many ways contingent combination of entities and circumstances: to her parents, of course, but also to her parents having chanced to encounter each other at the time propitious for her conception, and to her mother having managed to avoid cars and fatal diseases during the period of her pregnancy (this, obviously, to name simply the most obvious of the innumerable conditions that had to be satisfied for her to emerge as precisely the cat that she is). Thus, whereas for the Platonist the origin is simple and pure, for the Aristotelian, it is a mess.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Borges refers to this passage in *OC4:174*; in the same piece he also describes the *Phaedo* as “the most moving (*patético*) text in all philosophy” (173).

<sup>24</sup> The status of ideas or forms of artifacts, in the Platonic dialogues, is controversial, but the passage where they are most prominent is in a part of the *Republic* we know Borges to have read, i.e., Book X (*OC 1: 228n*).

<sup>25</sup> Concerning the messiness of the origin, consider, from “Note on Walt Whitman”:

Pantheism has divulged a variety of phrases which declare that God is several contradictory or (even better) miscellaneous things. The prototype of such phrases is this: “I am the rite, I am the offering, I am the libation of butter, I am the fire (*Bhagavadgita* IX, 16). Earlier, but ambiguous, is Fragment 67 of Heraclitus: “God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger.” (*OC 1: 251/OI: 69*)

U(QBA)R

From the details of Part I considered thus far, I emerge with the suggestion that the Uqbarian heresy is, broadly speaking, Platonistic, thereby signalling, as the opposed orthodoxy, an Aristotelianism. Combining this conclusion with the earlier consideration of Uqbar and Ur, the replacement of Ur with Uqbar suggests a rejection of an origin that would be simple, perfect, pure, and pristine. To use one of Aristotle's favorite phrases, "Ur" *legetai pollakos*, i.e., is "said in many ways," or has many meanings, and that it has the ones that it has is a matter purely of chance.<sup>26</sup> And this may be signalled by the name "Uqbar," which interrupts and complicates the "Ur" with a *cuba*: in Spanish, the name of the letter "q" is *cu*, and a *cuba* is a barrel or vat. The replacement of Ur with Uqbar suggests that we have no simple source or origin, no Ur; instead, the only beginning we can discover – rather than produce by suggestion or bring forth by hope – is complex, a barrel or vat (*cuba*, *q-ba*) within the Ur (U-qbar),<sup>27</sup> a vessel containing, at least, the heterogeneous elements of its Platonism and its Aristotelianism – which may also be reflected, respectively, in Tlön and Mlejnás, the two "imaginary realms" wherein, we are told, all Uqbarian literature is set (OC 1: 442/CF: 70).

1614 AND 1641

A final detail from Part I must be introduced. As I have noted, the narrator reports that the bibliography of the *Cyclopaedia's* article on Uqbar lists four items.

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<sup>26</sup> This distinguishes it from, for example, "healthy," whose many meanings all relate, according to Aristotle, to one that is primary: because bodies can be healthy, we can call such things as diets and climates "healthy", because they can contribute to the health of bodies. "Ur" is instead like "bark," whose various meanings – including the sound dogs make, the covering of trees, and a type of small boat – are unrelated.

<sup>27</sup> This suggestion for Borges's choice of the name "Uqbar" will no doubt strike some readers as overly fanciful; worth noting is Borges's admission, in 1964, that he and Bioy, in work they co-authored, "had probably gone too far with their jokes – 'jokes squared, jokes cubed'" (Woodall, 128).

The first, *Lesbare und lesenswerthe Bemerkungen über das Land Ukbar in Klein-Asien*, published in 1641, is the work of one Johannes Valentinus Andreä. That fact is significant: two or three years afterward, I came upon that name in the unexpected pages of De Quincey (*Writings*, Vol. XIII), where I learned that it belonged to a German theologian who in the early seventeenth century described an imaginary community, the Rosy Cross – which other men later founded, in imitation of his foredescription. (432-33/70)

De Quincey indeed argues that Andreä is the author of *Fama Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis*, and one detail of his summary of that work provides a tenuous link to Ur, described in the Bible as “of the Chaldees” (*Gen.* 11: 28):

Christian Rosycross, of noble descent, having upon his travels into the East and into Africa learned great mysteries from Arabians, Chaldeans, etc., upon his return to Germany established, in some place not mentioned, a secret society. (13: 403)

The copy of *Fama Fraternitatis* consulted by De Quincey was dated 1614, although De Quincey suspects that there had been earlier editions. I share with other commentators the assumption that *Bemerkungen über Ukkbar* does not exist, and others have noted that its publication date, 1641, transposes the final digits of De Quincey’s *Fama*. This is true, but of course it is not the only truth about 1641. 1641 is also the publication date of Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*, which is an example of the kind of account Bioy and the narrator discuss as “Tlön” begins: its first-person narrator arguably omits or disfigures facts and develops various contradictions in a manner that could allow a few – at the outset, a very few – readers to divine a possibly appalling or banal reality. About the *Meditations*, more will have to be said.

## 2. TLÖN

Part II of Borges’s story opens with the introduction of the Englishman Herbert Ashe, who is unmasked, in the Postscript, as a member of the secret society responsible for transforming our world into Tlön. As one of the conspirators, Ashe should also (in accordance

with my working hypothesis) be a Platonist, and although that identification appears to be made problematic by Borges's assertion that "the English mind was born Aristotelian" (OC 2: 97), the force of this claim is undermined by Borges's own identification, as Platonists, of several Englishmen (including Keats, along with the 17th-century "Cambridge Platonists" and F. H. Bradley (OC 2: 95-96)). That Ashe should be included among these anomalies is supported by his further characteristics: he is a mathematician, an engineer, and a chess player (the world of chess, as a fully ordered and rule-governed cosmos, is Platonistic).

Ashe enters the story because, some months following his death in September 1937, the narrator acquires a book intended for the decedent:

The book was written in English, and it consisted of 1001 pages. On the leatherbound volume's yellow spine I read these curious words, which were repeated on the false cover: *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön. Vol. XI.*<sup>28</sup> *Hlaer to Jangr.* There was no date or place of publication. On the first page and again on the onionskin page that covered one of the color illustrations there were stamped a blue oval with this inscription: *Orbis Tertius.* (OC 1: 434/CF: 71)

The narrator concludes, with the ultimate support of numerous scholars, that the Tlön described in the volume is the creation of "a secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebraists, moralists, painters, geometers, ..., guided and directed by some shadowy man of genius" (434-35/72). By 1940, the "zoology and topography" of Tlön have been "trumpeted, with pardonable excess," in "popular magazines" (435/72). The narrator then himself devotes several pages – easily the longest section of the story – to an extensive description of Tlönian thought, languages, science, and literature.

The narrator's account appears, in a number of particulars, to be definitive: "The nations of that planet are, congenitally, idealistic" (435/72); "the classical culture of Tlön is composed of a single disci-

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<sup>28</sup> That the volume number is eleven may be another hint of the relevance of the eleventh edition of the *Britannica*.

pline – psychology – to which all others are subordinate” (436/73); “Within the sphere of literature [...], the idea of a single subject is all-powerful” (439/76). It is conceivable, of course, that articles with just this information could be included in those with titles falling between “Hlaer” and “Jangr,” yet we should also note, as the narrator does, both that “many massive volumes” are missing, and that “the foundation stone of the proof that the other volumes do in fact exist” is provided by “the apparent contradictions of Volume Eleven.” Alfonso Reyes – like Bioy Casares, an actual friend of Borges – is reported to have suggested a collective effort at reconstructing the *First Encyclopedia* in its entirety, and to have estimated “half-seriously, half in jest, that a generation of Tlönists would suffice” (434/72). The project is clarified by the phrase *ex ungue leonem*, “from the claw, the lion.”

Clearly, a generation of Tlönists cannot have provided the narrator with the information he relates, a mere two or three years following the discovery of Volume Eleven. As clearly, the project, even for that generation of scholars, would be deeply problematic. *Ex ungue leonem*, perhaps – but *ex eodem ungue vel sphingem vel chimaeram vel manticatoram vel grypsem*: one might, from a claw, reconstruct a lion, but from the same claw one might equally well reconstruct a sphinx, a chimaera, a manticore, or a griffin – and these possibilities are all provided by our own mythological heritage. When the task is that of reconstructing an entire, fictitious planet, the possibilities of utter distortion increase beyond measure. The tenuousness of the narrator’s own reconstruction is emphasized by the revelation, in the Postscript, that the eleventh volume from a complete set of forty volumes, reported (as of 1940) to have been discovered in 1944, differs significantly from the volume intended for Ashe; indeed, we are told specifically that the duplication of *hrönir*, whose description occupies the single longest paragraph in Part II (439-40/77-78), has been “eliminated or muted in the Memphis copy” (442/80). The narrator assumes that the Ashe copy predates the complete set – “It seems reasonable to suppose that the cuts obey the intent to set forth a world that is not too incompatible with the real world” – but it seems just as reasonable to suspect that Ashe’s volume might be as aberrant as was Bioy’s forty-sixth volume of the *Cyclopedia*: there is

no reason to assume that the Tlön containing *hrönir* is more accurate (to what?) than the one from which *hrönir* are missing.

These various considerations strongly suggest that the Tlönian details provided in Part II should not be taken as revelatory of what is essential to the Tlön that our world is said to be becoming. Borges confronts us with a narrator who makes guesses about a whole on the basis of relatively few, relatively isolated, and at least at times apparently contradictory parts. He describes his volume as “a vast and systematic fragment,” but the “system” that organizes it – alphabetic order – insures that it itself is not a coherent whole: the volume is, so to speak, a microchaos rather than a microcosm. We cannot of course simply ignore the fragments reconstructed on the basis of those fragments, but we must also attempt to glimpse a whole different from the one constructed by the narrator (we must, if there is indeed an appalling and/or banal reality to be divined from Borges’s omissions, distortions, and contradictions, and if we are to succeed in divining it).

#### COLORS AND NUMBERS

With this in mind, let us look back to Herbert Ashe. The narrator describes their final meeting as follows:

I recall [Ashe] on the hotel veranda, holding a book of mathematics, looking up sometimes at the irrecoverable colors of the sky, One evening, we spoke about the duodecimal number system, in which twelve is written 10. Ashe said that he was just then transposing some duodecimal table or other to sexagesimal (in which sixty is written 10). He added that he’d been commissioned to perform that task by a Norwegian man in Rio Grande do Sul. [...] [N]othing more was said – God forgive me – of duodecimals. (433/71)

In the Postscript, the Norwegian is identified as Gunnar Erfjord, who emerges, along with Ashe, as a member of the secret society responsible for the development of Tlön (440/78, 441/79). This justifies the assumption that it must have been a project related to Tlön that Ashe had been pursuing during that final meeting with the narrator. The question, then, is that of the connection between “the irre-

coverable colors of the sky” and alternative systems of writing numbers.

In a footnote to “The Analytic Language of John Wilkins,” Borges notes:

Theoretically, the number of systems of numeration is unlimited. The most complex (for the use of divinities and angels) would include an infinite number of symbols, one for every whole number; the simplest would require two. (*OC* 2: 85/*OI*: 102).

The sentence to which the footnote is appended reads,

Descartes, in a letter dated November 1629, had already noted that by means of a decimal system of notation we can learn in a single day to enumerate all quantities up to infinity and write them in a new language of Arabic symbols.<sup>29</sup>

Following the intervention of the footnote, the sentence continues: “[Descartes] had also proposed the formation of an analogous and general language that would organize and contain all human thoughts.” Wilkes, Borges tells us, sought to develop such a language, but his proposed language was not to be mathematical, although Borges does use the mathematical term “quadragesimal” to describe it, on the basis that it is grounded in a division into forty basic categories (the system itself is not mathematical in that there is no indication that each of these categories should contain forty subdivisions, each of which should contain a further forty, etc.). Having pointed out some “ambiguities, redundancies, and deficiencies”

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<sup>29</sup> My “Arabic symbols” renders Borges’s *guarismos*. Simms provides “the language of numbers,” but I deem Borges’s use of the less common term, derived from Arabic, worth preserving, particularly given that the numerals we use are, of course, themselves Arabic. Descartes, in the letter to which Borges refers, does not refer to the decimal or any other system of notation (I: 76-82); he argues instead that because of the “natural order” of the numbers, one can learn in a day to name (not symbolize) them all in a foreign language, and to write those names, although that would require infinitely many different words (80). In the ordered language, the words would presumably re-use significant parts (thus, “one-hundred-forty-three” would be a word distinct from “one,” “hundred,” “forty,” and “three,” but immediately intelligible to anyone understanding these other words). It would thereby differ from the senseless system of numeration begun by Borges’s Funes (*OC* 1: 489/*CF*: 135-36).



with Wilkes's proposed division, Borges cites comparable problems with a putative Chinese system that might be quartodecimal,<sup>30</sup> and a millesimal (1,000-categorized) one attributed to the Bibliographical Institute of Brussels.

The initially Cartesian project that had defeated Wilkes, the Chinese encyclopedists, and the Belgian bibliographers is the task being tackled by Ashe. He cannot have been commissioned simply to rewrite hexadecimals as sexagesimals; in itself, that is a straightforward and useless mathematical task. He must therefore be doing something more, and his vacillations between his book of mathematics and the clouds are explained, most plausibly (and perhaps solely), as an attempt to determine which system of numeration – if not the duodecimal, perhaps the hexagesimal – could succeed in preserving, via symbolic notation, those irrecoverable colors of the sky.

Ashe's part of the project, so understood, is consistently presented by Borges as post-Medieval,<sup>31</sup> and more specifically as Cartesian. This fits well with the connection suggested in Part I between Uqbar and Andreä (and with him, the dates 1614 and 1641), a connection strengthened in the Postscript, when the origin of Tlön is located "sometime in the early seventeenth century." That, in other words, is the point at which Tlön began its transformation from one of the two imaginary settings for Uqbarian literature to the planet we ourselves inhabit.

What we have, in the remainder of Part II, are fragments – most of them, probably, abortive – from this transformation. For just that reason, we cannot move from those disconnected or even contradictory parts to the ultimate whole of an appalling and/or banal reality.

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<sup>30</sup> Borges tells us only that animals are divided into fourteen categories, which I note for the benefit of readers who may not have encountered them: "(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens [*sirenas*; possibly "mermaids"], (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in this classification, (i) that are worked up like crazy, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) that have just broken the vase, (n) that from a distance look like flies" (OC 2: 86/OI: 103).

<sup>31</sup> The Chinese encyclopedia is insufficiently linguistic and insufficiently mathematical to qualify as a counterexample.

Once we have a vision of the whole, we will be in a better position to look back at these parts, but to gain that vision of the whole, we must look to the Postscript.

### 3. ORBIS TERTIUS

We first encounter Orbis Tertius in Volume XI of the *First Encyclopedia*. In it, "Orbis Tertius" is inscribed within a blue oval stamped both on the first page and on an onionskin page. We are told that "there was no date or place of publication," but there, perhaps, the narrator is mistaken, for "*orbis tertius*," Latin for "third orb" or "third circuit," could indicate both place – our earth, the third planet – and time – our age, the modern or scientific, following the ancient or pagan and the medieval or Christian.

Orbis Tertius next enters as the tentative title of a projected 100-volume work, *The Second Encyclopedia*, to be written in one of the languages of Tlön. When that work appears, the narrator projects, "the world will be Tlön," and it will have been made Tlön by "a scattered dynasty of recluses."

This "dynasty of recluses" has included, among its earliest members, Dalgarno and Berkeley. I focus first on the former, who is best known as the first to attempt to reach the Cartesian goal of creating a universal, philosophical language.<sup>32</sup> Given, however, that the goal itself is Cartesian, it seems reasonable also to classify Descartes himself as a member of the "secret society of recluses", and perhaps even as its founder. And if we look more closely at the letter Borges has cited, we discover that Descartes conceived of a language that would not be not merely universally usable, but universally revelatory of reality – one that would provide so accurate a "map of the universe," to use Borges's terms, that "by its means peasants would be better able to judge of the truth of things than are [current] philosophers" (*Ceuvres* 1: 81-82). For the language to come into use, however, would "presuppose great changes in the order of things, and it would be necessary that the entire world be nothing but a ter-

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<sup>32</sup> Adam and Tannery, editors of Descartes's *Ceuvres*, note the Cartesian basis of this project, which they present as moving from Dalgarno to Wilkins (1: 82).

restrial paradise, which is reasonable to suggest only for France [*ce qui n'est bon à proposer que dans le pays des romans*]” (82).

That Descartes does not here envisage transforming the entire world into a terrestrial paradise is less surprising than that he does envisage such a transformation for France.<sup>33</sup> Surprising though the latter projection may be, however, it is one that he makes not only in this private letter, but also in his first (albeit anonymously) published work. In the *Discourse on Method*, he announces his discovery of “some general notions about physics” that

made me see that it is possible to [...] find a practical philosophy by means of which, knowing the force and action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens and all other bodies that surround us, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans, we would be able to use them in the same way for all the applications for which they are appropriate, and thereby make ourselves masters and possessors of nature. This is not merely to be desired with a view to the invention of an infinite number of devices that would enable us to enjoy, without any effort, the fruits of the earth and all the goods we find there, but also, especially, for the preservation of health which is undoubtedly the foremost good and the foundation for all the other goods of this life. (Shea 110)

Enjoying the fruits of the earth without any effort, we would be as though in the garden from which Adam and Eve were expelled, but our new garden would be one of our own making, controlled by machines that we had produced and could maintain, one within which we, not God, would be masters and possessors, and one within which we might even, as Descartes himself hoped, dwell as though we had eaten from the tree of life (as Adam and Eve were, by means of their expulsion, prevented from doing). A source contemporary with Descartes reports “that although he could not promise to render man immortal he was certain that he could render his life as long as that of the Patriarchs,” i.e., somewhere between 365

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<sup>33</sup> That he limits the proposal to France fits well with the details of “TUOT”: the original ambition of the secret society was to create a country; the project of creating a planet is attributed to an American, and dated “around 1824” (OC 1: 440/CF: 79).

and 969 (110). That Descartes's concerns with extending life, perhaps indefinitely, were not known only to intimates is clearly indicated by the fact that when Descartes died (at 53), the *Antwerp Gazette* noted, "A fool, who said he could live as long as he wished, has died in Sweden" (110-11).

The teaching that the technology developing from a mathematical physics will make humans into gods who might no longer need to worry about an afterlife was not, as Descartes was well aware, likely to be embraced by the still-dominant Catholic Church. He was on the verge of publishing *The World* when, in November 1633, he learned of Galileo's condemnation;<sup>34</sup> he withdrew the work, and its most controversial parts were published only after his death. Less problematic parts appeared in 1637, with the *Discourse on Method*, but those he published anonymously.

From the eleventh edition of the *Britannica*, Borges will have known that Descartes was concerned with, and ultimately did not avoid, censorship and persecution, that he was both interested in and linked to the Rosicrucians, and that he was a recluse who, for significant periods of his life, kept "his proper address ... completely secret" (8:80d; see also Lewes, 2: 437-38). He will have known that Descartes projected a "universal science" (82a), and that the *Discourse*, at least, was written in the first person (82b). Of Descartes's teachings, Borges will have read this summary:

The *Discourse of Method* and the *Meditations* apply what the [posthumously published] *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* had regarded in particular instances to our conceptions of the world as a whole. They propose, that is, to find a simple and indecomposable point, or absolute element, which gives to the world and thought their order and

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<sup>34</sup> Galileo is another key member of the secret society of recluses, or perhaps one of their forerunners. In a footnote to "On the Cult of Books" (1951), Borges quotes him: "Philosophy is written in that very large book that is continually opened before our eyes (I mean the universe), but which is not understood unless one first studies the language and knows the characters in which it is written. The language of that book is mathematical and the characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures" (*OC* 2: 94n1/*OI*: 119-20n2). The contention at the very heart of *Tlön*, on my reading, is that the book of the universe is written in the language of mathematics - this would be *Tlönian* language "that has already filtered into our schools" (*OC* 1: 443/*CF*: 81).

systematization. The grandeur of this attempt is perhaps unequalled in the annals of philosophy. The three main steps in the argument are the veracity of our thought when that thought is true to itself, the inevitable uprising of thought from its fragmentary aspects in our habitual consciousness to the infinite and perfect existence which God is, and the ultimate reduction of the material universe to extension and local movement. There are the central dogmas of logic, metaphysics, and physics, from which start the subsequent inquiries of Locke, Leibnitz, and Newton. They are also the direct antitheses to the scepticism of Montaigne and Pascal, to the materialism of Gas-sendi and Hobbes, and to the superstitious anthropomorphism which defaced the reawakening sciences of nature. *Descartes laid down the lines on which modern philosophy and science were to build.* But himself no trained metaphysician and unsusceptible to the lessons of history, he gives but fragments of a system which are held together, not by their intrinsic consistency, but by the vigour of his personal conviction transcending the weaknesses and collisions of his several arguments. "All my opinions," he says, "are so conjoined, and depend so closely upon one another, that it would be impossible to appropriate one without knowing them all." Yet every disciple of Cartesianism seems to disprove the dictum by his example. (84d; my emphasis)

"Descartes laid down the lines on which modern philosophy and science were to build," and it is modern science, specifically, that continues to transform the world into one of our making, and thus into Tlön. And he first laid down those lines, in his own name, in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, published in 1641, the putative date of Andreä's *Lesbare und lesenswerthe Bemerkungen über das Land Ukbar in Klein-Asien*.

Like the piece the narrator recalls discussing with Bioy as "TUOT" begins, and like "TUOT" itself, Descartes's *Meditations* – along with the anonymously published *Discourse on Method* – is a first-person narrative.<sup>35</sup> Yet whereas Descartes wrote the *Discourse* in French, the

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<sup>35</sup> That both are written in the first person Borges could well have gleaned from Russell and Lewes (Borges's first philosophical source (OC 1: 244), and one he continued to consult regularly (276). The extent of Borges's direct acquaintance with Cartesian texts is difficult to determine. On the one hand, he knew not only the relatively obscure let-

*Meditations* are in Latin. Descartes explains the former choice as follows:

If I write in French which is the language of my country, rather than in Latin which is that of my teachers, that is because I hope that those who avail themselves only of their natural reason in its purity may be better judges of my opinions than those who believe only in the writings of the ancients. (*Ceuvres* 6: 77/*Works* 1: 129-30)

Descartes's phrasing appears to identify his teachers with "those who believe only in the writings of the ancients," although his teachers in fact were Jesuits, who presumably at least claimed to place their faith in God and the Bible incomparably higher than their belief in human writings of any time. Descartes does add that "those who unite good sense with study" are the ones "whom alone I crave for my judges," but those, presumably, would be comfortable with Latin. Justifying his choice of the latter for the *Meditations*, he writes, "the road which I follow [...] is so little trodden, and so far removed from the ordinary path, that I did not judge it expedient to set it forth at length in French and in a Discourse which might be read by everyone, in case the feebler minds should believe that it was permitted to them to attempt to follow the same path" (7: 7/29-30).

Descartes not only restricts the *Meditations*, initially, to those who read Latin, but addresses them, in an introductory Dedication, "To the most wise and illustrious the Dean and Doctors of the Sacred Faculty of Theology in Paris." The dedication is followed by a Pref-

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ter discussed above, but also the second volume of Baillet's biography (*Inquisiciones* 127n), but on the other, Berveiller argues persuasively that his acquaintance with French literature was mediocre at best (199ff.), quoting Borges's friend Néstor Ibarra: "Borges knew everything that no one else knows, but he didn't know almost everything that every moderately well-read person knows"; "one could be very well-read without having read a tenth of what he had read. But *he had read only a tenth of what even a moderately well-read person would have read.*" Ibarra specifically emphasizes Borges's general ignorance of French literature (199-200). Borges did consider himself sufficiently familiar with Descartes's thought to conclude that the latter's famous rigor "is, let us say, a right that is apparent, or fictitious," even "false," in that it purports to arrive precisely at Catholic dogma (*Diálogos* 300).

ace to the Reader, a Synopsis of the six Meditations, and the Meditations themselves.<sup>36</sup>

In his opening pages, Descartes announces several distinct concerns, thereby arguably introducing “inconsistencies and contradictions.” His most frequently repeated goal is to prove the existence of God: this aim is expressed on the title pages of the first two editions, twice in the Dedication, and once in the Preface. On the title page of the first edition, the second explicit goal is that of establishing the immortality of the soul, but this is replaced, in the second edition, with that of establishing a “real distinction” between the body and the soul – perhaps because the *Meditations* in fact purport to do the latter, whereas they contain no arguments for immortality.<sup>37</sup> These “two questions respecting God and the Soul” are, Descartes asserts, “the chief of those that ought to be demonstrated by philosophical rather than theological argument,” chiefly because theological arguments have no force on infidels” (7: 1-2/133). This sounds reasonable, but is at odds with a passage later in the Dedication that borders on groveling:

whatever force there may be in my reasonings, seeing they belong to philosophy, I cannot hope that they will have much effect on the minds of men, unless you extend them your protection. But the estimation in which your Company is universally held is so great, and the name of Sorbonne carries with it so much authority, that, next to the Sacred Councils, never has such deference been paid to the judgment of any Body, not only in what concerns the faith, but also in what regards human philosophy as well.

Having requested the Faculty’s corrections and additions to his work, Descartes continues,

when finally the reasonings by which I prove that there is a God, and that the human soul differs from the body, shall be carried to that

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<sup>36</sup> Descartes also included a set of Objections solicited from leading thinkers of his time, and his Replies to the Objections. Despite this inclusion, most twentieth-century editions of the *Meditations* omit the Replies and Objections. Lewes asserts that Descartes invented the objections (2: 437).

<sup>37</sup> This Borges will have known from the *Britannica* (8: 82c).

point of perspicuity to which I am sure they can be carried in order that they may be esteemed as perfectly exact demonstrations, if you deign to authorise your approbation and to render public testimony to their truth and certainty, I do not doubt, I say, that henceforward all the errors and false opinions which have ever existed regarding these two questions will soon be effaced from the minds of men. For the truth itself will easily cause all men of mind and learning to subscribe to your judgment; and your authority will cause the atheists, who are usually more arrogant than learned or judicious, to rid themselves of their spirit of contradiction or lead them possibly themselves to defend the reasonings which they find being received as demonstrations by all persons of consideration, lest they appear not to understand them. (7: 5/136).

Why the atheists will not already have been swayed by the authority of the Sorbonne faculty is, of course, far from clear.

In developing his arguments, Descartes tells us, he has not attempted to collect "all the different reasons which might be brought forward to serve as proofs of this subject: for that never seemed to be necessary excepting when there was no single proof that was certain." He also asserts, "I judge that those [proofs] of which I here make use are equal to, or even surpass in certainty and evidence, the demonstrations of Geometry" (7: 4/135). Given these claims, it is noteworthy that the *Meditations* contains *two* proofs of the existence of God (the first in Meditation III, the second in Meditation V). If neither is certain in isolation, it is not clear how the two could be certain in conjunction, particularly given that we appear to get to the point at which the second can be introduced only if we have already accepted the first. Granted, Descartes's intentions with the proofs are matters of scholarly controversy; nevertheless, a reader seeking an appalling or banal reality behind apparent inconsistencies and contradictions will wonder why there should be two proofs: if either were compelling, it at least appears that the other would be superfluous, and if neither is compelling, then neither is their conclusion.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> I stress again that I do not offer this as a definitive reading of the *Meditations*. My point is simply that readers seeking possibly intentional contradictions and inconsistencies can discover at least initially plausible candidates.



Suspicious readers, seeking a disguised reality and aware of Descartes's fear of persecution by the religious authorities, will at least wonder whether Descartes's motives are as pious as they at first appear. And whereas such readers might find no obvious indication of an alternative concern in the introductory materials, they will find one clearly announced in the opening words of the First Meditation:

It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once and for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, *if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences.* (7: 17/144; my emphasis)

Regardless of his indeterminable intentions with his first-person narratives, Descartes unquestionably contributed importantly to the development of mathematical physics, which soon comes to present itself as free from religious underpinnings of any sort. One appalling or banal reality, then – one that would once have been appalling, but has by now become banal – is that science has no need of God, even if, at the time of its inception, it perceived a need for support from religious authorities.

It is beyond question that Descartes is a key figure in two key developments of modernity, i.e., the fall of religion and the rise of science and technology. And that Borges himself came to see Descartes as the origin or *Ursprung* of the scientific project of technological mastery and possession of nature is attested by a short piece he co-authored with, of all people, Bioy Casares, and published in 1967. The piece – “The Idlers” – describes the putative culmination of technology with the development of a machine designed to perform the final activity that had been left to humans:

The reign of the machine is a phenomenon that is already undisputed; the Idler signifies one more step in this ineluctable development. [...] [W]ithin its entrails palpitates something silent and secret, something that plays and sleeps. [...] [W]herever there is an Idler, the machine relaxes and man, invigorated, works.

The inventor of the Idler, we are told, had a French grandmother; in a pamphlet, the elegance of his inventions is attributed to this "flow of Cartesian blood" (OCC: 363-64).

That the third historical epoch of our third orb from the sun has been characterized by the increasing dominance of mathematical physics and the technology that emerges from it is, I believe, beyond question: it is a reality that is so obvious as to be banal, but one that can, in ways indicated more clearly below, also be appalling. Attributing the origins of this still-emerging reality to "a scattered band of recluses," including Galileo and Descartes, is not controversial. Including Dalgarno in this band is not difficult. What, however, of the other member explicitly named by Borges? What of Berkeley?

First, that Borges would have seen a link between Descartes and Berkeley is probable; according to the eleventh edition of the *Britannica*, the autobiographical record provided by Berkeley's *Common Place Book* shows "no sign of any intimate knowledge of ancient or scholastic thought; to the doctrines of Spinoza, Leibniz, Malebranche, Norris, the attitude is one of indifference or lack of appreciation, but the influence of Descartes and especially of Locke is evident throughout" (3: 779c). Granted, Borges himself regularly stresses the distance between Descartes and Berkeley, but that does not preclude their having cooperated, if unintentionally, in the project of the transformation of the world. And though the linkage is more complicated than that with Dalgarno - in significant part because Borges mentions Dalgarno only in the passage under consideration, but both mentions Berkeley earlier in "TUOT" and writes regularly of him throughout his life (see the references in Balderston) - the connection can be made.

Central to the Platonism of both Descartes and Berkeley is the contention that things are less than they appear to be. The Berkeleyan formula *esse est percipi*, "to be is to be perceived," might appear to suggest the contrary, but in fact it does not. My cat appears to me to be something more than the collection of sensations or perceptions I have of her; when not reflecting on her philosophically, I proceed on the assumption that she continues to exist, and to be what she is, even when neither I nor anyone else is looking at her. If I reflect on her in Aristotelian fashion, this does not change: as an

animate organism, she is constantly at work remaining herself, as she inhales and exhales – incorporating oxygen and dispelling carbon monoxide – as she eats and excretes, as she grows, mates, and reproduces; she will be at work remaining herself as long as she is at all, that is, until she dies. For the Platonist, on the other hand, she is not really herself: she is a defective and misleading copy of the unchanging form or idea of the cat, the Ur-cat. Berkeley rejects Platonic forms, but for him, too, the reality of my cat is ideal: I connect my various perceptions (softness, odors, purrs, cries, pain), and though I naively attribute all to my cat, I never perceive *my cat*, I perceive only colors, odors, textures, etc. If to be is to be perceived, and my cat cannot be perceived, then my cat cannot be.

The similarity between the Berkeleynan and Cartesian positions can be indicated through specification of how, for each, my cat becomes, so to speak, transparent (perhaps like the tigers reported to exist on Tlön (OC 1: 436/CF: 72)). For the Berkeleynan, my cat is transparent in that there is nothing about her that is hidden: she is nothing more or other than the various perceptions others, myself and God included, have of her. For the Cartesian, she is transparent in the same sense – there is nothing opaque or impenetrable about her – but for a different reason: she is a machine, reducible to the mathematically calculable interactions of her various parts. For the Aristotelian, on the other hand, there is an ineluctable opacity: observation of cats (or oak trees, or people) leads us to conclude that there is something at work within them, maintaining them in their being, but examination of them, no matter how thorough, fails to bring this literally to the eye. For the Aristotelian, she is more than she will ever “appear” to be, in that no collection of her appearances could exhaust her in her being.

#### 4. TLÖN

My reading of the Postscript suggests that Tlön is not a world different from ours, but our world, understood or interpreted in ways that have led to its actual transformation. If that is so, then the various peculiarities mentioned in Part II should not be the idle fantasies of Borges or of his encyclopedic conspirators, but instead doctrines

that have discoverable terrestrial counterparts. In some cases, of course, unclarities or ambiguities make such discoveries problematic or even impossible: what, for example, might be meant by “towers of blood” (436/72)? Conceivably, a reference to a building equipped with elevators, intended for one familiar with such things, might be read, by one with no relevant experience, as describing an edifice with a circulatory system, and I have just suggested a similar way of understanding the transparency of Tlönian tigers. If my reading is to be persuasive, however, I may have to expose links stronger than those. I believe that I can do so.

Among the aspects of Tlön that appear to be simply fantastic, perhaps most fantastic are those concerning language: the original language of the southern hemisphere of the planet is said to consist solely of verbs, of the northern, solely of adjectives. Because the eleventh volume of *A First Encyclopedia* contains little information concerning the latter, the linguistic picture remains vague, but it does appear that the development of the languages has made all Tlönians “congenitally idealistic,” rejecting space while affirming time, and denying the persistence of objects over time (435/72).

Bizarre though these linguistic and metaphysical situations may appear, they have direct counterparts in one of Borges’s favorite works of philosophy, Fritz Mauthner’s *Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. There, Mauthner associates both space and objectivity with “the substantive world” – the “wholly unreal” world of nouns – which he also describes as “mystical” and “mythological”: “We will see and will often have to emphasize that our always materialistic language is familiar only with an adjectival world, that the substantive world of things is in fact wholly built on hypotheses” (1: xciv).

There is an adjectival world, the only world that we experience immediately by means of our senses; all our impressions, all our sense data are adjectival; also adjectival are all our psychic impressions, our value judgments, everything we call right, good, beautiful, etc. This adjectival world disintegrates into individual impressions; it does not form itself into unities; one could call it “pointillistic.”

[...] The connection of the impressions into unities through the activity of memory could be called (with somewhat more daring than with the expression “adjectival world”) the verbal world. Or, with an

audacious identification of activity and effectiveness: the causal world. The pointillistic world of passive sensory impressions is transformed by active apperception into the world of becoming, the fabric of the world, the flowing. (1: 18-19)

To be sure, Mauthner stresses that neither of these “worlds” can be experienced or bespoken in isolation either from the other or from the substantive world, which is based upon them. Nevertheless, one with access only to fragments of Mauthner’s work could easily get the impression that he took these worlds to be not only distinguishable, but separable, and that he believed there to be an *Ursprache* appropriate to each.

From the notion that we truly experience only unrelated sense data it follows, on earth as on Tlön, that the only science could be psychology: since all connections and combinations are the products of our minds, there is nothing beyond our minds for us to study; this is an apparent consequence of the teachings both of Hume and of Kant. As with Mauthner, the question is not whether, on the most defensible interpretation, either Hume or Kant actually advocates an essential psychologism of this sort; it suffices, for the purposes of my argument, if the fragments of their teachings one might encounter in references in encyclopedias could lead one to believe that they held such a position – and this I deem non-problematic.

That this psychologism would “invalidate science” logically without affecting the propagation of sciences (*OC* 1: 436/*CF*: 74) also fits well with the Humean position. Hume argues that we have no reason to assert that there are causal connections, but also that we cannot avoid assuming that there are such connections. I have successive visual impressions of round white patches, which, considered in conjunction, follow a line. That line alters following a visual impression of a round black patch directly adjacent to an appearance of a round white patch. I then have successive impressions of round white patches tracing a different line, and of round black patches tracing a line of their own. Moving from the predominantly adjectival level of this description to a more verbal level, I would say that the round white patches moved, and that their contact with the round black patch caused both an alteration in the movement of the white patches, and the initiation of movement of the black patches.

Moving from this verbal level to the substantive level, I would say that the cue ball struck the eight ball. But I would not, Hume insists, truly have seen either the causal connection, or the billiard balls: all I would have seen would have been colored shapes. There is no logical step from my impressions of the colored shapes to my ideas about causal connections and billiard balls; that I nevertheless take that step must therefore be a consequence of my psychology or, as we might now say, of the way that my brain is wired.<sup>39</sup> If the wiring were different, then not only would my experience be different, so too would (or could) be my logic and my mathematics. Nevertheless, as long as my brain remains wired as it is, I will continue to think in terms of objects and causes, about which I can develop scientific theories.

I have introduced enough detail, I hope, to have established that the apparently fantastic doctrines the narrator finds in *A First Encyclopedia* are no more fantastic than those espoused by various terrestrial metaphysicians, and that at least many have direct terrestrial counterparts.<sup>40</sup> Whether all do is unimportant with respect to my interpretation of the story, given that the narrator is reconstructing fragments from fragments, on the basis of an unreliable source (the Volume XI that includes not only the contradictions the narrator initially takes to establish its authenticity, but also the description of *hrönir* absent from the Memphis copy).

On the whole, on my reading, Part II is a sizable and fascinating red herring: its specific details serve chiefly to conceal the reality Borges challenges the reader to divine. At the same time, the variety of the details accurately reflects the cacophony of metaphysical musings that have emerged on our earth following what Nietzsche terms the death of God. Philosophers have indeed come up with fantastic ways of explaining things, but the fantasmagoria has been

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<sup>39</sup> Of course, I have no reason to believe that I am an "I" who has a "brain"; I and brain, like the billiard balls, are substantives. But, again as with the billiard balls, "I" seem to be unable to avoid thinking in terms of substantives. The best "I" can do, intellectually, is to realize that in so thinking, I am not being rational in any significant sense.

<sup>40</sup> For additional correspondences, see especially Alazraki 183-200 and Jaén 187-194.

largely irrelevant, in that it has not deterred the juggernaut of technology. This particular red herring, then – certainly not the only red herring to be found in Borges<sup>41</sup> – is thus a perfect fit for the story.

## 5. AN APPALLING REALITY

In an interview cited above, Borges identifies “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” as his first and perhaps best story where “something prodigious finally turns out to be appalling.” The Cartesian project of technological mastery and possession of nature, of transforming the earth into paradise, is certainly prodigious. Already with Descartes, however, appalling features are visible as well. As Borges will have read in the *Britannica*, for Descartes, “Chemistry and biology are alike swallowed up in the one science of physics, and reduced to a problem of mechanism” (8: 87a). Reducing biology to mechanism, Descartes not only asserts that animals are machines, but uses this claim to justify vivisection; for him, “The sentience of the animal to the lash of his tyrant is not other than the sensitivity of the plant to the influences of light and heat” (8: 87c). His followers “eagerly seized” “this monstrous doctrine,”

dissected living animals in order to show to a morbid curiosity the circulation of the blood, were careless of the cries of tortured dogs, and finally embalmed the doctrine in a syllogism of their logic, – No matter thinks; every soul of beast is matter; therefore no soul of beast thinks. (87d)

Descartes repeatedly insists upon a real distinction, for humans, between the body and the soul, but of course that is what the Church would have required. The *Britannica* notes, “Man and the

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<sup>41</sup> A favorite of mine is the compass in the story “Death and the Compass.” The compass of the title – a navigational compass [*brújula*] rather than one for drawing [*compás*] – is said to be used by Lönnrot in determining the site of a coming murder (OC 1: 503/CF: 152), but what he does involves marking and measuring a map; for this, he has no need of the compass. On the whole, the lesson suggested by “Death and the Compass” is consonant with the Aristotelianism I find supported by “TUOT”: Lönnrot is doomed by his insistence that everything make orderly sense, that there be no complicating coincidences.

animals are [...] described as compared to automata, and termed machines" (8: 87b), and Mauthner goes much further:

The full logic of his mechanistic system should have led him to conclude, a hundred years before Lamettrie, that humans are machines. I have always been of the opinion that he really wanted to say that and, not daring to do so, nevertheless at least declared that animals are machines. (1: 187)

By the time Borges is writing, the consequences of Cartesian mechanism and technocracy have become incomparably more appalling, as he has his narrator remind us:

Ten years ago, any symmetry, any system with an appearance of order – dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism – could spellbind and hypnotize mankind. How could the world not fall under the sway of Tlön, how could it not yield to the vast and minutely detailed evidence of an ordered planet? (OC 1: 442/CF: 81)

The Tlön the narrator fears our world is becoming is thus the counterpart to the German-geographical Ur: whereas the former is a pure, pristine, and perfectly ordered beginning, the latter is a pure, pristine, and perfectly ordered end. On my reading, Borges attempts to undermine both. Rather than longing for – or seeking to accomplish – the total organization of the world, we should accept and embrace its messy complexity.

#### *URNE BURIALL*

Borges's story closes with the narrator's account of his own activity: "through my quiet days in this hotel in Adrogué, I go on revising (though I never intend to publish) an indecisive translation in the style of Quevedo of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urne Buriall*" (443/81). Of this conclusion, Emir Rodríguez Monegal writes:

The search for an article in an encyclopedia has ended with the discovery that the world is being taken over by the encyclopedia. The limits between fiction and reality have been erased. In reaction, the narrator resigns himself to a remote corner of a remote country, devoting himself entirely to a useless occupation: the translation of a book, written by an English baroque writer, about funeral inscrip-



tions. By relentless artifice, Borges has created in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" more than a mirror to reality: he has created a mirror to the writing of fiction as well. The story finally reflects only itself. (337-38)

Obviously, I disagree with Rodríguez Monegal's final assessment: the story, I have argued, reflects much more than itself.<sup>42</sup> I am also unpersuaded that the narrator's occupation is useless – or, at least, that that is enough to be said of it. The *Britannica's* description of the work he is translating – "reflections on the shortness of life inspired by the unearthing of some funeral urns" – introduces its author as a counterpole to Descartes: whereas the one strives for technical means to extend human life, the other reflects upon its brevity. Of Browne, the *Britannica* continues: "His display of erudition, his copious citations from authorities, his constant use of metaphor and analogy, and his elaborate diction, are common qualities of the writers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century" (4: 666c). Not all these qualities are evident in all of Browne's works, but the display of erudition is:

The *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, written in a more direct and simple style than is usual with Browne, is a wonderful storehouse of out-of-the-way facts and scraps of erudition, exhibiting a singular mixture of credulity and shrewdness. Sir Thomas evidently takes delight in discussing the wildest fables. (4: 666d-667a)

Of the work the narrator is translating, we read,

the whole strength of his genius and the wonderful charm of his style are to be sought in the *Urn Burial*, the concluding chapter of which, for richness of imagery and majestic pomp of diction, can hardly be paralleled in the English language. (4: 667a)

The features of Browne's writings stressed in these passages strengthen his opposition to Descartes:

Though Rembrandt's "Nightwatch" is dated the very year after the publication of the *Meditations*, not a word in Descartes breathes of any work of art or historical learning. The contempt of aesthetics and

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<sup>42</sup> I admit to not understanding why, if the story did reflect only itself, it would be "more than a mirror to reality."

erudition is characteristic of the most typical members of what is known as the Cartesian school [...]. Descartes was not in any strict sense a reader. [...]

Thus Descartes is a type of that spirit of science to which erudition and all the heritage of the past seem but elegant trifling. (8: 81b).

"Here are my books," he is reported to have told a visitor, as he pointed to the animals he had dissected. (81c)

The mind is not for the sake of knowledge, but knowledge for the sake of the mind. This is the reassertion of a principle which the middle ages had lost sight of - that knowledge, if it is to have any value, must be intelligence, and not erudition. (83c)

These qualities that distance Browne from Descartes bring him close, of course, to Borges's narrator and - especially - to Borges himself, of whom Richard Bernstein writes, "Borges's uniqueness in 20<sup>th</sup>-century letters is rooted in an almost monstrous combination: encyclopedic knowledge, razorlike critical judgment, and a ravishing appreciation for the magical and pagan dimension in every situation," and Eliot Weinberger, "Borges' unlimited curiosity and almost superhuman erudition becomes, in the non-fiction, a vortex for seemingly the entire universe (Borges *SNF*: xi)." Borges and his narrator are also like Browne with respect to the distance they maintain from political and military affairs; just as, as World War II intensifies, the narrator works on his perhaps futile translation and Borges writes his fantastic stories, "Browne's writings are among the few specimens of purely literary work produced during a period of great political excitement and discord" (4: 666c).<sup>43</sup>

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

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<sup>43</sup> Browne as described in the *Britannica* appears to differ from Borges as I read him in being a kind of Platonist but, in that his Platonism does not lead him to look away from the world we experience - "nothing is too great or small for him" (4:666d), it is not the sort that would distance him from Borges.

order to last, must allow variable readings. 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." (Irby 42-43)

Borges's story indeed presents the dismay of the teller, but not necessarily that of its author.<sup>44</sup> Nor must (or should) it simply dismay the reader. Borges and Browne were comparably incapable of directly influencing the political and military upheavals of their times. Both wrote about apparently unrelated matters.<sup>45</sup> In their displays of erudition, however, both demonstrate to readers the richness of our sloppy, non-utopian world. They thus remind us of how much would be lost if the Cartesian dream were realized.

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<sup>44</sup> Borges, in an interview some years after he became blind:

I believe, like Chesterton, that one must be grateful for everything. Indeed the fact, Chesterton said, the fact, well, to be on the Earth, to be standing on the Earth, to see the sky, to have been in love - these are like gifts for which one cannot cease to be grateful. And I try to feel this, and have tried to feel, for example, that my blindness is not just a misfortune, although it certainly is that, but that it also allows me, well, gives me more time for solitude, for thinking, for the invention of fables, for writing poems. That is to say, all that is good, no? (*Diálogos* 49)

<sup>45</sup> As Woodall stresses, Borges did not write only of apparently unrelated matters. He was "almost alone in Argentina for his denunciations of Nazism and anti-Semitism" (87).

As early as 1937, in *Sur*, he had pointed out how fascism was only poisoning Germany, whose culture he knew so well: "I do not know if the world can do without German civilisation. It is shameful that it is being corrupted by teachings of hate," he wrote, speaking of racism in current German school textbooks [*en Sur*, 145-46/SNF: 200]. In October 1939, in a special *Sur* issue, against the war, he explicitly condemned Hitler and the Nazis: "It is unarguable that a [German] victory would see the ruin and debasement of the world [30/203]" (112)

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