

COLLECTED FICTIONS
Jorge Luis Borges



TRANSLATED BY
Andrew Hurley

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Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius

I

I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia. The mirror troubled the far end of a hallway in a large country house on Calle Gaona, in Ramos Mejía*; the encyclopedia is misleadingly titled *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* (New York, 1917), and is a literal (though also laggardly) reprint of the 1902 *Encyclopædia Britannica*. The event took place about five years ago.

Bioy Casares* had come to dinner at my house that evening, and we had lost all track of time in a vast debate over the way one might go about composing a first-person novel whose narrator would omit or distort things and engage in all sorts of contradictions, so that a few of the book's readers—a *very few*—might divine the horrifying or banal truth. Down at that far end of the hallway, the mirror hovered, shadowing us. We discovered (very late at night such a discovery is inevitable) that there is something monstrous about mirrors. That was when Bioy remembered a saying by one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar: *Mirrors and copulation are abominable, for they multiply the number of mankind*. I asked him where he'd come across that memorable epigram, and he told me it was recorded in *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, in its article on Uqbar.

The big old house (we had taken it furnished) possessed a copy of that work. On the last pages of Volume XLVI we found an article on Uppsala; on the first of Volume XLVII, "Ural-Altai Languages"—not a word on Uqbar. Bioy, somewhat bewildered, consulted the volumes of the Index. He tried every possible spelling: Ukbar, Ucbar, Ookbar, Oukbahr . . . all in vain. Before he left, he told me it was a region in Iraq or Asia Minor. I confess I nod-

ded a bit uncomfortably; I surmised that that undocumented country and its anonymous heresiarch were a fiction that Bioy had invented on the spur of the moment, out of modesty, in order to justify a fine-sounding epigram. A sterile search through one of the atlases of Justus Perthes reinforced my doubt.

The next day, Bioy called me from Buenos Aires. He told me he had the article on Uqbar right in front of him—in Volume XLVI* of the encyclopedia. The heresiarch's name wasn't given, but the entry did report his doctrine, formulated in words almost identical to those Bioy had quoted, though from a literary point of view perhaps inferior. Bioy had remembered its being "copulation and mirrors are abominable," while the text of the encyclopedia ran *For one of those gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are hateful because they multiply and proclaim it.* I told Bioy, quite truthfully, that I'd like to see that article. A few days later he brought it to me—which surprised me, because the scrupulous cartographic indices of Ritter's *Erdkunde* evinced complete and total ignorance of the existence of the name Uqbar.

The volume Bioy brought was indeed Volume XLVI of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. On both the false cover and spine, the alphabetical key to the volume's contents (Tor-Upps) was the same as ours, but instead of 917 pages, Bioy's volume had 921. Those four additional pages held the article on Uqbar—an article not contemplated (as the reader will have noted) by the alphabetical key. We later compared the two volumes and found that there was no further difference between them. Both (as I believe I have said) are reprints of the tenth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Bioy had purchased his copy at one of his many sales.

We read the article with some care. The passage that Bioy had recalled was perhaps the only one that might raise a reader's eyebrow; the rest seemed quite plausible, very much in keeping with the general tone of the work, even (naturally) somewhat boring. Rereading it, however, we discovered that the rigorous writing was underlain by a basic vagueness. Of the fourteen names that figured in the section on geography, we recognized only three (Khorasan, Armenia, Erzerum), and they interpolated into the text ambiguously. Of the historical names, we recognized only one: the impostor-wizard Smerdis, and he was invoked, really, as a metaphor. The article seemed to define the borders of Uqbar, but its nebulous points of reference were rivers and craters and mountain chains of the region itself. We read, for example, that the Axa delta and the lowlands of Tsai Khaldun mark the southern boundary, and that wild horses breed on the islands of the delta.

That was at the top of page 918. In the section on Uqbar's history (p. 920), we learned that religious persecutions in the thirteenth century had forced the orthodox to seek refuge on those same islands, where their obelisks are still standing and their stone mirrors are occasionally unearthed. The section titled "Language and Literature" was brief. One memorable feature: the article said that the literature of Uqbar was a literature of fantasy, and that its epics and legends never referred to reality but rather to the two imaginary realms of Mle'khnas and Tlön. . . . The bibliography listed four volumes we have yet to find, though the third—Silas Haslam's *History of the Land Called Uqbar* (1874)—does figure in the catalogs published by Bernard Quaritch, Bookseller.¹ The first, *Lesbare und lesenswerthe Bemerkungen über das Land Ukkbar 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.

That night, Bioy and I paid a visit to the National Library, where we pored in vain through atlases, catalogs, the yearly indices published by geographical societies, the memoirs of travelers and historians—no one had ever been in Uqbar. Nor did the general index in Bioy's copy of the encyclopedia contain that name. The next day, Carlos Mastronardi* (whom I had told about all this) spotted the black-and-gold spines of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* in a bookshop at the corner of Corrientes and Talcahuano. . . . He went in and consulted Volume XLVI. Naturally, he found not the slightest mention of Uqbar.

II

Some limited and waning memory of Herbert Ashe, an engineer for the Southern Railway Line, still lingers in the hotel at Adrogué, among the effusive honeysuckle vines and in the illusory depths of the mirrors. In life, Ashe was afflicted with unreality, as so many Englishmen are; in death, he is not even the ghost he was in life. He was tall and phlegmatic and his weary rectangular beard had once been red. I understand that he was a widower, and without issue. Every few years he would go back to England, to make

¹Haslam was also the author of *A General History of Labyrinths*.

his visit (I am judging from some photographs he showed us) to a sundial and a stand of oak trees. My father had forged one of those close English friendships with him (the first adjective is perhaps excessive) that begin by excluding confidences and soon eliminate conversation. They would exchange books and newspapers; they would wage taciturn battle at chess. . . . 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 by coincidence 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. Ashe and I had known each other for eight years, and he had never mentioned a stay in Brazil. We spoke of the bucolic rural life, of *capangas*,* of the Brazilian etymology of the word "gaucho" (which some older folk in Uruguay still pronounce as *ga-úcho*), and nothing more was said—God forgive me—of duodecimals. In September of 1937 (my family and I were no longer at the hotel), Herbert Ashe died of a ruptured aneurysm. A few days before his death, he had received a sealed, certified package from Brazil containing a book printed in octavo major. Ashe left it in the bar, where, months later, I found it. I began to leaf through it and suddenly I experienced a slight, astonished sense of dizziness that I shall not describe, since this is the story not of my emotions but of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius. (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 was feeling that evening.) The book was written in English, and it consisted of 1001 pages. On the leather-bound volume's yellow spine I read these curious words, which were repeated on the false cover: *A First Encyclopædia of Tlön. Vol. XI. 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 was stamped a blue oval with this inscription: *Orbis Tertius*. Two years earlier, I had discovered in one of the volumes of a certain pirated encyclopedia a brief description of a false country; now fate had set before me something much more precious and painstaking. I now held in my hands a vast and systematic fragment of the entire history of an unknown planet, with its architectures and its playing cards, the horror of its mythologies and the murmur of its tongues, its emperors and its seas, its minerals and its birds and fishes, its algebra and its fire, its theological and metaphysical

controversies—all joined, articulated, coherent, and with no visible doctrinal purpose or hint of parody.

In the “Volume Eleven” of which I speak, there are allusions to later and earlier volumes. Néstor Ibarra,* in a now-classic article in the *N.R.F.*, denied that such companion volumes exist; Ezequiel Martínez Estrada* and Drieu La Rochelle* have rebutted that doubt, perhaps victoriously. The fact is, the most diligent searches have so far proven futile. In vain have we ransacked the libraries of the two Americas and Europe. Alfonso Reyes,* weary of those “subordinate drudgeries of a detective nature,” has proposed that between us, we undertake to *reconstruct* the many massive volumes that are missing: *ex ungue leonem*. He figures, half-seriously, half in jest, that a generation of Tlönists would suffice. That bold estimate takes us back to the initial problem: Who, singular or plural, invented Tlön? The plural is, I suppose, inevitable, since the hypothesis of a single inventor—some infinite Leibniz working in obscurity and self-effacement—has been unanimously discarded. It is conjectured that this “brave new world” is the work of a secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebrists, moralists, painters, geometers, . . . , guided and directed by some shadowy man of genius. There are many men adept in those diverse disciplines, but few capable of imagination—fewer still capable of subordinating imagination to a rigorous and systematic plan. The plan is so vast that the contribution of each writer is infinitesimal.

At first it was thought that Tlön was a mere chaos, an irresponsible act of imaginative license; today we know that it is a cosmos, and that the innermost laws that govern it have been formulated, however provisionally so. Let it suffice to remind the reader that the apparent contradictions of Volume Eleven are the foundation stone of the proof that the other volumes do in fact exist: the order that has been observed in it is just that lucid, just that fitting. Popular magazines have trumpeted, with pardonable excess, the zoology and topography of Tlön. In my view, its transparent tigers and towers of blood do not perhaps merit the constant attention of *all* mankind, but I might be so bold as to beg a few moments to outline its conception of the universe.

Hume declared for all time that while Berkeley’s arguments admit not the slightest refutation, they inspire not the slightest conviction. That pronouncement is entirely true with respect to the earth, entirely false with respect to Tlön. The nations of that planet are, congenitally, idealistic. Their language and those things derived from their language—religion, literature, metaphysics—presuppose idealism. For the people of Tlön, the world is not

an amalgam of *objects* in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent *acts*—the world is successive, temporal, but not spatial. There are no nouns in the conjectural *Ursprache* of Tlön, from which its “present-day” languages and dialects derive: there are impersonal verbs, modified by monosyllabic suffixes (or prefixes) functioning as adverbs. For example, there is no noun that corresponds to our word “moon,” but there is a verb which in English would be “to moonate” or “to enmoon.” “The moon rose above the river” is “*hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö,*” or, as Xul Solar* succinctly translates: *Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned.*

That principle applies to the languages of the southern hemisphere. In the northern hemisphere (about whose *Ursprache* Volume Eleven contains very little information), the primary unit is not the verb but the monosyllabic adjective. Nouns are formed by stringing together adjectives. One does not say “moon”; one says “aerial-bright above dark-round” or “soft-amberish-celestial” or any other string. In this case, the complex of adjectives corresponds to a real object, but that is purely fortuitous. The literature of the northern hemisphere (as in Meinong’s subsisting world) is filled with ideal objects, called forth and dissolved in an instant, as the poetry requires. Sometimes mere simultaneity creates them. There are things composed of two terms, one visual and the other auditory: the color of the rising sun and the distant caw of a bird. There are things composed of many: the sun and 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 Morpheus. These objects of the second degree may be combined with others; the process, using certain abbreviations, is virtually infinite. There are famous poems composed of a single enormous word; this word is a “poetic object” created by the poet. The fact that no one believes in the reality expressed by these nouns means, paradoxically, that there is no limit to their number. The languages of Tlön’s northern hemisphere possess all the nouns of the Indo-European languages—and many, many more.

It is no exaggeration to say that the classical culture of Tlön is composed of a single discipline—psychology—to which all others are subordinate. I have said that the people of that planet conceive the universe as a series of mental processes that occur not in space but rather successively, in time. Spinoza endows his inexhaustible deity with the attributes of spatial extension and of thought; no one in Tlön would understand the juxtaposition of the first, which is typical only of certain states, and the second—which is a perfect synonym for the cosmos. Or to put it another way: space

is not conceived as having duration in time. The perception of a cloud of smoke on the horizon and then the countryside on fire and then the half-extinguished cigarette that produced the scorched earth is considered an example of the association of ideas.

This thoroughgoing monism, or idealism, renders science null. To explain (or pass judgment on) an event is to link it to another; on Tlön, that joining-together is a posterior state of the *subject*, and can neither affect nor illuminate the prior state. Every mental state is irreducible: the simple act of giving it a name—i.e., of classifying it—introduces a distortion, a “slant” or “bias.” One might well deduce, therefore, that on Tlön there are no sciences—or even any “systems of thought.” The paradoxical truth is that systems of thought do exist, almost countless numbers of them. Philosophies are much like the nouns of the northern hemisphere; the fact that every philosophy is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has allowed them to proliferate. There are systems upon systems that are incredible but possessed of a pleasing architecture or a certain agreeable sensationalism. The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility—they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy. They know that a system is naught but the subordination of all the aspects of the universe to one of those aspects—*any* one of them. Even the phrase “all the aspects” should be avoided, because it implies the impossible addition of the present instant and all those instants that went before. Nor is the plural “those instants that went before” legitimate, for it implies another impossible operation. . . . One of the schools of philosophy on Tlön goes so far as to deny the existence of time; it argues that the present is undefined and indefinite, the future has no reality except as present hope, and the past has no reality except as present recollection.² Another school posits that all time has already passed, so that our life is but the crepuscular memory, or crepuscular reflection, doubtlessly distorted and mutilated, of an irrecoverable process. Yet another claims that the history of the universe—and in it, our lives and every faintest detail of our lives—is the handwriting of a subordinate god trying to communicate with a demon. Another, that the universe might be compared to those cryptograms in which not all the symbols count, and only what happens every three hundred nights is actually real. Another, that while we sleep here, we are awake somewhere else, so that every man is in fact two men.

²Russell (*The Analysis of Mind* [1921], p. 159) posits that the world was created only moments ago, filled with human beings who “remember” an illusory past.

Of all the doctrines of Tlön, none has caused more uproar than materialism. Some thinkers have formulated this philosophy (generally with less clarity than zeal) as though putting forth a paradox. In order to make this inconceivable thesis more easily understood, an eleventh-century heresiarch³ conceived the sophism of the nine copper coins, a paradox as scandalously famous on Tlön as the Eleatic aporiae to ourselves. There are many versions of that “specious argument,” with varying numbers of coins and discoveries; the following is the most common:

On Tuesday, X is walking along a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds four coins in the road, their luster somewhat dimmed by Wednesday’s rain. On Friday, Z discovers three coins in the road. Friday morning X finds two coins on the veranda of his house.

From this story the heresiarch wished to deduce the reality—i.e., the continuity in time—of those nine recovered coins. “It is absurd,” he said, “to imagine that four of the coins did not exist from Tuesday to Thursday, three from Tuesday to Friday afternoon, two from Tuesday to Friday morning. It is logical to think that they in fact *did* exist—albeit in some secret way that we are forbidden to understand—at every moment of those three periods of time.”

The language of Tlön resisted formulating this paradox; most people did not understand it. The “common sense” school at first simply denied the anecdote’s veracity. They claimed it was a verbal fallacy based on the reckless employment of two neologisms, words unauthorized by standard usage and foreign to all rigorous thought: the two verbs “find” and “lose,” which, since they presuppose the identity of the nine first coins and the nine latter ones, entail a *petitio principii*. These critics reminded their listeners that all nouns (*man, coin, Thursday, Wednesday, rain*) have only metaphoric value. They denounced the misleading detail that “[the coins’] luster [was] somewhat dimmed by Wednesday’s rain” as presupposing what it attempted to prove: the continuing existence of the four coins from Tuesday to Thursday. They explained that “equality” is one thing and “identity” another, and they formulated a sort of *reductio ad absurdum*—the hypothetical case of nine men who on nine successive nights experience a sharp pain. Would it not be absurd, they asked, to pretend that the men had suffered

³A “century,” in keeping with the duodecimal system in use on Tlön, is a period of 144 years.

one and the same pain?⁴ They claimed that the heresiarch was motivated by the blasphemous desire to attribute the divine category *Being* to a handful of mere coins, and that he sometimes denied plurality and sometimes did not. They argued: If equality entailed identity, one would have to admit that the nine coins were a single coin.

Incredibly, those refutations did not put an end to the matter. A hundred years after the problem had first been posed, a thinker no less brilliant than the heresiarch, but of the orthodox tradition, formulated a most daring hypothesis. His happy conjecture was that there is but a single subject; that indivisible subject is every being in the universe, and the beings of the universe are the organs and masks of the deity. X is Y and is *also* Z. Z discovers three coins, then, because he remembers that X lost them; X finds two coins on the veranda of his house because he remembers that the others have been found. . . . Volume Eleven suggests that this idealistic pantheism triumphed over all other schools of thought for three primary reasons: first, because it repudiated solipsism; second, because it left intact the psychological foundation of the sciences; and third, because it preserved the possibility of religion. Schopenhauer (passionate yet lucid Schopenhauer) formulates a very similar doctrine in the first volume of his *Parerga und Paralipomena*.

Tlön's geometry is made up of two rather distinct disciplines—visual geometry and tactile geometry. Tactile geometry corresponds to our own, and is subordinate to the visual. Visual geometry is based on the surface, not the point; it has no parallel lines, and it claims that as one's body moves through space, it modifies the shapes that surround it. The basis of Tlön's arithmetic is the notion of indefinite numbers; it stresses the importance of the concepts "greater than" and "less than," which our own mathematicians represent with the symbols $>$ and $<$. The people of Tlön are taught that the act of counting modifies the amount counted, turning indefinites into definites. The fact that several persons counting the same quantity come to the same result is for the psychologists of Tlön an example of the association of ideas or of memorization. —We must always remember that on Tlön, the subject of knowledge is one and eternal.

Within the sphere of literature, too, the idea of the single subject is all-powerful. Books are rarely signed, nor does the concept of plagiarism exist:

⁴Today, one of Tlön's religions contends, platonically, that a certain pain, a certain greenish-yellow color, a certain temperature, and a certain sound are all the same, single reality. All men, in the dizzying instant of copulation, are the same man. All men who speak a line of Shakespeare *are* William Shakespeare.

It has been decided that all books are the work of a single author who is timeless and anonymous. Literary criticism often invents authors: It will take two dissimilar works—the *Tao Te Ching* and the *1001 Nights*, for instance—attribute them to a single author, and then in all good conscience determine the psychology of that most interesting *homme de lettres*. . . .

Their books are also different from our own. Their fiction has but a single plot, with every imaginable permutation. Their works of a philosophical nature invariably contain both the thesis and the antithesis, the rigorous *pro* and *contra* of every argument. A book that does not contain its counter-book is considered incomplete.

Century upon century of idealism could hardly have failed to influence reality. In the most ancient regions of Tlön one may, not infrequently, observe the duplication 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. These secondary objects are called *hrönir*, and they are, though awkwardly so, slightly longer. 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. . . . Group research projects produce conflicting finds; now individual, virtually spur-of-the-moment projects are preferred. The systematic production of *hrönir* (says Volume Eleven) has been of invaluable aid to archaeologists, making it possible not only to interrogate but even to modify the past, which is now no

less plastic, no less malleable than the future. A curious bit of information: *hrönir* of the second and third remove—*hrönir* derived from another *hrön*, and *hrönir* derived from the *hrön* of a *hrön*—exaggerate the aberrations of the first; those of the fifth remove are almost identical; those of the ninth can be confused with those of the second; and those of the eleventh remove exhibit a purity of line that even the originals do not exhibit. The process is periodic: The *hrönir* of the twelfth remove begin to degenerate. Sometimes stranger and purer than any *hrön* is the *ur*—the thing produced by suggestion, the object brought forth by hope. The magnificent gold mask I mentioned is a distinguished example.

Things duplicate themselves on Tlön; they also tend to grow vague or “sketchy,” and to lose detail when they begin to be forgotten. The classic example is the doorway that continued to exist so long as a certain beggar frequented it, but which was lost to sight when he died. Sometimes a few birds, a horse, have saved the ruins of an amphitheater.

Salto Oriental, 1940

POSTSCRIPT—1947

I reproduce the article above exactly as it appeared in the *Anthology of Fantastic Literature* (1940), the only changes being editorial cuts of one or another metaphor and a tongue-in-cheek sort of summary that would now be considered flippant. So many things have happened since 1940. . . . Allow me to recall some of them:

In March of 1941, a handwritten letter from Gunnar Erfjord was discovered in a book by Hinton that had belonged to Herbert Ashe. The envelope was postmarked Ouro Preto; the mystery of Tlön was fully elucidated by the letter. It confirmed Martínez Estrada’s hypothesis: The splendid story had begun sometime in the early seventeenth century, one night in Lucerne or London. A secret benevolent society (which numbered among its members Dalgarno and, later, George Berkeley) was born; its mission: to invent a country. In its vague initial program, there figured “hermetic studies,” philanthropy, and the Kabbalah. (The curious book by Valentinus Andreä dates from that early period.) After several years of confabulations and premature collaborative drafts, the members of the society realized that one generation would not suffice for creating and giving full expression to a country. They decided that each of the masters that belonged to the society would select a disciple to carry on the work. That hereditary arrangement was followed;

after an interim of two hundred years, the persecuted fraternity turned up again in the New World. In 1824, in Memphis, Tennessee, one of the members had a conversation with the reclusive millionaire Ezra Buckley. Buckley, somewhat contemptuously, let the man talk—and then laughed at the modesty of the project. He told the man that in America it was nonsense to invent a country—what they ought to do was invent a planet. To that giant of an idea he added another, the brainchild of his nihilism⁵: The enormous enterprise must be kept secret. At that time the twenty volumes of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* were all the rage; Buckley suggested a systematic encyclopedia of the illusory planet. He would bequeath to them his gold-veined mountains, his navigable rivers, his prairies thundering with bulls and buffalo, his Negroes, his brothels, and his dollars, he said, under one condition: “The work shall make no pact with the impostor Jesus Christ.” Buckley did not believe in God, yet he wanted to prove to the nonexistent God that mortals could conceive and shape a world. Buckley was poisoned in Baton Rouge in 1828; in 1914 the society sent its members (now numbering three hundred) the final volume of the *First Encyclopædia of Tlön*. It was published secretly: the forty volumes that made up the work (the grandest work of letters ever undertaken by humankind) were to be the basis for another, yet more painstaking work, to be written this time not in English but in one of the languages of Tlön. That survey of an illusory world was tentatively titled *Orbis Tertius*, and one of its modest demiurges was Herbert Ashe—whether as agent or colleague of Gunnar Erfjord, I cannot say. His receipt of a copy of Volume Eleven seems to favor the second possibility. But what about the others? In 1942, the plot thickened. I recall with singular clarity one of the first events that occurred, something of whose premonitory nature I believe I sensed even then. It took place in an apartment on Laprida, across the street from a high, bright balcony that faced the setting sun. Princess Faucigny Lucinge had received from Poitiers a crate containing her silver table service. From the vast innards of a packing case emblazoned with international customs stamps she removed, one by one, the fine un-moving things: plate from Utrecht and Paris chased with hard heraldic fauna, . . . , a samovar. Among the pieces, trembling softly but perceptibly, like a sleeping bird, there throbbed, mysteriously, a compass. The princess did not recognize it. Its blue needle yearned toward magnetic north; its metal casing was concave; the letters on its dial belonged to one of the

⁵Buckley was a freethinker, a fatalist, and a defender of slavery.

alphabets of Tlön. That was the first intrusion of the fantastic world of Tlön into the real world.

An unsettling coincidence made me a witness to the second intrusion as well. This event took place some months later, in a sort of a country general-store-and-bar owned by a Brazilian man in the Cuchilla Negra. Amorim* and I were returning from Sant'Anna. There was a freshet on the Tacuarembó; as there was no way to cross, we were forced to try (to try to endure, that is) the rudimentary hospitality at hand. The storekeeper set up some creaking cots for us in a large storeroom clumsy with barrels and stacks of leather. We lay down, but we were kept awake until almost dawn by the drunkenness of an unseen neighbor, who swung between indecipherable streams of abuse and loudly sung snatches of *milongas*—or snatches of the same *milonga*, actually. As one can imagine, we attributed the man's insistent carrying-on to the storekeeper's fiery rotgut. . . . By shortly after daybreak, the man was dead in the hallway. The hoarseness of his voice had misled us—he was a young man. In his delirium, several coins had slipped from his wide gaucho belt, as had a gleaming metal cone about a die's width in diameter. A little boy tried to pick the cone-shaped object up, but in vain; a full-grown man could hardly do it. I held it for a few minutes in the palm of my hand; I recall that its weight was unbearable, and that even after someone took it from me, the sensation of terrible heaviness endured. I also recall the neat circle it engraved in my flesh. That evidence of a very small yet extremely heavy object left an unpleasant aftertaste of fear and revulsion. A *paisano* suggested that we throw it in the swollen river. Amorim purchased it for a few pesos. No one knew anything about the dead man, except that "he came from the border." Those small, incredibly heavy cones (made of a metal not of this world) are an image of the deity in certain Tlönian religions.

Here I end the personal portion of my narration. The rest lies in every reader's memory (if not his hope or fear). Let it suffice to recall, or mention, the subsequent events, with a simple brevity of words which the general public's concave memory will enrich or expand:

In 1944, an investigator from *The Nashville American* unearthed the forty volumes of *The First Encyclopædia of Tlön* in a Memphis library. To this day there is some disagreement as to whether that discovery was accidental or consented to and guided by the directors of the still-nebulous *Orbis Tertius*; the second supposition is entirely plausible. Some of the unbelievable features of Volume Eleven (the multiplication of *hrönnir*, for example) have been eliminated or muted in the Memphis copy. 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. The spread of Tlönian objects through various countries would complement that plan. . . .⁶ At any rate, the international press made a great hue and cry about this “find.” Handbooks, anthologies, surveys, “literal translations,” authorized and pirated reprints of Mankind’s Greatest Masterpiece filled the world, and still do. Almost immediately, reality “caved in” at more than one point. The truth is, it wanted to cave in. 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? It would be futile to reply that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but orderly in accordance with divine laws (read: “inhuman laws”) that we can never quite manage to penetrate. Tlön may well be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth forged by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men.

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

At that, French and English and mere Spanish will disappear from the earth. The world will be Tlön. That makes very little difference to me; 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*.

⁶There is still, of course, the problem of the *material* from which some objects are made.