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Spatiality and Conflicted Meanings in Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

Abstract: This paper examines issues of language, knowledge, and location in the story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" by Jorge Luis Borges. There is a sense in which this story is fundamentally about the nature of language, and the story comments on ways in which human language articulates a relationship between knowledge itself and location. The basic premise is the challenge of establishing locations, commenting on them, and examining the nature of them. This process can be seen to be related to the search for a type of understanding, the possibility of which is always in doubt but which serves as motivation for action and endeavour, thus making possible the very notion of the availability of alternatives, of multiple paths, of a range of choices. In this way, a goal such as reaching the minotaur at the centre of a labyrinth is not only figured as being unattainable but is like the notion of a perfect translation or the production of a perfect utterance, a concept more fruitfully utilized as a spur to provoke us to think harder and to weigh up more options and possibilities, to strive towards goals and enhance achievements, rather than being seen as a state of idyllic verbal expression we should realistically aim for.

Keywords: conflict, Jorge Luis Borges, literary spatiality, space, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

> In every poem chaos must shimmer through the regular veil of orderliness (Novalis 1990, 114)

In this article, I comment on the story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" in order to explore the notion that this narrative by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) is fundamentally about the relationship between spatiality and the nature of language, and that the story comments on ways in which human language articulates a relationship between knowledge itself and conflicts about location. The basic premise of this story is seen to be the challenge of establishing conflicted locations and their implications, commenting on them, and examining the nature of them. This process is related to the search for a type of understanding, the possibility of which is always in doubt, but which serves as motivation for action and endeavour. That search for understanding entails the depiction of characters and events that proceed towards a future that is undefined and essen-

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tially unknowable, thus opening up the very notion of different alternatives, multiple paths, and a range of possible options.

In 2015, the German philosopher Markus Gabriel published a book called (in English) *Why the World Does Not Exist*. In it, he outlines an epistemological approach that suggests that the key fact about our knowledge of what surrounds us is that it is limited by our inability to escape from our condition of being ourselves *in* the world. The idea that we can "grasp the whole" (Gabriel 2015, 12), that is, think about the entirety of what we usually call "the world," is an illusion, since "it is in principle too big for any thought"; thus, "the world cannot in principle exist because it is not found in the world." Note that Gabriel is not attempting to claim that the universe is an illusion or that life is a dream; indeed he explicitly states that "considerably more exists than one would have expected – namely, everything else except the world." In this set of what exists he includes those concepts and thoughts that we conjure up in our imaginations, so that what is imaginary exists – the example he gives is of unicorns wearing police uniforms and living on the far side of the moon (13). The latter exist because we can imagine them; what we cannot do, he insists, is imagine "the world." And the point is further reinforced by the following assertion: "The question is never simply whether something exists but always *where* something exists. For everything that exists, exists somewhere – even if it is only in our imagination" (emphasis in original). And the only exception to this is, of course, the world, since "this we cannot imagine at all" (13–14).

Whether or not we are convinced by Gabriel's argument, we can presumably see where he is coming from, and can appreciate the point. He quotes Wittgenstein's two opening statements in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

I. The world is everything that is the case.
II. The world is the totality of facts, not of things. (Gabriel 2015, 33)

He then develops this to suggest that the world is "neither the totality of things nor the totality of facts, but it is that domain in which all existing domains are found," approvingly citing Heidegger's formulation of the world as "the domain of all domains" (Gabriel 2015, 45), which leads to the conclusion that "there is no such thing as the domain of all domains," that is, that the world, as such, does not exist.

There are two main thoughts emerging from Gabriel's argument, ideas that correspond in a fruitful way to the kind of thinking about language, spatiality, and identity that emerges from a reading of the work of Jorge Luis Borges. The first is the notion that there exists a tension between what we could call a commonsense view that assumes that the world exists and that we exist in it, on the one hand, and a position such as Gabriel's that concludes that there is no such

thing as that "world" which is the domain of all domains. The second is the position that this argument entails about language, namely that language is fundamental to the discussion itself, since it is precisely when we attempt to refer to "the world," that is, to make some statement about existence, that the problem comes into focus; after all, the only means whereby we can address the issue in question is language – it is only through language that a statement about such things as the meaning of life, or explanations of our existence, or the fact of the world's existence or non-existence, can be uttered.

Both of these are crucial dimensions of several Borges stories, and they raise important concerns about how this author's *ficciones* function as stories. In particular, they relate in important ways to how notions of spatiality are employed – either explicitly or implicitly – in order to explore certain fundamental insights into our humanity. Note that this is not to say that Borges simply calls into question the idea that we are capable of understanding our own existence, nor am I suggesting that Borges is peddling a postmodernist conceptualization of the world as an illusory notion, constantly relativized and functioning as merely a series of self-induced deceptions about our being. Rather, what I wish to suggest is that Borges is more inclined to deal simultaneously with two opposing ideas which are mutually contradictory but which both have equal truth value. Thus, in Borges, we may find that the world does and does not exist, and that language does and does not reference reality. Perhaps the best example of how Borges does this, creating a domain in which conflicting truths coexist, is the 1940 story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."

This is one of Borges's best known *ficciones*, but it is one that is often misunderstood, in terms of the fundamental point that it addresses. In it, the narrator discovers a conspiracy to invent an imaginary world, one in which there are no material objects, and one where languages do not contain normal nouns or references to things, but rather only verbs and references to qualities. What I want to claim is that the central concern of the story – as in the case of many other Borges stories – is not the issue of escaping reality by playfully inventing a world of fantasy, but is something deeper and, ultimately, much more human than that: the issue of the conflict between such things as reality and fantasy. This story explores the nature of human conflict by addressing universal intellectual conflict and how that relates to human understandings of space. It does this by offering us a version of the conflicted state in which we live, one that hinges on our struggle to comprehend our place in the universe, and the possible sense of anguish associated with that struggle around meaning. It enquires into the nature of the self and the nature of identity, taking identity to mean the sense we have of the reality of the self. Is there an I that we can allude to as having real existence, or is this just a fiction, an invention? And, if it is an invention, in what way is it an

invention? That is, do we invent reality? Is that which we refer to as real merely a fiction, so that idealist notions of being as perception are in fact key to understanding the nature of existence?

What I want to suggest is that this claim is never actually resolved in the story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," and that this lack of resolution is central to what the story is about. The story succeeds, in other words, by articulating an intellectual aporia, a fundamental conflict – between existence and non-existence, reality and the imagination, and meaningfulness and lack of meaningfulness – and I suggest that this conflict is articulated in spatial terms. The story conjures up an entire alternative universe, one that we experience imaginatively while always also remaining tied to our everyday existence; via language, it places us outside our own universe and allows us to experience the sense of inhabiting a radically different "otherness," while continuing to be part of the universe we actually inhabit.

We can trace the process by which this happens by reviewing some of the key moments of conflict in the story, moments that lead us through a labyrinthine series of steps that take us to a place removed from normality but one that constantly confounds us by blurring the boundaries between the fictional and the real. It seems to me that there are four key phases in the story when conflict is foregrounded, phases that are characterized by issues of spatiality. We can sketch these spatial conflicts in the following terms.

1 Conflict over the existence of Uqbar

The narrator and his friend stumble upon the fact that there exists an anomalous version of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. This is a version that includes a description of a place called Uqbar. The encyclopaedia in question is said to be an inferior version of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. But the friends find that the "normal" edition of the encyclopaedia does not even refer to Uqbar; only this one anomalous version does. In it, they find an odd statement about existence which reads as follows: "Para uno de esos gnósticos, el visible universo era una ilusión o (más precisamente) un sofisma. Los espejos y la paternidad son abominables porque lo multiplican y lo difunden" [For one of these gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or (more precisely) a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are hateful because they multiply and disseminate that universe] (Borges 1996, 431).[1]

1 English translations of Borges's text in this article are my own.

So, in the "world" as it is conceived by this gnostic, the visible universe is not a kind of passive entity waiting to be observed by us. As a sophism, it has the same degree of agency as a linguistically formulated sentence, and serves to deceive us into thinking that it exists. Hence, the unresolved conflict we are left with is one in which we somehow manage to observe a world, but that world is just a deception or an illusion: it both exists before us as something we can witness, and simultaneously does not exist.

2 Conflicting characteristics of the imaginary world

The main feature attributed to the invented world in the story is its immateriality: that is, there are no material objects in this "world"; there is only thought and impressions or perceptions. This universe – which, at this point, is not even Uqbar, but the world of Tlön, that is, the universe invented within the literature of Uqbar – is not a spatial world. As the narrator puts it: "El mundo para ellos no es un concurso de objetos en el espacio; es una serie heterogénea de actos independientes. Es sucesivo, temporal, no espacial" [For them, the world is not a set of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial] (Borges 1996, 435).

The result of this is that the language used in this "world" – a language whose existence is implicitly called into question in a fundamental way, since it is itself referred to as "conjetural" [conjectural], and as being merely the posited origin of this place's current languages – does not have nouns in it, just impersonal verbs with adverbial affixes. There is extensive discussion of the nature of the languages of Tlön – there is another language that only has adjectives in it – but the upshot of the discussion is that the narrator, in company with the hapless reader, has to come to terms with paradoxical statements and ideas about the linguistic features being discussed, so that we are left with conflicting insights into not only the nature of these languages, but conceivably into the nature of language itself. We are told, for instance, that "el hecho de que nadie crea en la realidad de los sustantivos hace, paradójicamente, que sea interminable su número" [the fact that nobody believes in the reality of nouns means, paradoxically, that they are interminable in number] (Borges 1996, 435), so that all the "nouns" that Indo-European languages possess are also available in the languages of the northern hemisphere of Tlön, as well as many more.

3 Conflict created by intrusion of the imaginary world into the everyday world

As the story proceeds and we come to what is called the "Postscript," there is an increasing sense that the clash between our everyday world and the invented world of Tlön is coming to a head. A compass is found with words written on it in Tlönian lettering; the narrator comes upon a cone made of a metal heavier than any known on earth, and we are told that such cones are images of the divinity in Tlön; a version of the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* is found, but with parts deleted from it in order to make it fit in more with the characteristics of the real world, while schools begin to teach children the Tlönian language and the history of Tlön starts to replace conventional history. As our narrator states, "ya en las memorias un pasado ficticio ocupa el sitio de otro, del que nada sabemos con certidumbre – ni siquiera que es falso" [in people's memories, a fictional past has now taken the place of another past, one that we know nothing about with any certainty, not even that it is false] (Borges 1996, 440). Language and expression are therefore central to the world that is replacing our everyday world; in order to convey anything at all about that other world, we need to have recourse to a discussion of language itself, and ultimately, this boils down to uncertainty and ambiguity: we can say nothing with certainty because there is nothing material in existence about which we could even make a claim.

4 Conflict of private vs public realities

The final conflict presented by the narrator is that between public and private worlds: the public space in which there is obsessive assimilation of a fantastical alternative to the real, and a private world which is figured as a quiet, untroubled existence in which our narrator retires to a place apart (a hotel in Adrogué, twenty kilometres outside of cosmopolitan Buenos Aires) in order to work on a translation of the classic seventeenth-century English meditation on death, Thomas Browne's "Urn Burial": "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" [I don't pay it any heed. In the peace and quiet of the hotel in Adrogué, I just keep working on revising my indecisive translation of Browne's "Urn Burial," written in the style of Quevedo – a translation I have no intention of publishing] (Borges 1996, 440). This statement about what the narrator is now doing allows him to dismiss the universe that has been fabricated in the preceding paragraphs and return us to the highly personal starting point with which he

began when he talked of his conversation with a friend that led to the initial discovery of Uqbar.[2] But the references to copies, simulations, and inventions continue here, since, for all that he evokes the private world of the individual in this final sentence of the story, he still suggests that the translation he is working on is not especially reflective of his own personality, that is, that the world is not really *him*. Rather, we are told that the translation is being written in the manner of the Spanish Golden-Age satirical poet, Francisco de Quevedo, and that it is "indecisive." Even the narrator's retreat from the chaotic conundrums associated with the public appropriation of the alien world he has described, then, is characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity.

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The instances of conflict that have been outlined above all serve to reinforce the central point of the story, which is that everything is uncertain, nothing can be taken for granted, and that the general issue of personal identity, the question of the existence of "the world" and the issue about the capacity – or lack of capacity – of language to convey anything substantial about that world are all called into question. In an interview conducted in 1984, Borges said that he "never stopped laughing from beginning to end" while writing "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," and that the story was "all one huge metaphysical joke" (quoted in Kearney 2006, 346). But, of course, when he said that, he may have been only joking: the story is clearly more than a joke; indeed, it is more than a story. While we must not make the mistake of treating Borges's *ficciones* as if they were simply philosophical essays in which the author was attempting to explicate complex questions – a common enough error in my view[3] – we must also acknowledge that, as well as being fictional stories, they are indeed incursions into knotty conundrums about metaphysical issues. In a radical sense, then, the story is both a fiction and an exercise in philosophical reflection, and it leaves unresolved the tension between these two questions of genre, just as it deliberately leaves unresolved the various enigmas it references in the course of the narrative. In this sense, it is precisely this characteristic – the conflicted nature of the very genre of this piece of writing – that affords the story its ultimate originality, and presumably it is precisely this fundamentally ambivalent quality that accounts, at least in part, for its universal appeal.

2 Note how this chimes with the discussion in Italiano (2016) of the links between real and imagined places in the context of the "imaginative geographies" conjured up in literary texts.

3 See, for instance, Richardson (2012, 176–177) for a discussion of this point in relation to another Borges story, "The Library of Babel."

This is achieved, I would suggest, by spatial means.[4] Each of the conflicts identified above is spatial in nature. First, the existence of Uqbar is debated and disputed, with an initial clear acknowledgement that what is being referred to is imaginary but with subsequent claims that the imaginary universe that has been invented is growing and expanding. Second, the characteristics of this imaginary world are explained to us in terms that allow us to see the various contradictions inherent in them, so that issues about the reality of objects are left unresolved and features of imaginary languages are seen to be paradoxical. Then, the conflict, attendant on the intrusion of objects from Tlön into our everyday existence, is depicted as a spatial conflict as if it were a kind of war of worlds, the implication appearing to be that inevitably the dystopian but rational imaginary universe will prevail over our mundane world, as we sink into an abyss of obsession with, and blind faith in, the superiority of this alien alternative. Finally, even the option of escaping the juggernaut of Tlön and Uqbar by having recourse to the consolation of poetry is seen to be fallacious, since uncertainty also characterises this move, and the tenuous nature of the self is emphasized by the admission that what is being produced reflects the influence of another writer (Quevedo), and the result is yet more lack of clarity.

Language is seen to be tied up with epistemology here, as well as with fundamental notions about identity. The labyrinthine world which we are invited to enter takes us through a series of steps that deposit us in ambiguity and ambivalence. There is no rational hyper-ego, no "self," that can impose order on this chaos or present a rational map of the territory in question.[5] At each turn, significations slip away from us, and the impression we are left with is one of a vast maze of hints and half-truths that somehow seem to convey something valid about how we apprehend things, but which will not sit still long enough or simply be stable enough to allow us to fix meanings in anything like a permanent manner. Just as there are no nouns in Tlönian languages, there are no objects in this world, and the ambiguities in the story undermine any sense that we can grasp hold of what surrounds us. In this story, even our private self is seen to be evanescent, and we are left adrift in a fundamentally nebulous universe.

Most of the individual issues that have been raised here in relation to this story have been addressed on numerous occasions elsewhere, often with great

4 This discussion is informed by my reading of key texts on literary spatiality such as Westphal (2011), Dünne and Günzel (2012), and Tally (2017); for more detailed discussion of the matter, see Richardson (2018).

5 In this regard, it is worth noting that this story itself may well be deemed to qualify, in the conception of literary spatiality outlined by Stockhammer (2006), as being both "mappable" and "unmappable."

insight.[6] But I would like to comment briefly on three fairly general aspects that I think are central both to the story itself and to any consideration of the relevance of Borges's work to the ongoing evolution of creative writing. These are as follows: questions about existence, about the nature of language, and about the conflicted journey towards meaning that the story's trajectory represents.

Firstly, in relation to the question of existence, there is a fundamental ambiguity in operation in the story, one that serves to undermine any degree of certainty about our knowledge of the universe around us. The point here is not so much about whether what we can call "the world" does or does not exist: common sense may dictate the former, while, as we saw above, philosophers such as Markus Gabriel can argue effectively in favour of the latter. What the story seems to suggest, however, is that our focus needs to be epistemological, rather than ontological: what is impossible is certainty in relation to our knowledge of the universe around us, and the reason for that uncertainty is a spatial one: we cannot pin down the universe, that is, know *where* it is, precisely because we do not know *what* it is, and we cannot have knowledge of the universe because we do not know *where* that knowledge is. Just as Borges and his friend strive to locate the meanings behind the fantasy world of Tlön, so we too flounder as we search within the story to identify the location of reliable knowledge about all that there is around us.

Secondly, language comes into play when we attempt to formulate meaning of any kind. The fundamental ambiguity of language is signalled by the discussion in this story about the nature of the languages of Tlön. Not only are there no nouns in Tlönian languages; there are also two contrasting ways of addressing the resultant deficit: we can rely on references to times and events, or we can allude to qualities through the use of adjectives. The very fact that two such options exist obviously adds to the sense of uncertainty and ambiguity: our only recourse is to rely on the two fundamental phenomena of events happening and things seeming to have qualities. In an archly idealist move, the search for alternative ways of articulating meaning takes us back to ourselves as perceivers of what is around us, acknowledging the primacy of perception and the basic ambiguity of linguistic codes. Those codes are seen here in Whorfian terms as both reflecting and creating alternative ways of thinking, and these ways of thinking, rather than offering solid options, reveal only further bifurcating paths in a labyrinth, so that the more our narrator attempts to identify the characteristics of the

6 See, for instance, the remarks on the "reality" of the Tlönian universe in the context of quantum theory in Merrell (1991, ch. 6), the discussion in Sarlo (1993) of issues relating to order and chaos in this story, Seargeant (2009) on questions relating to the languages of Tlön, and Fishburn (2015) on how "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" can be read as a story about the world created within the story itself.

languages he is describing, the more he uncovers further uncertainty and debate around their core meanings, and the more further possibilities for meaning emerge.

In such a context, as Krzystof Ziarek (2009, 84) suggests, "being becomes tied to the notion of possibility, and not simply to possibilities but to the very force of the possible," so that "to experience being means to experience its historical-temporal happening in terms of the force of the possible." This is the third – and perhaps crucial – dimension of this story that has not been given due attention: the way in which its labyrinthine structure serves to leave unresolved the various forays that the story undertakes into the nature of meaning and the location of knowledge. Starting with the initial scene where the narrator and his friend begin the process of discovering Uqbar, and wending our way through all the various twists and turns on the path to understanding the Tlönian universe, and having been tempted with the possibility of the creation of an "Orbis Tertius," we end up experiencing, with the narrator, the ambiguities associated with his own efforts at translating an English text into Spanish. We find ourselves immersed in a maze of meanings and half-truths, always waiting to discover the next twist in the tale that will finally reveal a good understanding of what is going on, only to realize that in fact what we are destined to discover is that there is no prize at the centre of the labyrinth, indeed that the centre of the labyrinth is itself unattainable, that the journey in search of that prize is in fact the fundamental meaning we are pursuing, not the unattainable prize itself. In the terms of this labyrinth, reaching the minotaur at the centre of the labyrinth is not only figured as being unattainable but is, as the story hints, like the notion of a perfect translation or the production of a perfect utterance in any human language, a concept more fruitfully utilized as a spur to provoke us to think harder and to weigh up more options and possibilities, to strive towards goals and enhance achievements, rather than being a blissful state of idyllic verbal expression we should realistically aim for.

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