

WORLDMAKING



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Was wär' ein Gott, der nur von außen stieße.
J. W. Goethe

A moment of the utmost perplexity in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (TUOT) is, perhaps, the appearance of a tiny and yet extremely heavy cone towards the end of the story. The object is said to have been brought by a man about whom nobody knew anything except that “he came from the frontier”.¹ We are told that cones are a representation of the deity in Tlön; the shape confirms their extraterrestrial nature (the various intonations of God’s metaphors show throughout history that God is spherical):

As far as I remember, history does not register conic or pyramidal gods, but it does register idols. On the other hand the shape of the

¹ “que venía de la frontera” (OC 1: 442). All references to Borges’ texts correspond to *Obras Completas*. English versions of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” and “La otra muerte” belong to Andrew Hurley. The remaining translations of Borges’ texts are by Eliot Weinberger. Martin Heidegger’s English text is cited from *Being and Time*.

sphere is perfect and consistent with divinity. (Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II, 17).²

The appearance of the strange object could be compared *mutatis mutandis* with the optical illusion shown in figure 1; when we attempt to see the two-dimensional figure as a three-dimensional representation, an anomaly arises:

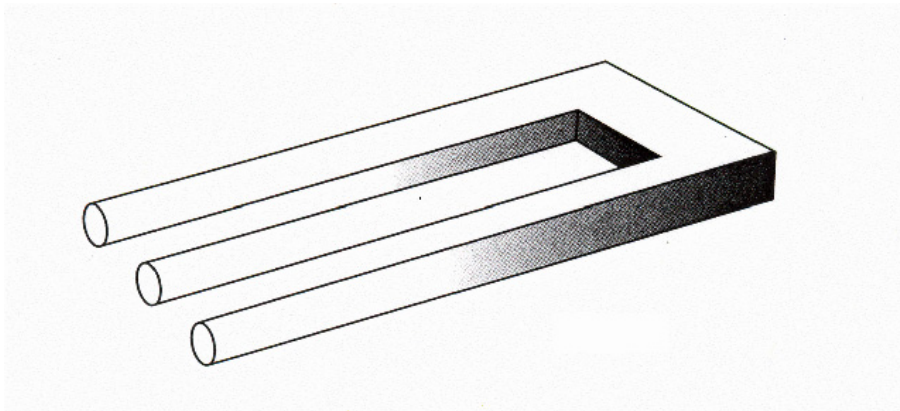


Figure 1

The impossibility of the universe in which figure 1 exists derives from the way the object is represented in three-dimensional space: it is neither three-pronged nor two-pronged. The fact that we cannot “hold” both perceptions of the figure at the same time renders the object distressingly unstable. In a similar example (*Tractatus* 5.5423), Wittgenstein argues that the perception of a complex figure demands two different ways of perceiving its constituent parts, i.e. two different ways of putting its parts together and, therefore, the existence of two different facts (the world is the totality of facts). Likewise, what so far in the story could have been interpreted as a perfectly coherent world (provided that we had previously selected the

² “Que yo recuerde, la historia no registra dioses cónicos o piramidales, aunque sí ídolos. En cambio, la forma de la esfera es perfecta y conviene a la divinidad. (Cicerón, *De natura deorum*, II, 17) (OC 2: 82). Borges refers again to the sphere as the best form to represent divinity in “La esfera de Pascal” (OC 2: 14-16).

appropriate mode) now gives us the impression of some inexplicable impossibility. Make-believe, in line with the description of an imaginary planet, is no longer capable of the “physical explanation” now demanded in view of the sudden intrusion of concrete Tlönian objects; both worlds seem to exclude each other.

The introduction of such a slippage in the story acknowledges a precursor text: “La flor de Coleridge”. In that short essay, Borges analyses similar devices pertaining to the literary tradition. He considers them a *terminus ad quem*, the end of a culminating process, which cannot in turn foster other felicitous inventions.³ TUOT somehow repeats this dictum when Tlönian objects begin to encroach upon reality. The proliferation of these objects is the cause of the progressive adoption of the ways of Tlön and, at the same time, a result of it. The “eternal object”-like the palace built by Kublai Khan and the poem by Coleridge—gradually entering the world is also a testimony of the “literary pantheism” professed by Borges:

Perhaps an archetype not yet revealed to mankind, an eternal object (to use Whitehead’s term), is gradually entering the world; its first manifestation was the palace; its second, the poem. Whoever compares them will see that they are essentially the same.⁴

³ The examples given by Borges are: a flower brought from Paradise referred to by Coleridge, Wells’ *The Time Machine* and the incomplete novel *The Sense of the Past* by Henry James. (OC 2: 17).

⁴ “Acaso un arquetipo no revelado aún a los hombres, un objeto eterno (para usar la nomenclatura de Whitehead), esté ingresando paulatinamente en el mundo; su primera manifestación fue el palacio; la segunda el poema. Quien los hubiera comparado habría visto que eran esencialmente iguales.” (OC 2: 23). Such manifold ingression of the eternal object into the history of the universe is possible if we admit a concept of existence in which the standpoint of the observer is irrelevant. Borges seems also to agree with Meinong (q.v.) in this regard. For the latter the position of the observer falls away as a result of the independence of the object of thought from the thinking subject (e.g., the object *rain* that falls during the monsoon season and the one that will fall next year at the same period have a timeless existence and therefore are the *same* rain). The same line of thought makes possible the identification of any man who recites a line of Shakespeare with William Shakespeare (OC 1: 438). Borges suggests that such identification on the part of certain Tlönian congregations implies eidetic Platonism. It is plain that Berkeleyian idealism alone does not explain the many things that occur in Tlön.

A typical Borgesean procedure comes in support of this view. Moving from a state of affairs pertaining to one domain, to a state of affairs pertaining to another, by means of an *epistemological hypallage*, all fields of knowledge are levelled out:

If the doctrine that all authors are one is valid, such facts are, of course, insignificant. Strictly speaking, it is not necessary to go that far; the pantheist who declares the plurality of authors to be illusory finds unexpected support in the classicist, to whom such a plurality barely matters. For the classical mind, literature is the essential thing, not individuals.⁵

Since in Tlön things are ideally constructed, "There is still, of course, the problem of the material from which some objects are made."⁶ As Borges stated in the aforementioned essay, the object can only be placed at the end of the story and it cannot be used to forward other associations; being a boundary in time, it remains itself unaccounted for. The footnote in which the discordant essence of the Tlönian world is acknowledged confirms the pure fictional status of Tlön: by the power of words, objects from the fictional world are now found in a remote location of the Argentine hinterland.

WOR(L)DS

Fictional objects live in the number of words in which they are alluded to; they lack ulterior specifications and lack the possibility of our increasing the number of such specifications (e.g. we know that Herbert Ashe was tall and phlegmatic and like many Englishmen he was afflicted with unreality, but we shall never know the colour of his eyes). There is an object-directness involved in our reading of fiction that dupes us into assuming a wholeness which they lack; in fact, fictional objects are strictly confined within the words that go to name them. According to textual theories, "the victor at Austerlitz"

⁵ "Claro está que si es válida la doctrina de que todos los autores son un autor, tales hechos son insignificantes. En rigor, no es indispensable ir tan lejos; el panteísta que declara que la pluralidad de los autores es ilusoria, encuentra inesperado apoyo en el clasista, según el cual esa pluralidad importa muy poco. Para las mentes clásicas, la literatura es lo esencial, no los individuos." (OC 2: 18-19).

⁶ "Queda, naturalmente, el problema de la *materia* de algunos objetos" (OC 1: 442).

and “Napoleon Bonaparte” are not entirely the same, even if we, who inhabit the “real” world, cannot help making the equivalence.⁷ As Borges suggests in “Nueve ensayos Dantescos,” indeterminacy is the distinctive mark that characterises the fictional realm where the form cannot be separated from the content. Nevertheless, deliberative ambiguity is not to be seen in literature as a shortcoming but rather a device permitting the naming of certain realities:

To affirm or deny Ugolino’s monstrous crime is less tremendous than to have some glimpse of it. The pronouncement ‘A book is the words that comprise it’ risks seeming an insipid axiom. Nevertheless, we are all inclined to believe that there is a form separable from the content and that ten minutes of conversation with Henry James would reveal to us the ‘true’ plot of *The Turn of the Screw*. I think that the truth is not like that; I think that Dante did not know any more about Ugolino than his tercets relate.⁸

Fictional entities are intrinsically incomplete: the way of saying is the object of what is said. Their incompleteness is caused by their lacking an extra-literary object to be confronted with: *Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*. There is no real object to confront the text with. On the contrary, it is said that scientific or historical texts avail themselves, in principle, of a referent underlying the text; their enunciation can be thoroughly determined. The distinction would not satisfy Borges, though, to whom the nature of the universe is merely conjectural. By mingling scientific, historical and fictional texts, Borges further sug-

⁷ The difference between *sinn* (sense) and *bedeutung* (reference) was established by Frege; it roughly corresponds to the notions of *intension* (the content of a concept) and *extension* (what is denoted in a particular world at a particular time, i.e. in an “indexical world”). Two language expressions that have the same extension do not necessarily have the same intension; accordingly: “The evening star is the morning star” is a true statement, but “The evening star means ‘the morning star’” is not. Possible worlds are essentially intensional worlds; the meaning of words determines the things referred to by those words. The words construct the world. On Frege’s *summa divitio*, see Carl.

⁸ “Negar o afirmar el monstruoso delito de Ugolino es menos tremendo que vislumbrarlo. El dictamen Un libro es las palabras que lo componen corre el albur de parecer un axioma insípido. Sin embargo todos propendemos a creer que hay una forma separable del fondo y que diez minutos de diálogo con Henry James nos revelaría el ‘verdadero’ argumento de Otra vuelta de tuerca. Pienso que tal no es la verdad; pienso que Dante no supo mucho más de Ugolino que lo que sus tercetos refieren” (OC 3: 353).

gests that all reality is “fictional” and therefore equally “incomplete” (“*The Garden of Forking Paths* is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe.”)⁹ The impossibility of reaching the object poses a conundrum from which there is no way out. All our assertions about reality are bound to be incomplete. Such incompleteness engulfs all human domains and is not restricted to literature, for reality is always articulated by signs and symbolically mediated:

Robert Louis Stevenson (‘Some Gentlemen in Fiction’) observes that a book’s characters are only strings of words; blasphemous as this may sound to us, Achilles and Peer Gynt, Robinson Crusoe and Don Quixote, may be reduce to it. The powerful men who ruled the earth, as well: Alexander is one string of words, Attila another.¹⁰

No unmediated object lies outside the text. Even if historical events (the string of words) are presented as general descriptions of objective realities, and even if there are truth-claims in historiography, still there are no objects as such underlying its narratives. Moreover, Borges argues that the consistency and knowability exhibited by reality—the object—arises solely *from* the text. In the writing of history such consistency is obtained by a tailoring of the facts dictated by the overall form of the story that is being told. History describes past actuality by linking together a series of events in temporal sequence, but those events are dependent on the narrative form in which they are encoded and not the other way around.

But there is a further implication to the expression “past actuality”. In so speaking we implicitly assume that historical events are units that somehow accord with segments of an untold reality waiting to be told. The situation is not unlike the map of the Empire drawn to the same scale as the Empire and coinciding with it point for point (OC 2: 225). The hypothetical map is superimposed onto the territory creating the utopian paradigm of total representation.

⁹ “*El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* es una imagen incompleta, pero no falsa, del universo” (OC 1: 479).

¹⁰ “Robert Louis Stevenson (*Ethical studies* 110) observa que los personajes de un libro son una sarta de palabras; a eso, por blasfematorio que nos parezca, se reducen Aquiles y Peer Gynt, Robinson Crusoe y don Quijote. A eso también los poderosos que rigieron la tierra: una serie de palabras es Alejandro y otra es Atila” (OC 3:352).

Yet, in order to represent, a map must possess a sketchy nature that can be “filled in” in a continuous and endless progression towards the territory; the ultimate complete territory, being unattainable, remains solely a postulate of reason. Because the real territory is not given to us directly and comprehensively, the map itself becomes the necessary surrogate territory. Similarly, we cannot have a sense of the past unless we experience it through a particular narrative of the past, i.e. a representation of the past. And like the map, any narrative of the past, albeit fragmented, is deemed to possess the possibility that it may be expanded to encompass the whole of the past, coinciding point for point with it. But again, the untold past can only be ideally postulated.¹¹

Things are in Tlön the summation of their perceived qualities and nothing else. A book is the words that compose it; no form can be separated from the content. History is similarly constructed with no ultimate referents lying outside its narrative form. Yet, all these entities become intelligible when we contrast them with their purported complete paradigms. Thus we posit the universal apple from which we derive the taste and colour of our everyday apple. We graft Tlön onto our world, for fiction necessitates the world as a background. We believe historical accounts to be partial records of the unwritten (complete) Universal History. More consistently the Tlönians do not assume any permanent substance behind the sensations registered

¹¹ As Louis Mink has consistently demonstrated, we consciously reject the idea of a historiographical representation of a Universal History, but are quite willing to accept one of its major implications, namely, the assumption that there is an untold story waiting to be told: “It seems, therefore, that the idea of Universal History has been discarded upon the midden of the past, along with such refuse as the legitimacy of kings and the perfectibility of man. Yet I venture to claim that the concept of universal *history* has not been abandoned at all, only the concept of universal *historiography*. It makes no more sense to laymen than to professional historians to suppose that a single unified story of the human past could even ideally be written and read. Yet the idea that the past itself is an untold story has retreated from the arena of conscious belief and controversy to habituate itself as a presupposition in that area of our a priori conceptual framework which resists explicit statement and examination. To say that we still presuppose, as *a priori*, a concept of universal history, means: we assume that everything that has happened belongs to a single and determinate realm of unchanging actuality. (‘What’s done is done. You can’t change the past.’)” (140-141).

by their languages; this is the reason why they only venture to say, "it mooned."¹²

POSSIBLE WORLDS

The history and discovery of *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* and its subsequent intrusion into the actual world is purported to be an alternative history of Western Thought; the way things could have been had the spirit of the French Enlightenment not prevailed over Berkeleyian idealism.¹³ This fantastic development of the theory of knowledge is posited on the basis that any modification of the past entails a parallel history of the world. Borges says as much in the short story "La otra muerte":

To change the past is not to change a mere single event; it is to annul all its consequences, which tend to infinity. In other words: it is to create two histories of the world.¹⁴

A benevolent society sets out to describe a planet in which extreme idealism rules. Since the way of organising knowledge denotes a certain mode or *world*, the society also rewrites a new history leading to a possible world. Conversely, by postulating Tlön, Borges can revisit the various assumptions established by our *natural* knowledge. (Knowing is tantamount to constructing the world, and

¹² Borges' main contentions seem always to accommodate Ockham's principle of parsimony: plurality ought not to be posited without necessity (*entia prater necessitatem non esse multiplicanda*). Universals are constructs to which we arrive out of similarities observed in the individuals; they are not real, their existence can only be predicated *de dicto* not *de re*. It is solely by a slow process that we build up these general forms. Because they are mental constructs formed through the experience of the subject, their universality with all the corresponding attributes can only be postulated. On the bearing of Nominalism on TUOT, see Almeida.

¹³ Among the multiple historical references contained in the story, the Encyclopaedia occupies a pre-eminent place in TUOT; although it is not John Locke's theory of knowledge, nor the *Encyclopédie* as the embodiment of the French Enlightenment, that Borges is more concerned with; but rather George Berkeley, a thinker that the encyclopedists steadfastly resisted, and a hidden encyclopaedia: *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*. It is this shift that makes up most of the argument of the story.

¹⁴ "Modificar el pasado no es modificar un sólo hecho; es anular sus consecuencias, que tienden a ser infinitas. Dicho sea con otras palabras; es crear dos historias universales" (OC 1: 575).

as we saw earlier, to constructing history as well, for the conditions of cognition are also the conditions of existence.)

In describing the languages of the northern hemisphere, Borges compares the endless ideal objects with the Meinongean world of subsistent objects:

The literature of the northern hemisphere (as in Meinong's subsistent world) is filled with ideal objects, called forth and dissolved in an instant, as the poetry requires.¹⁵

The citation is not fortuitous. By engaging in a counterfactual world, Borges explores an alternative ontology; Meinong's theory of objects serves this purpose. And the theory seems to inspire the story on more than one account. What follows is a brief outline of the ideas which inspire it.

Alexius Meinong (1853-1920) was an Austrian philosopher originally associated with Franz Brentano, who later developed the famous theory of objects by which he is universally known. In TUOT the minute description of a complex, ideal and non-existent world seems to acknowledge the universe of the subsistent objects and the *Außersein* ("There are' also objects that do not exist or subsist, and I have designated this fact as the 'Außersein of the pure object'—a somewhat barbaric word formation, I fear, but one which is hard to improve", *On Assumptions* 62)¹⁶; a highly organised universe like Tlön.

As is known, Franz Brentano had already found in intentionality—the ability of a thought to direct itself to something different from itself—the essence of mental phenomena; it is evident that no physical object could exhibit such a property. Thus, all mental states have an object or tend towards an object. This idea or presentation (*Vorstellung*) is accepted or rejected by us in our judgements. From this

¹⁵ En la literatura de este hemisferio (como en el mundo subsistente de Meinong) abundan los objetos ideales, convocados y disueltos en un momento, según las necesidades poéticas. (OC 1: 435). Borges refers to Meinong again in his "Nueva Refutación del tiempo" (OC 2: 147).

¹⁶ "'Gibt es' auch die Gegenstände, fürchte, etwas barbarischen aber schwer zu verbessernden Wortbildung, als das 'Außersein des reinen Gegenstandes' bezeichnet" ("Über Annahmen" 79). To be "*Außersein*"; literally: "to lie 'out-side'".

starting point, Meinong will introduce the difference between the content (*inhalt*) and the object (*gegenstand*) of any mental act (Meinong uses “object” as a general term; object is what is given in a presentation). Objects can have a real existence (a tree, a star) or an ideal existence (the number 7, the relationship of identity). The latter objects are deemed to *subsist* (*bestehen* in Meinong’s terminology). (In Tlön, ideal objects are called forth and dissolved in a matter of seconds, but they secretly subsist *all the time*.)

Existence and subsistence are two distinctive and self-evident modes of being: “‘Being’ (in the narrower sense), as already mentioned, can be existence, but also subsistence: the sun exists, equality—and similarly, any other ideal entity—cannot exist, but can subsist.” (Meinong “Zur Gegenstandstheorie” 228). As already stated, Meinong will introduce later a new category of objects: the *Außersein*. The reasoning that leads to it can be stated as follows: when I think of a round square, I have an idea to which no real or ideal object corresponds, for the content of the idea entails a contradictory property (“In some cases the so-being implies its non-being; the so-being of the round square implies its non-existence, but even this does not enter into the nature of the round square”, Findlay, 49-50). In spite of the contradiction that prevents it from existing as a real or ideal object, I can hardly say that when I am thinking of a round square I am not thinking of anything, for a round square is both thinkable and sayable. So that, a non-existent object can perfectly be thought of and our prejudice in favour of the actual should not make us treat it as merely nothing.

As we can see, Meinong holds the view that even though an object like our Tlönian avatar, for instance, is empirically impossible, it is nevertheless conical and heavy. Whether an object is or is not makes no difference to *what* the object is; and only if we assume that such intentional objects have a number of properties can there be knowledge about them. This field of enquiry is constituted by the *Außersein*:

Außersein is a strange sort of desert in which no mental progress is possible, but the desert has many oases, as no one who has read a fine novel, or a treatise on metageometry, can possibly doubt. Such oases are also the infinite number of possible worlds which, accord-

ing to Leibniz, were presented to the choice of God; all of these are as interesting and as highly organised as our own universe, though we have neither the time nor the wit to 'think them out'. (Findlay, 49-50)

Such a field of enquiry is often ignored due to our practical interest, but we do not have to forget that entities such as numbers, values, simultaneity, "limit, gap, and even the notorious nothing [nichts]" ("On Assumptions" 14-15),¹⁷ which are equally non-existent (they *subsist*), go towards the construction of the real world. In drawing conclusions between the content of a mental act, on the one hand, and the intention or object of the act, on the other, Meinong passes beyond the confines of the actual universe. The fact that other possible worlds often do not play any part in the real world is not a good reason for transferring them to the mind.

The relationship between world and knowledge indicated earlier holds good in both directions; knowledge figures a world as much as a world refigures knowledge. In Tlön, objects are constituted by layers of impressions deposited one on top of the other and expressed either as verbs or adjectives. The latter objects are convoked and dissolved in an instant and their availability as well as their permanent configuration is ensured by simultaneity, similarity, succession or any such invariable principles. (Notice that simultaneity pertains to the nature of the object as much as any inner property the object may exhibit, e.g. the colour grey, being made of iron, etc.; the only difference would be that relational properties like simultaneity inhere in a plurality of objects whereas inner properties can inhere in one object only.) The ideal objects composed of visual and auditory sensations proposed by Borges, such as "the colour of the rising sun and the distant caw of a bird"; or the objects composed of many, such as "the sun and the water against the swimmer's breast, the vague shimmering pink one sees when one's eyes are closed, the sensation of being swept along by a river and also by dreams"¹⁸, can

¹⁷ "Grenze, Loch, sogar das vielberufene Nichts." ("Über Annahmen" 10)

¹⁸ "el color del naciente y el remoto grito de un pájaro." (...) "el sol y el agua contra el pecho del nadador, el vago rosa trémulo que se ve con los ojos cerrados, la sensación de quien se deja llevar por un río y también por el sueño" (OC 1: 435-436).

enter the experience of the inhabitants of Tlön because they avail themselves of the words to name them (as strange as the Tlönian languages may appear to us, they are no more arbitrary than our own word formation). There is no room for all-time existing substances in Tlön (besides, and although this reason contradicts the former, in an idealistic world, a material substance is regarded as a violation of the legality of knowledge). Thus in Tlön the empirical is organised differently, according to different principles. Such principles are not found in the world but rather built into the world; they constitute the objectives and higher-order subsistent objects that, according to Meinong, are the material of all possible worlds. The periodization of history, for example, follows a different pattern (since 12 is written 10, a century has 144 years). Geometry is based upon the notion of surface. There are no parallel lines and a man, as he moves, modifies the shape of the space that surrounds him. And Borges is being facetious in this regard. Although we believe the world to consist of solids, in actual fact we only see and touch surfaces. We cannot see or touch a solid. A solid is a concept made up of a number of representations put together by means of reasoning and experience. Only surfaces exist for our sensations. Likewise, volume, mass, weight and notions of the kind that we associate with solids are only "experienced" by us with sensations of surfaces. The solid as such remains out of that experience. As for the denial of parallel lines, there is here a clear hint at Reimann's geometrical model in which all lines intersect. On the other hand, if space is not an *a priori* category (as in Kant), our movements are bound to modify the space as the perception of the objects that create it changes.

Tlön's arithmetic is based on the concept of "greater than" and "less than", and the act of counting modifies the amount counted, which is consistent with the idea of an imaginary world where things have an altogether different ontological status. The act of counting supposes that we are trained to recognise a certain way of going on, but this procedure is not independent of our practice or make-up, nor does it apply to objects that do not belong to our physical world. In Tlön, for example, if items were to aggregate af-

ter we have placed four in a heap, or split them in two when the heap has reached ten, we would go on counting in a different way.¹⁹

Possible worlds are erected not only for the semantics of conditionals but also for *epistemic* purposes; they constitute a heuristic conception that allows us to understand actual phenomena. Non-actuality does not preclude us from making propositions about various states of affairs, which ultimately mirror our knowledge of the “real” world. It is precisely in this “otherness” that its explanatory power lies, for how can anything be *the other* if it is not somehow *the same*?

The narrative strategy adopted in TUOT allows Borges to approach the problem of fiction within the framework of possible worlds. Meinong’s theory of objects seems again to afford insights that allow us to explain the nature of fiction in the context of TUOT; fiction being one of the possible worlds that orbits the actual.²⁰

As we saw earlier, for Borges any modification of the past entails the writing of a new history of the entire universe. And as we have already seen, for Borges the rewriting of history is tantamount to making the world anew, for words construct history as much as the collection of things referred to by history. But, to what extent can it be said that things might have been otherwise? “The actual” is said to be fully determined and bound to the history of the universe and, as such, unmodifiable. Indeed, since any possibility—and therefore, any possible world—entails a state incompatible with factuality, un-factuality or any other state expressed by a different fraction (the possibility of a certain throw with a dice can only be 6/6), it has been said that possibility is only a degree of our knowledge or ignorance. As we saw earlier, Meinong does not think that that is the case. Since the object of any given idea has an independent existence from the idea that presents it, any possibility as such also constitutes an object. And objects that exist, subsist or have *Außersein* are all; there is no good reason to ascribe them to the mind. Furthermore, any possibility entails an object embedded in the object

¹⁹ See the interesting example proposed by Wittgenstein in *Remarks I*: 2.

²⁰ “Possible worlds” comprises fictional worlds hereafter.

that exists. Those objects embedded in the concrete existents are incomplete objects: the square as such, the colour red, the manhood of the man, etc. Meinong felt it necessary to posit the incomplete objects in order to explain how the concrete objects of our experience are presented to us. When I see a person walking by, I am aware of him as “a man”; that is the way in which I grasp the very complex nature that lies behind his presence. The incomplete objects of our reference constitute a sort of matrix to which the multiple objects (those empirically experienced as well as those fictionally experienced) are related. He further argued that the incomplete objects made possible all knowledge of concrete objects; they are a sort of aid for the apprehension of the concrete existents. The incomplete objects are not bereft of the particulars because they have been mentally stripped of them, but rather they are intrinsically incomplete; that is the only way they can access our thought (if we were to run through an infinite number of facts concerning the so-being of every object, we would be in no better position than Funes the memorious). The vagueness of our knowledge of concrete existents lies in the fact that we do not have direct access to things except by means of the incomplete objects embedded in them. As Meinong points out, we know things by “description” and not by “acquaintance”. But this incompleteness of the objects of our experience is what brings about all possible worlds, for the incomplete objects are embedded in the real objects, giving to them a sort of derivative possibility. A concrete drinking glass (complete object) which perhaps will never break, still retains its capacity to break as long as we consider it as *a* drinking glass (incomplete object):

To take the case of the drinking glass, it is perhaps a glass in a museum that will never be broken. To say of it that it *can* be broken is simply unmeaning. On the other hand, it is legitimate to say of ‘the drinking glass’, an incomplete object, that it can be broken, for it is embedded in glasses that get broken. Now ‘the drinking glass’ is embedded in this drinking glass in the museum, and even in this situation it retains its capacity for breaking, that is, it is still embedded in glasses which break. (...) It seems to me that the chief value of Meinong’s theory of possibility is that it enables us to say in a precise way what we mean when we say vaguely that ‘things might have been otherwise’. In one respect the worshippers of the actual are

right; it is quite senseless to say that *this* world might have been different, that *this* man might have had some other father than his actual father, that *this* town might have been built on the coast instead of a mile inland. But it is only because we have dragged in the real world by the use of the word 'this' that these consequences hold. When I speak of 'a world', or 'a man' or 'a town' I can pass beyond the confines of the actual universe; this world could not be other than it is, but there might have been *another* world, resembling this in some points and differing in others. (Findlay 215-217)

Thus *Possibilia* is opened up by means of the incomplete objects. Only incomplete objects can pass from one universe to another, for only incomplete objects are connected to possibilities. These objects exhibit a degree of incompleteness that allows them to be variously combined in order to create possible worlds. TUOT evinces the circular character of this thesis: A world comes into being through historical mutations. That is possible because the events of our experience are filled with the incomplete objects of our apprehensions; their incompleteness makes them retain a sort of unrealised potentiality. If we actualise what is retained, not only do we rewrite history but we also rebuild a world. In actual life, things are fully determined because life means past events, but when life is thought and told we turn the actual into the possible. In TUOT the retained possibilities of the historical past are turned into the quasi-past of fiction.

TLÖN'S ARCHEOLOGICAL FINDS

Years and years of idealism have modified reality. Things exist as long as they are perceived; verbs such as "to forget" and "to remember" replace verbs like "to lose" and "to find". In certain regions of Tlön the duplication of objects has been observed: Two people are looking for a lost 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. These secondary objects are called *hrönir* (in singular, a *hrön*). Thus the *hrönir* are ideal objects that satisfy our expectations. Seeking and finding coincide, for objects are *produced* ("*educidos*") by our mental readiness. The systematic production of *hrönir*, we are told, has been adopted by archaeologists, making it possible not only to interrogate but also to modify the

past. In the experiments described in Tlön, things are produced by the desire to find them. As the story progresses, we are told that the Tlönians benefit from this phenomenon, making of it a technique for unearthing objects of archaeological value. In order not to influence the finds (hope and greed can be inhibiting), spur-of-the-moment projects are preferred over well-planned archaeological expeditions. History, then, becomes a construction based upon satisfied expectations; the Tlönians unearth what they expect to find:

Until recently, *hrönir* were the coincidental offspring of distraction and forgetfulness. It is hard to believe that they have been systematically produced for only about a hundred years, but that is what Volume Eleven tells us. The first attempts were unsuccessful, but the *modus operandi* is worth recalling: The warden of one of the state prisons informed his prisoners that there were certain tombs in the ancient bed of a nearby river, and he promised that anyone who brought in an important find would be set free. For months before the excavation, the inmates were shown photographs of what they were going to discover. That first attempt proved that hope and greed can be inhibiting; after a week's work with pick and shovel, the only *hrön* unearthed was a rusty wheel, dated some time *later* than the date of the experiment. The experiment was kept secret, but was repeated afterward at four high schools. In three of them, the failure was virtually complete; in the fourth (where the principal happened to die during the early excavations), the students unearthed—or produced—a gold mask, an archaic sword, two or three clay amphorae, and the verdigris'd and mutilated torso of a king with an inscription on the chest that has yet to be deciphered. Thus it was discovered that no witnesses who were aware of the experimental nature of the search could be allowed near the site...²¹

²¹ “Hasta hace poco los *hrönir* fueron hijos casuales de la distracción y el olvido. Parece mentira que su metódica producción cuente apenas cien años, pero así lo declara el oncenno tomo. Los primeros intentos fueron estériles. El *modus operandi*, sin embargo, merece recordación. El director de una de las cárceles del Estado comunicó a los presos que en el antiguo lecho de un río había ciertos sepulcros y prometió la libertad a quienes trajeran un hallazgo importante. Durante los meses que precedieron a la excavación les mostraron láminas fotográficas de lo que iban a hallar. Ese primer intento probó que la esperanza y la avidez pueden inhibir; una semana de trabajo con la pala y el pico no logró exhumar otro *hrön* que una rueda herrumbrada, de fecha posterior al

Relics *qua* relics can only be perceived and therefore found, by making reference to a plexus of multiple relations; their archaeological value is thus constructed. They are objects that in spite of their ruinous conditions are complete and perfect, for their historical character is not derived from the physical properties they possess. Relics *qua* objects are no less present than any other ordinary objects; it is the possibility of seeing through them that makes them objects of the past. The archaeology of our world also exhibits examples of felicitous correspondences between seeking and finding. All sorts of artefacts have been found throughout history, but they only became archaeological items once the worlds to which they belonged were sufficiently reconstructed. Conversely, the archaeological enterprises that culminated with the discoveries of Tutankhamun and Agamemnon's golden masks were possible only after piecing together the ancient worlds they speak of; it is precisely this pertaining to a world no-longer-there that gives them their historical character. It is not the mere fact of being old, but rather the fact that they are grounded in a world of the 'past'. As Heidegger points out:

The antiquities which are still present-at-hand have a character of the 'past' and of history by reason of the fact that they have belonged as equipment to a world that has been—the world of a Dasein that has been there—and that they have been derived from that world.²²

Correspondences are bound to occur; every time we seek, finding according to our expectations most probably ensues. And not because sheer luck intervenes, but rather because we create the conditions for an object to be found by actualising the related world to

experimento. Éste se mantuvo secreto y se repitió después en cuatro colegios. En tres fue casi total el fracaso; en el cuarto (cuyo director murió casualmente durante las primeras excavaciones) los discípulos exhumaron –o produjeron– una máscara de oro, una espada arcaica, dos o tres ánforas de barro y el verdinoso y mutilado torso de un rey con una inscripción en el pecho que no se ha logrado aún descifrar. Así se descubrió la impropiedad de testigos que conocieran la naturaleza experimental de la busca..." (OC I: 439).

²² "Die noch vorhandenen Altertümer haben einen 'Vergangenheits' und Geschichtscharakter auf Grund ihrer zeughaften Zugehörigkeit zu und Herkunft aus einer gewesenen Welt eines da-gewesenen Daseins" (380-381).

which it appertained as something then available. By a similar mechanism “each writer creates his precursors”²³, which means that in understanding the past we always project a retroactive causality. But the past only lives in the present. There are not past events, but rather narratives about past events in which those events are articulated so as to create in the present the conditions to perceive the past. Thus the past is modifiable and always open to the present. The scandalous rewriting of history at the end of TUOT is not an impressive feat after all. History can be rewritten and “*un pasado ficticio*” (OC 1: 443) supersedes another because if Tlön were truly an all-encompassing narrative, there would be no criterion outside its own narrative to decide if the account given is historical, mythical or merely fictional.

Tlön exhibits a history; a long process leading to a certain preparedness of the mind that allows its final intrusion into the “real” world. Thus Borges is keen to anchor the epistemological in the historical. Tlön’s constituent traits were already defined long before Tlönian objects started invading the world: “The splendid history had begun sometime in the early seventeenth century, one night in Lucerne or London.”²⁴ But the finding of the Encyclopaedia only takes place when the minds are ready for the “discovery” (“*hallazgo*” in Spanish, in quotes in the original text). The event is a culminating process partly guided by its own epistemological development. The readiness of the mind required for seeing “the new” comes after a long process of incubation, for we only see what fits in the world-image that corresponds to our epoch. A world-image floating above us directs our perception towards one aspect of the real. (And a world-image has not only to do with “material progress” but also with our desires, fears, anxieties and expectations.)²⁵ History, de-

²³ “cada escritor *crea* a sus precursores” (OC 2: 88-89).

²⁴ “A principios del siglo XVII, en una noche de Lucerna o de Londres, empezó la espléndida historia.” (OC 1: 440).

²⁵ Expectations relate here to Reinhart Koselleck’s concept of *horizon d’attente*, i.e., the possibilities and hopes which are not yet realised; the line behind which a new space of experience will open but cannot yet be seen. The horizon of expectations brings about the possibility of experiencing a future as a present, a time-still-to-come as a time somehow gone-by. It is this tension between expectation (future) and experience (past)

scribing the worldness of the world, reflects the assumptions of its own epoch:

I have suspected that history, true history, is more modest and its essential dates can remain secret for a long time. A Chinese prose-writer has observed that the unicorn, being anomalous, must go unnoticed. The eyes see what they are used to seeing. Tacitus did not perceive the crucifixion although it is recorded in his book.²⁶

There is a similitude between the world that Tlön is and the Popperian World 3 (Orbis Tertius!). As is known, Karl Popper distinguishes three different worlds: World 1 of physical objects, World 2 of mental states, and World 3, the world of “objective contents of Thought”. The latter, being autonomous, awaits discovery by us. The main conception behind this idea is that the products we find in World 3, although originating in World 2 (the world of human consciousness), develop further according to a logic of their own. The objective contents of thought pertaining to this world may have unexpected implications (for instance, although numbers are a human invention, once they have come into existence they bring along all sorts of theorems relating to them. These theorems are only “discovered” by us.) Tlön, like World 3, has a history characterized by the progressive intrusion and subsequent discovery of partially autonomous and partially constructed entities. The discovery of Tlönian objects and the subsequent erosion of reality as a result of adopting the ways of Tlön, reflects this tension.

Tlön emerges as a result of the problematization of our mental and perceptive habits. *Esse rerum est percipi* is the paramount principle that governs certain regions of Tlönian reality; the existence of things depends upon a percipient subject, but once this principle has been established, we only “discover” the numerous implications

which, according to Koselleck, shapes the ever-changing design of historical time. Koselleck discusses the idea in “Space” 267-289.

²⁶ “yo he sospechado que la historia, la verdadera historia, es más pudorosa y que sus fechas esenciales pueden ser, asimismo, durante largo tiempo, secretas. Un prosista chino ha observado que el unicornio, en razón mismo de lo anómalo que es, ha de pasar inadvertido. Los ojos ven lo que están habituados a ver. Tácito no percibió la Crucifixión, aunque la registra su libro” (OC 2: 132).

that it brings about. Certainly, facts about Tlön (idealism among them) do not necessarily have to be thought of in order to exist. In this respect Tlön is a mind-independent entity. The fact that in Tlön objects must be thought of in order to exist does not mean that Tlön itself must be thought of in order to exist; its non-dependency on our thinking does not depend on our thinking of that property, but rather on expectations that prompt *bona fide* feeling in its existence as a putative world. In this respect, the forty volumes of the Tlönian Encyclopaedia are not different from the *hrönir* described in the imaginary planet: they are “unearthed” when the minds of the inhabitants of this world have reached the required preparedness. A change in a certain direction makes mind-independent facts come to light. That there were no aeroplanes in 1600 did not become a fact when aeroplanes were invented three centuries later; it was a fact even in 1600, although the minds of that time were unable to apprehend it.

Tlön strikes us as a very bizarre place indeed. On reflection, the bizarreness of Tlön grows familiar to us; many of the propositions held true in Tlön could, in a *different way*, also be held true in our world. The amount of its contingent content tends to zero (the contingent content of a proposition is inversely proportional to the ‘size’ of the set of possible worlds in which that proposition is true).²⁷ Although TUOT confronts us with a fantastic and portentous world, in the end it becomes apparent that the story is the futile literary experiment anticipated by the narrator. The process of constructing a possible world only to merge it into and supersede the “real” world evinces its epochality; the way in which the world is always revealed to us on a particular historical horizon. Such a literary pur-

²⁷ Necessary truths are mostly tautological and therefore true in all possible worlds. Non contingent propositions, being close to tautologies, also tell us very little. See the following example from Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*: “‘You are sad,’ the Knight said in an anxious tone: ‘let me sing a song to comfort you.’ ‘Is it very long?’ Alice asked, for she had heard a good deal of poetry that day. ‘It’s long,’ said the Knight, ‘but it’s very *very* beautiful, Everybody that hears me sing it—either it brings tears into their eyes, or else—’ ‘Or else what?’ said Alice, for the Knight had made a sudden pause. ‘Or else it doesn’t, you know...’” (208).

suit can only be banal on account of the fact that the remaking of the world does not differ from the reinterpreting of the world (there is no untold story waiting to be told); a phenomenon that not only has happened throughout history, but is also the very condition that makes history possible.

The ominous prophecy “El mundo será Tlön” (OC 1: 443) pronounced at the end of a story published in 1940, which already included a postscript dated in 1947, can perfectly be read: The world will always be Tlön.

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