

BORGES AND THE REALITY OF THE WORD



Timothy Scott

“**W**hat is in a name?” asked Shakespeare. “That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Yet might it not be, as once retorted, “That which we call a rose by any other name would whither and die.” What is in a word? Are words simply arbitrarily assigned their meaning? or meanings and things arbitrarily represented with words? For Plato there was a “natural fitness” of words to their ideal. In the world of Islam the written word of the Holy Quran is not simply a recording of the Islamic revelation but the revelation itself. “In the beginning” says St. John, “was the Word.” The cosmogonic word or sound is to be found universally. In the Hindu tradition it is said that all things were made from the sound of the Vedas (*Manava-dharma-sastra* 1.21). Drawing upon the Scriptures, Meister Eckhart taught that God has, from the beginning of time, spoken only a single word in which all reality, all time and space, is contained. In *Psalms* 61 we read: “Once and for all God has spoken two things.” Again, in the *Book of Job*: “I have spoken once, I shall not speak again; I have spoken twice, I have nothing more to say.” The one word containing “two things” demonstrates the communicative nature of the singular word that is at the same time both spoken and

heard, both subject and object. In his book, *After Babel*, George Steiner observed that from the Pythagoreans to Leibniz and J.G. Hamann we are told "that the substance of man is bound up with language; the mystery of speech characterizes his being, his mediate place in the sequence leading from the inanimate to the transcendent order of creation" (60). Yet, certain deconstructionist theories of the Postmodern school would have words merely as "tools", and in the extreme no more than arbitrary "sounds" or "marks" on paper.

Jorge Luis Borges recognises and appears to side with the traditional view of the creative "word". As he writes in his poem, "The Golem"

If every name is (as the Greek maintains In the *Cratylus*)
the archetype of its thing,
Among the letters of *ring*, resides the ring,
And in the word *Nile* all the Nile remains. (*Selected* 123)

In an essay on the Kabbalah, Borges observed the creative power of the divine word:

There is another circumstance, a curious one, which must have influenced the Kabbalah: God, whose words were the instrument of his work (...) created the world through words: God said, Let there be light, and there was light. From this one came to the conclusion that light was created by the word *light*, or by the intonation with which God pronounced the word *light*. (*Seven* 98-99)

"When we think of words," remarks Borges, "we think historically: that words were first spoken and then later they became composed of letters." However in Kabbalah the letters came first, "they were the instruments of God, not the words signified by the letters. It is as if one were to think of writing, contrary to the experience, as older than the speaking of the language" (*Seven* 99). Borges similarly remarks of the Quran: "It is a book—this is incredible, but this is how it is—that is older than the Arabic language (...) older than the Arabs, older than the language in which it exists, and older than the universe" (*Seven* 97). In the same essay he observes that the Koran itself speaks of "a mysterious book, the mother of the book, the celestial

archetype of the Koran." In the Platonic language this is the Form of the Book or, as it is, the Form of the Forms.

Borges observes the creative power attributed to the written form of the *Tetragrammaton* in the Kabbalah, remarking that "if one possesses the name of God, or discovers the *Tetragrammaton*, the name of the four letters of God, and knows how to pronounce them correctly, one can create a world, and one can also create a golem, a man" (*Seven* 104). Nevertheless, the golem is inevitably condemned to a tragic and destructive existence. We see this in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a modern reworking of the golem story. The failing of the golem is a limitation inherent in the human word. Man is made in the image of God, but Man is not God. "Every image of the Absolute" remarks the Swiss metaphysician, Frithjof Schuon, "is, however, bound ultimately to confess that it is merely an image, and that the first age could not retain the level of its outset" (134). Every human word is an image, and in the end a translation, of the divine Form of the word. Within Kabbalah Adam is seen as the first golem; but it was God who breathed life into him (*Gen.* 2:7). Even if a man discovers the *Tetragrammaton* and brings to life a golem, still this creature will lack the vital "Divine Breath", the Kabbalist's *Ruach*, the Islamic *Ruh*, the Christian *Holy Spirit*. The golem will be simply the reflection of a reflection, such as the magician of Borges', "The Circular Ruins".

In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", Borges investigates the psychology of language and reality. This is the primary discipline of Tlön (*Labyrinths* 33). Through a subvert conspiracy Uqbar is introduced; nothing too out of the ordinary, it even has some relationship with the world we, the readers, consider our own. Nestled like a seed in the account of Uqbar is the admittedly imaginary region of Tlön. It is, like the golem, simply a fantasy within a fantasy. It is noteworthy of Borges' playful cleverness that the original mention of Uqbar is discovered in *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, an image of the "original", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Even in this simple fact there is the implication of America as a copy of its royal Motherland. Maybe more insightful is the play on the word "Encyclopaedia" to "Cyclopaedia", with the obvious suggestion of the cyclic nature of what is occurring. Consider then that "Orbis Tertius" literally means "Third

Sphere", as in the third planet from the sun. The perpetrators of this invention explicitly and with wicked delight admit the cyclic duality of Earth and Tlön. Thus sown into the consciousness, this idea of Tlön becomes the ground plan for a still grander conspiracy—the "literal", in the full meaning of this word, creation of an entire world.

Our next encounter with Tlön comes from "*A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön. Vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr*". Nothing here is accidental. That this is volume "eleven" may well allude to the symbolic association of this number in the language of the Kabbalah to a "doorway" into another world. Moreover the book is purported to contain 1,001 pages, which number, admits Borges, carries for him the rich potential of infinity and beyond, as he discusses in relation to "The Thousand and One Nights" (*Seven* 45-46). When the narrator discovers this work he experiences an "airy feeling of vertigo". As the reader of Borges' fiction we can only sympathize. We have only just encountered Tlön two pages beforehand, yet our narrator admits a two year period since he had first read of an imaginary Tlön. Now he must question his memory, question his own version of reality as it is stored away in the mystery of the human brain. If he is wrong about this then what else may not be as he recalls it?

The world of Tlön is "congenitally idealist".

Their language and the derivations of their language-religion, letters, metaphysics—all presuppose idealism. The world for them is not a concurrence of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial." (*Labyrinths* 32)

In comparison our world—our concept of reality—is "irrevocably" tied to the spatial. England is England because it is physically England. Yet at the same time England is England because it is "English". But if this were to change: "Then English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön" (43).

The surrendering of the world of the narrator—our world—to the world of Tlön appears to contradict the idea of its being "irrevocable". But the subjective nature in language allows Earth to be "irrevocably" Earth, to the people of Earth, and Tlön to be "irrevocably" Tlön to the people of Tlön, even through they may be the same people, who have, so to speak, simply changed their minds. Borges

explores this ideal- temporal-subjectivist nature of Tlön with characteristic intelligence and humour through the omission of nouns in their language. Finally the narrator explains: "How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet?" (42). Tlön's reality is destined to become the irrevocable truth. Again we are reminded of the cyclic nature inherent in so much of Borges' writing.

We are considering here a psychology of language and reality, in which the conversion of Earth to Tlön is conceivable as a mental process where reality is measured by the subjective viewer. Those materialists among us may however smile with their certainty that even if we subjectively conceive of things differently these things are nevertheless still physically the same. Yet, while they champion the place of an objective science in understanding the world, they are inevitably wary of the theories of quantum physics. So they believe their theories over the new theories, which is really to say that their world is constructed by their subjective view.

What are the repercussions if the physical or material reality is in fact reliant on a subjective conception of it? This question brings to mind what is maybe the most disturbing moment in the story of Tlön: the intrusion of the small cone, "made from a metal which is not of this world" (41), into the world of "reality". Keep in mind that by the time this occurs the narrator is already in possession of the "truth" about the conspiracy of Orbis Tertius. Even if it is possible that the cone has been physically brought into existence because of someone's belief in it, still, the narrator "knows" enough not to believe in it; yet it still exists.

What the narrator, and we as the reader, must ask ourselves is this: is it the case that the subjective belief of someone other can conjure something into a contingent objective (or shared) reality? Are we to suppose that each measure of reality is subject to whoever first conceives of it, and thereon it exists for all in that manner? Borges makes us contemplate this idea with the *hrönir* (38). Or—and this is infinitely more disturbing—is it the case that the narrator is in fact believing the cone into existence, that the entire episode is his subjective reality or fantasy, as the case may be, and that it is simply a component of his delusion that he thinks he knows the "truth"

about Tlön? Such an idea doesn't bear consideration for too long as it spirals away into the type of infinite regression that Borges is wont to play with.

There is a manner of comprehending the world that understands of both subjective and an objective reality. To shed light on this let us consider an extract from a lecture that Borges gave entitled, "Poetry":

The Irish pantheist Scotus Erigena said that the Holy Scripture contains an infinite number of meanings, (...) Centuries later, a Spanish Kabbalist said that God wrote the Scriptures for each one of the men of Israel, that there are as many Bibles as there are readers of the Bible. This is believable if we consider that the author of the Bible and the author of the destiny of each one of its readers is the same. (...) I would venture to say that they are both absolutely correct, not only in regard to the Scriptures but to any book worth rereading. (*Seven* 76)

Reality is both subjective to its perception and objective in its Divine conception. As it is of a contingent subjectivity, reality may be "created" by man; but, as we have seen in regards the golem, this creation will necessarily be imperfect—it will lack the objectivity of a Divine creation, even though paradoxically in virtue of God's supreme objectivity it cannot but be, in a sense, objective.

This objective view of the world equates, in terms of our literary concern, with what we may call the "God narrative" or what literary theorists call the "third person narrative". These theorists cite the great novels of the Russians and the eighteenth century as the eminent examples of this form. However, the "third person narrative" is still a literary technique and can be little more than a disguise for the author. The "objectivity" behind such works may be no more than the author's own subjective prejudices. To understand what it is for God to truly prescribe the narrative we may consider some insights that Borges offers into Dante's, *The Divine Comedy*. "We believe Dante so profoundly", observes Borges, "because the *Commedia* is written in the first person. It is not a mere grammatical artifice; it does not mean saying *I saw* for *they saw* or *it was*. It means something more. It means that Dante is one of the characters of the *Commedia*" (*Seven* 13). Dante is being "written" as much as the characters in his poem. Borges again:

It has been said that Dante is cruel toward Francesca, by condemning her. But that is to ignore the Third Character. The judgment of God does not always coincide with the feelings of Dante. (...) If Dante had always agreed with the god he imagines, it would have meant that his was a false god, merely a replica of Dante himself. (*Seven* 17)

Some six hundred odd years after *The Divine Comedy* James Joyce produced the watershed novel of the twentieth century, *Ulysses*. The novel, so literary theorists proclaimed, was no longer bound by "archaic" preconceptions. The world of postmodernism had freed the artist leaving the only limit to their subjective art as being their own imagination. History has shown how little imagination so many artists have. Denied the wealth of our rich traditions many were left with nothing but the tools of their art. Hence the hallmark of postmodernist fiction is its metafictional character. In the end this metaliterature comprises the two things that terrify Borges the most: "mirrors" and the building of "labyrinths".

Yet for the intelligent writer, wary of the impotent trap of "words for words' sake", there remains the chance to investigate and even play with language without belying the reality that it serves. When Hamlet replies to Polonius' inquiry as to what it is that Hamlet reads his reply prefigures deconstructionalism, while having none of the narcissism of this modern indulgence. "Words," says Hamlet, "words, words." It is clever, but it is not simply Shakespeare being clever for the sake of literary cleverness; it is Hamlet, and he has good reason to keep the prying Polonius guessing at his meaning.

For Franz Kafka, debatably the founding father of modern literature, this "opaqueness of language", as Steiner calls it, is less a play thing and more a nightmarish torment. "In the Penal Settlement" demonstrates the awful (in all the connotations of this word) nature of the written word. The Harrow engraves the script into the flesh of the condemned man, the script that is to be the "sentence" of execution. "You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. To be sure, that is a hard task; he needs six hours to accomplish it" (180). One is reminded of the darkness that descended in Christ's sixth hour on the cross. Suddenly we realise that Christ, the Word, was sentenced

to become flesh so that this flesh could be sentenced to the cross. The ineffable Word become the spoken word become the written word. But there is a more personal element here as well. As Steiner observes, Kafka makes the printing press an instrument of torture (68). Yet Kafka's livelihood depended upon this torture machine. He must suffer the torments of his writing to live. The religious analogy is equally true.

The play of language is not a new thing. As far back as Homer and well beyond language was consciously used to reinforce certain ambiguous meanings, to create parallelisms, to tell various tales simultaneously. In our modern sphere we find this tradition noticeably vibrant in the case of such writers as the Cuban born, but Italian raised, Italo Calvino. Calvino's *Invisible Cities* inherently recognizes, even encourages, its own subjective dependence upon the reader. At the same time it explicitly explains its own nature. Consider this passage between Marco Polo and the Great Khan:

Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.

"But which is the stone that supports the bridge?" Kublai Khan asks.

"The bridge is not supported by one stone or another," Marco answers, "but by the line of the arch that they form."

Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds:

"Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me."

Polo answers: "Without stones there is no arch." (Calvino 82)

Each "city", each section of the book, each word, each varying way that different readers engage the book: each of these is a "stone"; the story, even the physical book cover to cover with all its pages of paper: this is the "bridge". The arch is somewhere where they all meet, and at the same time, somewhere beyond. Reading this one is reminded of Kafka's "The Great Wall of China", that no human, not one of its builders, can ever see in its entirety. *Invisible Cities* is not simply Calvino playing with words; it is, in all its facets, an elucidation—if not an illumination—of the nature of language, as this is a reflection of the nature of reality.

The relationship between language and reality may seem to place a rather heavy burden on the modern writer. But one should not mistake gravity and lack of humour for a serious understanding of

reality and language. The ludicrous conclusion of subjectivism in language is famously and delightfully exposed by Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking-Glass*:

"There's glory for you!" "I don't know what you mean by "glory"," Alice said. "I meant, "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!" "But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument"," Alice objected. "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." (100)

In *Catch 22*, the classic of illogical logicalism, Joseph Heller flirts deliciously with the subjectivity of language. The main character, Yossarian, tells a psychiatrist (who thinks Yossarian is Second Lieutenant A. Fortiori) about his friend, Dunbar's, dream of holding a live fish in his hands. The psychiatrist concludes Dunbar to be a figment of Yossarian's subconscious and takes the dream to be A. Fortiori's. If the reasoning behind this isn't conclusive enough then we must also take into account that, being a psychiatrist he is habitually Freudian. Yossarian sympathetically offers his support:

"My fish dream is a sex dream."

"No, I mean real sex dreams—the kind where you grab some naked bitch by the neck and pinch her and punch her in the face until she's all bloody and then you throw yourself down to ravish her and burst into tears because you love her and hate her so much you don't know what else to do. *That's* the kind of sex dream I like to talk about. Don't you ever have sex dreams like that?"

Yossarian reflected a moment with a wise look. "That's a fish dream," he decided.

Major Sanderson recoiled as though he had been slapped. "Yes, of course," (Heller 316)

Heller also parodies the objective "truth" attributed to language in the absolutist nature of military red tape. This is painfully absurd with the episode of Doc Daneeka's "death":

The first person in the squadron to find out that Doc Daneeka was dead was Sergeant Towser, who had been informed earlier by the man in the control tower that Doc Daneeka's name was down as a

passenger on the pilot's manifest McWatt had filed before taking off. Sergeant Towser brushed away a tear and struck Doc Daneeka's name from the roster of squadron personnel. With lips still quivering, he rose and trudged outside reluctantly to break the bad news to Gus and Wes, discreetly avoiding any conversation with Doc Daneeka himself... (362)

Borges' pen likewise drips with sarcasm, wit, and self-conscious humour as he reiterates the amazing achievement of "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote". But laugh as we may at the telling comparisons between Cervantes' and Menard's *Quixote*, still Borges has recognized here the problem for the modern reader encountering the texts of the past. In contrast to the subjectivity explored in the comparison between the two Quixotes is the attributing of *The Tao Te Ching* and *The 1001 Nights* to the one objective author, in Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (*Labyrinths* 37). This appears as an attempt to understand the psychological make-up of God. But this method considers the subjective "expression" of the Divine, which is to say the expression of the Divine as through Man. It is attempting to view Marco Polo's bridge in its entirety by picturing each and every stone. In metaphysical terms it is attempting to understand the whole through the particulars. It is a task that perpetuates itself eternally due to the indefinitude of particulars. Once one moves to consider the next stone of the bridge this movement and, indeed the consideration of this next stone, with its relation to its neighbor, influences and changes the understanding of the previous stone. Such understanding considers the reflections of reflections, *ad infinitum*; it ignores the inward return to the Original and instead builds labyrinths of inferior copies.

"Tlön is surely a labyrinth," we read, "but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men" (*Labyrinths* 42). This is the attraction of the subjective reality, it offers a world that is, at least in theory, decipherable. In contrast the objective reality of God is indecipherable to man. This is the God who justifies himself to Moses with his ineffable name. This is the unquestionable God of Job and Dante. This is the indecipherable and inevitably inexpressible "script of the tiger", "The God's Script":

Then occurred what I cannot forget nor communicate. There occurred the union with the divinity, with the universe I do not know whether these words differ in meaning. ... I saw the universe and I saw the intimate designs of the universe. I saw the origins narrated in the Book of the Common. ... I saw infinite processes that formed one single felicity and, understanding all, I was able also to understand the script of the tiger.

May the mystery lettered on the tigers die with me. Whoever has seen the universe, whoever has beheld the fiery designs of the universe, cannot think in terms of one man, of that man's trivial fortunes or misfortunes, though he be that very man. That man *has been he* and now matters no more to him. What is the life of that other to him, the nation of that other to him, if he, now, is no one? This is why I do not pronounce the formula, why, lying here in the darkness, I let the days obliterate me. (*Labyrinths* 206-7)

And, this is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, of language and of reality.

Timothy Scott
Düsseldorf

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