



TRANS-

Revue de littérature générale et comparée

14 | 2012

Utopies contemporaines

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Kerri Pierce



Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/trans/675>

DOI : [10.4000/trans.675](https://doi.org/10.4000/trans.675)

ISSN : 1778-3887

Éditeur

Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle

Référence électronique

Kerri Pierce, « An Unnatural History: Borges, Tlön, and the Myth of Self », *TRANS-* [En ligne], 14 | 2012, mis en ligne le 26 juillet 2012, consulté le 03 décembre 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/trans/675> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/trans.675>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 3 décembre 2024.

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An Unnatural History: Borges, Tlön, and the Myth of Self

Kerri Pierce

Es sabido que la identidad personal reside en la memoria y que la anulación de esa facultad comporta la idiotez. Cabe pensar lo mismo del universo. Sin una eternidad, sin un espejo delicado y secreto de lo que pasó por las almas, la historia universal es tiempo perdido, y en ella nuestra historia personal—lo cual nos afantasma incómodamente.

-J. L. Borges, "Historia de la eternidad" (432)

The world, unfortunately, is real . . .¹

- 1 In the essay entitled "Nueva refutación del tiempo" ("A New Refutation of Time"), Borges remarks:

And yet, and yet . . . Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. Nuestro destino (a diferencia del infierno de Swedenborg y del infierno de la mitología tibetana) no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro. El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebata, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges. (115)

And yet, and yet . . . Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. Our destiny (as contrasted with the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges. (233-34)

- 2 In this postscript, Borges illustrates an approach to language and text, and to the self as it is reflected in language and text, that he will both dramatize and problematize in the short fiction "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." As this passage namely demonstrates, in seeking to define time, we define ourselves; time forces a self-referential discourse. In this way, we emerge as both the object (standing outside of time as a destructive medium) and the agent (a parcel of our own destruction). The invocation of each metaphor ("time is . . .") is also the invocation of a mirror in which we meet ourselves in coming. This mirror, which problematizes the way we reflect upon issues such as mortality and memory, and the way we represent these concepts in language, can either become, as Borges remarks in "Historia de la eternidad" ("A History of Eternity"), the "delicado y secreto" ("sensitive, secret") medium that redeems lost time, or an empty oblivion that "nos afantasma incómodamente" (432; "rather uncomfortably makes ghosts of us" 136).
- 3 In the short fiction "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", Borges demonstrates the way in which the rise of a totalizing fiction can lead to a mythology of the self that, as Borges puts it in "Historia de la eternidad," "*nos afantasma incómodamente*" (432; "uncomfortably makes ghosts of us" 136). Within the tale, the "sense of an ending"² reaffirms, as it does in the above passage, the fact that the world is real, that the individual is able to act as both subject and object of his or her own discourse. At the same time, the lack of a sense of mortality, which allows the individual to append an iron-clad "and yet..." to totalizing constructs, robs the individual of the ability to stand outside the text.
- 4 The confrontation between the individual and totality is a theme familiar to readers of both Borges's fictional and non-fictional texts. Totalizing structures, such as Tlön or The Library of Babel, ultimately lead to the annihilation of individual identity. In contrast, human mortality is associated with memory and embodiment. The individual, who is conscious of both at once—who is able, for example, to conjure totalities in fiction, while yet remaining aware of his or her own mortality—exists upon a critical threshold. It is a threshold, furthermore, that depends upon the individual's ability to impose an "and yet" to any discourse that threatens to become totalizing; a threshold, moreover, that can act as a last, unfortunate defense in times of crisis. As Borges, for instance, remarks in "El tiempo circular" ("Circular Time"): "*En tiempos de auge la conjetura de que la existencia del hombre es una cantidad constante, invariable, puede entristecer o irritar; en tiempos que declinan (como éstos), es la promesa de que ningún oprobio, ninguna calamidad, ningún dictador podrá empobrecernos*" (472; "In times of ascendancy, the conjecture that man's existence is a constant, unvarying quantity can sadden or irritate us; in times of decline (such as the present), it holds out the assurance that no ignominy, no calamity, no dictator, can impoverish us" 228). In this respect, our everyday, "iron-clad" human reality—defined by such basic realizations as: "*El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho*" ("Time is the substance I am made of")—can become a way to resist 'unrealities', such as Nazism, that seek to "impoverish" human experience. For as Borges writes in "Anotación al 23 de agosto de 1944" ("A Comment on August 23, 1944"): "*El nazismo adolece de irrealidad, como los infiernos de Erígena. Es inhabitable; los hombres solo pueden morir por él, mentir por él, matar y ensangrentar por él*" (77; "Nazism suffers from unreality, like Erigena's hell. It is uninhabitable; men can only die for it, lie for it, wound and kill for it" 211).
- 5 The totalities Borges conjures in his fictions are likewise uninhabitable. In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," namely, we find that the rise of a totalizing fiction has resulted

in a perspectival shift on the part of the first person narrator. Thanks to a world quickly succumbing to Tlön's totalizing universe, the narrator is confronted with the erasure of human history and the loss of a sense of human identity. The world, that is, has lost (or surrendered) the ability to oppose Tlön's totalizing fiction with an "and yet" that affirms an individual's position on the threshold of language in text—to, in short, close the book. In the Benjaminian sense, which I will define below, history has become "unnatural."

- 6 In the discussion that follows, I will apply this concept of unnatural history, which I have adapted from Walter Benjamin's concept of natural history as defined in the essay "Der Erzähler" ("The Storyteller" 1936), to a consideration of J. L. Borges's short fiction "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940). In particular, it is my contention that "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" dramatizes the way in which the idea of self can become mythological in the face of a totalizing fiction. I will argue, along with Djelal Kadir, that "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" can be taken as a "cautionary tale" intended for the reader. It is in this regard that the idea of "unnatural history" proves especially useful. Although it is not a phrase that appears in Benjamin's writing, "unnatural history" nonetheless epitomizes Benjamin's idea of the perspectival shift that takes place when death, a common denominator of human experience, disappears from the scene. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," I argue, likewise dramatizes this perspectival shift, not only exploring the way in which texts are disseminated, but also the way in which texts are read in death's absence. It is at this point, I contend, that Tlön's history becomes "unnatural" in the Benjaminian sense and that the notion of self becomes mythological.
- 7 In order to apply these ideas to Borges's text, I will first discuss the concept of "unnatural history," as it is presented—or rather, I argue, implied—in Benjamin's essay "Der Erzähler." I will then turn to "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and explore the way in which the idea of self can become mythological in the face of a totalizing fiction that threatens to erase human history and with it human identity. In particular, I will focus on the position of "J. L. Borges"³, the first person narrator of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," at the end of the story.

Unnatural History : A Perspectival Shift

- 8 In "Der Erzähler" ("The Storyteller"), Walter Benjamin writes: "Der Tod ist die Sanktion von allem, was der Erzähler berichten kann. Vom Tode hat er seine Autorität geliehen. Mit andern Worten : es ist die Naturgeschichte, auf welche seine Geschichten zurückverweisen" (450 ; "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back" 94). For Benjamin, "die Naturgeschichte" ("natural history") represents the never-ending process of change that serves to connect all living things, resulting in an "originary unity and dialectal interaction between nature and history" (Hanssen 9). The presence of death, which acts as the ultimate common denominator of human experience, enables an individual's history to enter into a collective human thread.
- 9 It is a concept that Benjamin illustrates through Johann Peter Hebel's short story "Unverhofftes Wiedersehen" ("Unexpected Reunion"), where, according to Benjamin, the author concretizes the passage of time in the following way: ". . . und der siebenjährige Krieg ging vorüber, und Kaiser Franz der Erste starb, und der Jesuiten-Orden

wurde aufgehoben . . . " (450; ". . . and the seven year war came and went, and Emperor Francis I died, and the Jesuit Order was abolished . . ." 95). In this chronology, each individual event enters into a common narrative thread—"and . . . and . . . and"—through the presence of ending in the tale. As Benjamin, therefore, concludes: "*Tiefer hat nie ein Erzähler seinen Bericht in die Naturgeschichte gebettet als Hebel es in dieser Chronologie vollzieht*" (451; "Never has a storyteller embedded his report deeper in natural history than Hebel manages to do in this chronology" (95). Thanks to the presence of death in the tale, individual and collective experiences have been brought together—"and . . . and . . . and"—by the fact that all things must end. As a result, natural history becomes, for Benjamin, our "natural" narrative home. This narrative home, furthermore, is the provenance of the storyteller, who operates "*im Haushalt der Menschheit*" (457; "in the household of humanity" 101) and who takes her authority from the presence of death—the ultimate common denominator of human experience—in the tale. In "Der Erzähler," Benjamin represents idea imagistically by noting that the storyteller is able to move up and down the rungs of a ladder ("and . . . and . . . and") constituted by human experience (457; 102). As this metaphor demonstrates, the act of storytelling would not be possible without the open spaces, the moments of caesura, framed between the ladder's rungs.

- 10 When Walter Benjamin wrote "Der Erzähler" in 1936, he was living as a German in exile in Paris. It was from this exilic position that he reflected upon the way in which the world wars, as well as modern technological advances⁴, altered the self-conception of the individual in relation to narratives of origin and ending. In "Der Erzähler," the alteration in individual self-conception takes the form of the perspectival shift that occurs when death and dying—"einstmals ein öffentlicher Vorgang im Leben des Einzelnen und ein höchst exemplarischer" (449; "once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one" 94)—is steadily pushed behind the scenes. In the absence of death, which, for example, Benjamin notes takes place in hospitals rather than houses, the individual becomes "[ein] Trockenwohner der Ewigkeit" (450; "[a] dry dweller [] of eternity"). Having lost their connection to "natural history"—to the process of change that unites all living things, enabling the dialectic between individual and collective human experience—the individual is stuck in a position of narrative displacement. The presence of death in life, a common denominator of human experience, no longer proves to be a "natural" narrative home.
- 11 As a result, the absence of death introduces a new kind of history-telling. Having been thrust out of a narrative "home" by the disappearance of death, the individual, an ironic "dweller" of an illusionary eternity—human beings, after all, are still mortal—is stuck in a position of narrative displacement. In this context, it seems safe to posit, although Benjamin never uses the phrase, that those who have lost their narrative home in this way—who have lost, that is, their connection to death—become victims of *unnatural* history, of a history that offers no real "sense of an ending" and that never allows the individual to overcome their position of displacement. Indeed, Benjamin links the absence of death to the introduction of a new aesthetics, which enables the individual to perceive "*eine neue Schönheit in dem Entschwindenden*" (442; "a new beauty in what is vanishing" 87). Understood in Benjaminian terms, unnatural history—history that is conceived and written in the absence of death—brings with it a perspectival shift that results in a newfound aesthetics of vanishing.

- 12 This perspectival shift, accompanied by an aesthetics of vanishing, is also heralded by the disappearance of the storyteller. Indeed, the storyteller's disappearance is the image with which Benjamin opens "Der Erzähler" (438; 83), noting that if the storyteller is vanishing from our sight, it is the viewer who is receding.

The World Will Be Tlön

- 13 Borges's short fiction "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" dramatizes the disappearance of the storyteller in the face of an unnatural (read: Tlönian) history. This disappearance, I contend, represents the loss of tension between reader, text and world, or, put another way, the loss of the reader's ability to stand outside of, or append an "and yet..." to, the text. This "and yet," I argue, acts as a necessary, interactive caesura that is also reflected in the separation of the book (as a totality) from the writing act (which problematizes its origins and self-reflects upon its claims). According to Djelal Kadir,

The action of this drama consists in the suspenseful oscillation between the two, where the book translates as natural totality, as metaphysical absolute, as transcendental completion, as inappellable inscription and implacable law, on the one hand, and, on the other, writing as tentative and differential/deferential performance with provisional claims that abstain from the attempt to contain exhaustively writing's bequest within their own reflection. (*The Other Writing* 46)

- 14 The locus of this drama becomes the reader, who mediates in the act of reading between the book's totality and writing's provisional performance. Indeed, Kadir concludes: "If the author bequeaths, Borges seems to imply, the reader is the hermetic executioner, the hermeneutical executioner, of the bequest" (45).
- 15 In Borges's texts, this drama is not only extra-textual, but often drives the story's plot, an idea incorporated in the narrator's position at the end of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." It is at this point, that the first-person narrator paradoxically becomes "the heretic executioner, the hermeneutical executioner" of his own "bequest." Recognizing this idea allows us to reflect upon the narrator's stance toward language and text, and, therefore, upon the narrator's orientation to 'reality' in the face of Tlön's unnatural history. In order to explore these ideas further, I will engage in a close reading of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," beginning with a description of the story's plot. As I will demonstrate, in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the first-person narrator, "J. L. Borges", is faced with the rise of a totalizing fiction and the end of human history. He is, furthermore, confronted with two modes of representation: *id est* ("it is") and *als ob* ("as if"), the nominal and the hypothetical or fantastic.
- 16 On the first pages of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," then, we find that we owe the discovery of Uqbar (a fictional country) and Tlön (a fictional planet) to the conjunction of two "eternities": the encyclopedia, whose form calls to mind Zeno's paradoxes, and the mirror, which "*simula estar lleno y está vacío*" ("Historia de la eternidad" 421) ("simulates fullness and is empty" "A History of Eternity" 126). These "eternities" likewise invoke two different ways of knowing or representing the world, one objective and one subjective; one belonging to language's propensity to name and categorize (*id est*), one depending upon the act of self-reflection, which calls to mind themes of memory and identity, as well as the inversion (or extension) of realities (*als ob*). However, there is another "eternity" that persists throughout the narrative and does

not vanish until the end, when the first-person narrator abandons the stance of witness and adopts a tone of confession. This “eternity” is that of the “critical chronotope.”

17 Mikhail Bakhtin defines the chronotope in the following way:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84)

18 Using this definition as a springboard, we will see that in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” the critical chronotope represents a textual fusion, where the written word makes time “artistically visible,” and the blank page, which underlies the text, becomes “charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” At the same time, this critical chronotope—a chronotope made critical by the context in which it occurs—is no smooth meeting of time and space, text and blank page, but instead represents a problematic crossroads: a meeting that registers the first-person narrator’s shifting orientation toward history. Displaced out of an overarching narrative “home” by the rise of a totalizing fiction, the first-person narrator must decide how to position himself with regards to a vanishing human history. By focusing on those points in the text where the blank page breaks through, and by considering the narrator’s relationship to these moments of caesura, I will examine the narrator’s situation at the aforementioned crossroads, where forgetfulness and remembrance, oblivion and history meet and where the notion of ‘self’ becomes part of Tlön’s mythology.

19 “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” consists of two main parts: the article (dated 1940) and the postscript (dated 1947). Because the postscript was part of the original story, which was published in the literary periodical *Sur* in May 1940, the postscript acts as a “prescribed postscript,” an anticipatory construction “viewed as recursive post factum from a future memory seven years hence” (Kadir, *Memos* 99). The caesura between the two sections thereby functions as both anticipatory and retrospective space, a fictional exploration of what Borges saw as a terrifying reality: the catastrophic rise of totalitarianism. As a result, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” which dramatizes the rise of a totalizing fiction and the subsequent erasure of human history, acts as a “cautionary tale”⁵ (98), one that directly implicates the reader in its plot. The caesura between article and postscript therefore becomes a critical chronotope, a charged space where fiction and ‘reality’ meet. In order to set the stage for further discussion, I will briefly summarize the article and the postscript below.⁶

20 In the article, the first-person narrator, “J. L. Borges”, documents in a critical, objective tone the discovery of an article on Uqbar (a fictional country) in an apocryphal *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and the subsequent entrance of Tlön (a fictional planet) into the world via another encyclopedia: *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön. vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr* (71). Because the fantastic country of Uqbar is introduced in a mimetic fashion—in the guise of a fictional article appended to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*’s *id est* chronology of ‘fact’—the boundary between ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’ seems, within the context of the article, to be relatively clear. ‘Fiction’ is still framed by the appearance of an extratextual ‘reality’.

21 On the other hand, Volume Eleven of *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön* discards the disjunction between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’ and instead sets forth a universe composed of ‘unrealities’. Though conceptually belonging, like the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, to the world of *id est*, Volume Eleven contains a totalizing fiction that has no external

reference but itself. At the same time, this encyclopedia is composed of fragments—that is, of individual articles—and is itself a fragment: one volume in a larger series. It is, namely :

un vasto fragmento metódico de la historia total de un planeta desconocido, con sus arquitecturas y sus barajas, con el pavor de sus mitologías y el rumor de sus lenguas Todo ello articulado, coherente, sin visible propósito doctrinal o tono paródico. (517)

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 . . . —all joined, articulated, coherent, and with no visible doctrinal purpose or hint of parody. (72)

22 Within the encyclopedia's framework, 'reality' and 'fiction', *id est* and *als ob* appear to be one and the same thing. As a result, Tlön becomes the essence of a book that cannot be closed, a text that cannot be escaped. As such, María Díaz Pozueta notes that Tlön's form represents "an extreme case of intertextuality" (205), an eternally present oblivion where stories within stories happen, and where all sense of origin and ending vanish into the text.

23 The second part of the story is the 1947 postscript. Because the date on the article corresponds to the actual publication date of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" in the journal *Sur* in May 1940, the postscript, as previously noted, ironically projects itself into the future. At the same time, the postscript refers to events that "está[n] en la memoria (cuando no en la esperanza o en el temor) de todo mis lectores (527; "lie in every reader's memory [if not in his hope or fear]" 79). With these words, the reader is directly implicated in the story's plot.

24 Furthermore, in the course of this short postscript, the origins of Tlön are laid bare. (This tale of origination forms a stark contrast to Tlön's eternally present oblivion.) As the narrator documents, a secret society, Orbis Tertius, first planned to create an imaginary country, Uqbar. However, according to the narrator, in 1824 the American millionaire Ezra Buckley dismissed this project with scorn:

. . . [S]e ríe de la modestia del proyecto. Le dice que en América es absurdo inventar un país y le propone la invención de un planeta. A esa gigantesca ideal añade otra, hija de su nihilismo: la de guardar en la silencio la impresa enorme. . . . Buckley descrea de Dios, pero quiere demostrar al Dios no existente que los hombres mortales son capaces de concebir un mundo. (526)

. . . [He] 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 nihilism: The enormous enterprise must be kept secret. . . . Buckley did not believe in God, yet he wanted to prove to the nonexistent God that mortals could conceive and shape a world. (79)

25 Accordingly, Buckley donated his wealth to the furtherance of the project: "*sus cordilleras auríferas, sus ríos navegables, sus praderas holladas por el toro y por el bisonte . . .*" (526; "his gold-veined mountains, his navigable rivers, his prairies thundering with bulls and buffalo . . ." 79). The result of this conspiracy was Tlön, a fictional world created by men.

26 It is the entrance of the fictional world into the 'real' world, however, that leads to the events that the narrator assures us belong to common memory:

El contacto y el hábito de Tlön han desintegrado este mundo. Encantada por su rigor, la humanidad olvida y torna a olvidar que es un rigor de ajedrecistas, no de ángeles. Ya ha penetrado en las escuelas el (conjectural) "idioma primitivo" de

Tlön ; ya la enseñanza de su historia armoniosa (y lleno de episodios conmovedores) ha obliterado a la que presidió mi niñez ; ya en las memorias un pasado ficticio ocupa el sitio de otro, del que nada sabemos con certidumbre—ni siquiera que es falso. (528-29)

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—not even that it is false. (81)

- 27 Paradoxically, the events that belong to common memory are associated with forgetting. The "habit of Tlön" has obliterated the habit of history. Not only has "a fictitious past" replaced the history we knew, but it has also erased the boundaries separating 'fiction' from 'reality'. Indeed, Tlön's systematic and fragmentary oblivion makes it impossible to distinguish fact from fiction, truth from falsehood. 'Reality' has become 'unreality'; *id est* has become synonymous with *als ob*.
- 28 At the same time, it should be noted that Tlön's harmonious and moving history does not replace one historical narrative with another, but rather one *habit* of narration with another. Instead of contextualizing history in human experience, Tlön's history unfolds in an oblivion where stories happen, where one thing succeeds another *ad infinitum*. Not only does it become difficult to remember the history that preceded the fiction, but it also becomes difficult to regard that pre-history as anything but another 'unreality'. If residual memory of the other past still lingers, it is memory without context, something "del que nada sabemos con certidumbre—ni siquiera que es falso" (529; "of which we now know nothing—not even that it is false" 81).
- 29 It is, therefore, against a backdrop of universal forgetting that the narrator's story unfolds. In recording the origins of Uqbar and Tlön, however, the narrative sets up a paradoxical dichotomy. The story of origin is opposed to endlessness; memory is opposed to forgetfulness; history is opposed to oblivion.
- 30 At the same time, the blurring of the boundary between 'reality' and 'fiction' also characterizes "J. L. Borges's" own narrative. For example, in the postscript we find that the 1940 article, which takes the form of a scholarly document, was also published in the *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (525; "Anthology of Fantastic Literature" 78).⁷ As a result, the article, with its critical tone, is a work of mimicry, much like the original article on Uqbar. If, however, we can recognize the article as a work of mimicry—an idea that suggests that the boundary between 'fact' and 'fiction' remains relatively intact—that line disappears in the postscript, where the concept of Tlön begins to break into the 'real' world. In this way, the blending of 'reality' and 'fiction' becomes an important plot component, forcing the reader to decide how s/he will read the story. Will the reader, for instance, approach the story as a fiction, or will s/he accept it as something that touches upon his or her own 'reality'?
- 31 In the context of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the question becomes critical. Not only does the postscript reference a past that, in 1940, had not yet occurred, but the narrator also makes the connection between the story's plot and the reader's historical moment clear:

Hace diez años bastaba cualquier simetría con apariencia de orden—el materialismo dialéctico, el antisemitismo, el nazismo—para embelesar los hombres. ¿Cómo no someterse a Tlön, a la minuciosa y vasta evidencia de un planeta ordenado ? Inútil

responder que la realidad también está ordenada. Quizá lo esté, pero de acuerdo a leyes divinas—traduzco : a leyes inhumanas—que no acabamos nunca de percibir. Tlön será un laberinto, pero es un laberinto urdido por hombres, un laberinto destinado a que lo descifren los hombres. (528)

Ten years ago, any symmetry, any system with the 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 ordered. 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. (81)

- 32 In comparing Tlön to "cualquier simetría con apariencia de orden" ("any system with the appearance of order") capable of spellbinding mankind, the story not only implicates the reader in its plot, but it also forces the reader to reflect, in the context of a fantastical tale, upon his or her historical moment.
- 33 In this regard, the caesura that separates the article and the postscript represents the crisis of history's ending, as well as the problematic meeting of 'reality' and 'fiction'. Though framed by a fantastic tale, the caesura becomes a mirror of the time in which Borges was writing, a mirror of the author and the reader caught up in, and potentially swept away by, current events. The stress in Borges's story arguably falls on this moment of caesura, a caesura, furthermore, that is echoed in the sentences with which the narrator closes the tale:

Si nuestras previsiones no erran, de aquí cien años alguien descubrirá los cien tomos de la Segunda Enciclopedia de Tlön.

Entonces desaparecerán del planeta el inglés y el francés y el mero español. El mundo será Tlön. Yo no hago caso, yo sigo revisando en los quietos días del hotel de Adrogué una indecisa traducción quevediana (que no pienso dar a la imprenta) del *Urn Burial* de Browne. (529)

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*. (81)

- 34 Between the prediction that "El mundo será Tlön" ("The world will be Tlön") and the narrator's admission that "Yo no hago caso" ("That makes very little difference to me"), there is a pause that recollects the caesura between article and postscript. Like the projective caesura between the article and postscript, a fictionally constructed pause that represents the end of history and the rise of a totalizing fiction, the hiatus between the prediction (that "The world will be Tlön") and the confession ("That makes very little difference to me") reflects the crossroads—ending and endlessness, remembrance and forgetfulness, history and oblivion—at which the narrator (and, arguably, the reader with him) stands. This crossroads, furthermore, is embodied in a work of translation that is intended for no audience. At the same time, the work that the narrator has chosen to translate is Thomas Browne's *Urne Buriall*, published in 1658, which reflects upon the presence of death in the midst of life, not to mention the futile lengths to which an individual will go to ensure his or her own immortality. In this

way, the projected translation presents a contrast to, and arguably a way to resist, a world that heralds the erasure of history and the loss of individual identity.

35 As a result, the artfully constructed pause between the prediction that "The world will be Tlön" and the confession that "That makes very little difference to me" calls upon the reader to critically consider the narrator's final act. Is the work of translation an attempt to reconnect to a vanishing historical narrative, which, set against the backdrop of an eternally present oblivion, nonetheless still has death at its heart? Or, instead, is it an attempt to establish a world over which the narrator (as translator) has complete control?

36 Perhaps a partial answer to these questions could be found in the text Borges has chosen to translate. For, as mentioned in the first section, Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Buriall* is a work that has death at its heart. In recording the various methods of societies for interring the dead, the work reflects upon the fallacies we pursue in order to safeguard our tenuous eternities.⁸ As Browne, for example, writes in "The Epistle to the Reader":

But these are sad and sepulchral Pitchers, which have no joyful voices; silently expressing old mortality, the ruines of forgotten times, and can only speak with life, how long in this corruptible frame, some parts may be uncorrupted; yet able to outlast bones long unborn, and noblest pyle among us.

37 By choosing a text that in fact meditates upon death, the narrator, displaced out of history, is arguably attempting to reconnect to a universal human history by actively translating a text that has death, the common denominator of human experience, at its heart. In this respect, perhaps the narrator's act of translation is indeed akin to the postscript Borges appends to "Nueva refutación del tiempo" ("A New Refutation of Time")—an "And yet" that not only acknowledges that "El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho" (115; "Time is the substance I am made of" 234), but also allows this idea to become a means of self-reflection.

38 On the other hand, perhaps the act of translation is simply designed to postpone a confrontation with the world that will be Tlön. As Mercedes Blanco notes, the narrator arguably :

. . . embota su angustia con la droga de los "quietos días" de Adrogué, mientras espera lo inevitable, y ello mediante la empresa más fútil . . . que pueda concebirse ; traducir, para nadie, para nunca, de un idioma condenado a breve plazo a otro idioma condenado. (24)

. . . dulls his anxiety with the drug of the "quiet days" in Adrogué, while he awaits the inevitable—and this while engaging in the most futile project imaginable: a translation that is not meant for any reader, that serves no purpose, from one condemned language into another.

39 In this case, the translation, which is not meant for any reader—and which, therefore, is not in essence dialogical—seems to be a type of Tlönian game. Not only does the narrator, as translator, distance himself from a world of forgetting, but he also indulges in a form of play that has forgetting at its heart. Mediating between "one condemned language" and another, allows the translator—who works within the inner exilic void—to recreate a world, complete with the immutable past, over which he has total control. Furthermore, because the narrator attempts to translate Browne's text in the "style of Quevedo", his translation seems to echo the virtuoso play of the baroque poet of the Spanish Siglo de Oro. As such, the text can arguably be considered a Tlönian form of play, a game that takes place in the space between memory and forgetting.

40 Ultimately, then, it seems that the need to reconnect to an overarching historical narrative that has death at its heart—an idea Benjamin identifies as "natural history"—and the desire to recommence in a world over which he has total control, both co-exist in the narrator's project of translation. At the same time, they potentially come into conflict in the eye of the reader, who is able to recognize the caesuras in the story as points of tension where the totalizing world of Tlön meets the "iron-clad" reality of narrator and reader. If we say, therefore, that the chronotope the narrator inhabits is critical, we can also say that the chronotope the reader inhabits, which brings the story into contact with a broader human 'reality', is crucial. For it is at this point that the narrator's futile position is framed by the reader's time-conscious, history-conscious gaze. In reading the text as a product of human experience, the caesuras—which ultimately become meaningless in the narrator's context (after all, "el mundo será Tlön" ["the world will be Tlön"])—become speaking, subversive spaces that testify to a 'reality' beyond the book. Indeed, as Ivan Almeida points out :

Al llegar a esa frase, el desconcertado lector se siente conducido a recomenzar la lectura. Su atención se focaliza esta vez, muy naturalmente, no ya en las aventuras narradas sino en la performatividad del acto narrativo. (199)

Upon arriving at this phrase, the disconcerted reader feels himself led to rebegin the reading. This time his attention is focused, quite naturally, not only on the adventures that have been narrated, but also on the performance of the narrative act.

41 In focusing upon the performance of the narrative act, the (re)reader is also led to reflect upon the caesuras that occur in the text, executing, in the process, the vanishing author's "bequest" (Kadir, *The Other Writing* 45).

42 On the other hand, if the text is read as a 'fiction' that is divorced from the reader's 'reality', then the breaks in the text emerge as empty, unspeaking spaces simply designed to separate one idea from another. Faced with a narrator who vanishes into the text, then, it is left to the reader to decide whether the caesuras in the text will emerge as "speaking" or "empty"; whether they will become mirrors that echo human experience, or whether they are simply the confirmation of a simulated, fantastical fullness—the essence, perhaps, of "unnatural history" where the notion of the individual self who is able to self-reflect in language proves to be but a myth.

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NOTES

1. A portion of the text in this article is taken from my dissertation, "Reconnection and/or Recommencement: Narrative Desire and the Blank Page in Anna Seghers's *Transit*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and J. L. Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."
2. This comment is taken from the title of Frank Kermode's brilliant book *The Sense of an Ending*.
3. For the sake of clarity, I will use quotation marks to distinguish the first person narrator of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "J. L. Borges" from the author, J. L. Borges.
4. Benjamin's most famous essay on this subject is "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction), which explores the effect of film and photography on our conception of origin and originality.
5. See also Kadir, "Totalization, Totalitarianism, and Tlön."
6. For a more thorough discussion of the events that take place in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," see Cristina Parodi.
7. First published in the literary periodical, *Sur*, in May 1940, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" also appeared in *The Anthology of Fantastic Literature* that same year.
8. For a more thorough discussion of Borges's engagement with Browne's text, see Kristal, 89-96.

RÉSUMÉS

This article applies the concept of unnatural history, which I have adapted from Walter Benjamin's concept of natural history, as defined in the essay "Der Erzähler" ("The Storyteller"), to a consideration of J. L. Borges's short fiction "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." In particular, it is my contention that "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" dramatizes the way in which the idea of self can become mythological in the face of a totalizing fiction. I argue, along with Djelal Kadir, that "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" can be taken as a "cautionary tale" intended for the reader. It is in this regard that the idea of "unnatural history" proves especially useful. Although it is not a phrase that appears in Benjamin's writing, "unnatural history" nonetheless epitomizes Benjamin's idea of the perspectival shift that takes place when death, a common denominator of human experience, disappears from the scene. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," I argue, likewise dramatizes this perspectival shift, not only exploring the way in which texts are disseminated,

but also the way in which texts are read in death's absence. It is at this point, I contend, that Tlön's history becomes "unnatural" in the Benjaminian sense and that the notion of self becomes mythological.

AUTEUR

KERRI PIERCE

Kerri Pierce holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Pennsylvania State University. She was the recipient of a translation fellowship from Dalkey Press in 2010 and has since translated texts from Dutch, German, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish. She has translated several novels and her translations have also been published in the literary journal *Context* and the anthology *Best European Fiction 2010*.