

## CHALLENGES OF THE TEXT IN BORGES'S "TLÖN, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS" AND "PIERRE MENARD, AUTHOR OF THE QUIXOTE"

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### **Abstract**

*This paper analyses the relationship between the author and the reader in two of Borges's most representative fictions: "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote". In the first writing, the fictional reader and narrator Borges not only challenges the non-fictional reader to interpret correctly the various references that appear in the text, but he also invades his real-life world. In the second story, "Pierre Menard", the fictional reader and narrator challenges the non-fictional reader again by claiming that two identical texts may acquire different values when they are attributed to two different authors living in different periods of time. By exploring these provoking texts, the article attempts to establish Borges's own perspectives on "authorship" and "readership" starting from the premise that, in the Borgesian stories, the line between the reader and the author is blurred.*

**Keywords:** story, fiction, fictional, Borges, author, reader

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### **1. Introduction**

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In every story we read, we try to decipher a fictional world. But what if this world, with its constantly varying perspectives, transforms our reading into an arduous wandering through a labyrinth? Borges's stories, serious and playful at the same time, represent an extraordinary confirmation of the infinite potentialities of the imaginary. The author invites the reader to discover a plurality of textual universes that contain an infinity of meanings, and this extraordinary indeterminacy of the written word produces astonishment in the reader, compelling him to become aware of his own reality.

Borges is a writer who is famous for his provocative fiction that alters our sense of the world and makes us envision possibilities yet to be discovered. His polymorphous, elusive stories, full of allusions, contradictions, absurdities and mannerisms, incite us to question a universe that we are taking for granted.

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In his work, the Argentinian author employs recurrent themes, such as those of the labyrinth, of the unoriginality of all literature or of the totalizing fiction that invades reality. He also uses a variety of metafictional techniques. He mixes facts and fiction, writes notes on imaginary books, comments on the action of his protagonists and even appears as a character in his own stories. These techniques and themes, as well as many others, can be found in two of the writer's most representative works: "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" et "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*".

"Tlön" is a story about a story that begins to invade the author's life. The writing entails the blending between reality and illusion, the juxtaposition of existing elements with invented ones. Its main idea is that people have access to reality only through their representations of it. As Patricia Waugh notices, "Tlön" "implies that human beings can only ever achieve a metaphor for reality, another layer of "interpretation". (Waugh, 1984: 15)

On one hand, Borges appears as a character within the plot as both reader of an encyclopaedia and as fictional narrator of the events. On the other hand, the structure and content of this fiction presuppose a contextually aware non-fictional reader who already knows details about the real author's life, philosophy and aesthetics and who can understand the different philosophical and literary allusions that are scattered in the text. Thus, the interpretation of the story is conditioned by the reader's previous knowledge and disposition.

"Pierre Menard" also changes the way we perceive writing and reading, being, as Giskin affirms, a "revisioning of how meaning is created through the interaction of man and text." (Giskin, 2005: 103) Borges calls into question the author's and the reader's capacity to establish the meaning of a book by implying that the significance of a literary creation is tied not only to a particular cultural and historical context, but also to the interaction of specific horizons of expectations. We also find in this work the presence of a character who is both reader and narrator of the story.

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## ***2. The relationship between the author and the reader in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"***

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"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" encapsulates many metafictional devices that blur the distinction between fiction and reality. Borges manipulates the traditional plot, mimics the objective format of a literary review, mixes real writings with bogus works, makes references to personal acquaintances and even attributes false statements or books to genuine individuals. The writer also inserts himself in the story both as a fictional reader and as a fictional narrator, roles that represent projections of the real writer and of the real reader in the text.

Borges includes in this writing some of his favorite themes: the search for astounding ideas, the fascination with philosophical idealism, the creation of anti-worlds, the confrontation between the individual and the totalizing structure, the monstrous intrusion of the fantastic into the real world, etc. "Tlön" also contains the themes of the labyrinth and of the mirror, which are very dear to Borges. The labyrinth is present everywhere in the text, for the whole story is a conundrum that needs to be figured out by the non-fictional reader. The mirror, which appears in the beginning of the narrative, shows how the elements of reality are reflected upon the fictional universe and then back into the real world.

In Rim's opinion, the mirror also symbolizes the fiction's shaping of the reader's experience, allowing him to discern in the story only what one is able to, according to his own knowledge and predispositions (Rim, 2016: 8). The author has in mind an active, contextually aware reader who has some knowledge of his reputation, preoccupations and mannerisms and who can understand the various references to philosophical or literary texts, as well as the numerous allusions to writers and philosophers contained in the story.

The uncanny "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" opens with a dinner conversation between Borges, the fictional narrator, and his guest, Bioy Casares, who is actually the author's real-life friend. While talking about the monstrosity of mirrors, Casares remembers a saying: "Mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they multiply the number of men". (Borges, 1944: 146) The statement, which belongs to one of the heresiarchs of the country of Uqbar, is taken from an article in the "Anglo-American Cyclopaedia" which also contains a reference to the planet Tlön. Two years later, the narrator comes into possession of the eleventh volume of "A first Encyclopaedia of Tlön", which describes, among others, the Tlönian literature, philosophy and language.

The description of the writings of this planet contains the common Borgesian themes of "unoriginality" and "infinity". Thus, in Tlön, fiction has only one plot "with every imaginable permutation". (Borges, 1944: 168) The concept of plagiarism doesn't exist and all books are created by a single author, who is "timeless and anonymous". (Borges, 1944: 168) As Borges says, "all men who speak a line of William Shakespeare are William Shakespeare." (Borges, 1944: 167-168) These ideas imply the notion of "infinite authorship", concept that is explained by Rim in the following way:

*The infinite author would firstly suggest that there exists only one singular author, mainly because if a singular collective can embody all ideas, then individual thought becomes redundant and unnecessary [...]. Conversely, the infinite author could also mean that no author exists, in the sense that if everyone is able to invent and communicate all ideas, then the figure of the author (the individual creator) becomes*

*redundant, as all perspectives would be the same and consequently result in a lack of individual thought, and therefore, of individual authors.* (Rim, 2016: 32)

According to the encyclopaedia, Tlönians perceive the world only through their mind constructions. They see reality as a sequence of mental states, “a heterogeneous series of independent acts”. (Borges, 1944: 157) These mind processes lose their uniqueness when receiving a name or when being classified, for language, as an arbitrary construct, alters perceptions when imposing its shape on them.

Contextually aware readers, such as Silvia Dapia, who know that Borges liked to explore the literary possibilities of philosophy, have identified in the descriptions of Tlön, among others, traces of Fritz Mauthner’s views (Mauthner, 1923-1924). Just like the inhabitants of the planet, who believe that the universe is only a projection of the mind, Mauthner considers that we have access to the world only through our sense-impressions which constitute our representations of things, and that there is no ultimate substance that transcends these representations (Dapia, 1997: 97).

The German philosopher’s influence can also be seen in the refusal of Tlönians to employ nouns, for nouns would presuppose a universe of objects (Dapia, 1997: 97-99). In the same spirit with Mauthner, who considers that adjectives and verbs express better our experience of reality than nouns, the inhabitants of Tlön in the southern hemisphere replace nouns with verbs. For example, the verbs which would correspond to the word “moon” would be “to moonate” or “to enmoon”. Thus, “the moon rose above the river” would become in Tlönian “Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned”. (Borges, 1944: 158) At the same time, the Tlönians of the northern hemisphere use adjectives instead of nouns: “One does not say “moon”; one says “aerial-bright above dark-round” or “soft-amberish-celestial” or any other string.” (Borges, 1944: 158) And the Borgesian text continues to challenge the reader with its accumulation of poetic absurdities.

These unusual ideas envelop Tlön in an enigmatic aura, overwhelming the fictional reader of the encyclopaedia. However, the secret of the origin of this place is laid bare in the short postscript that closes the story. As we find out from the narrator, “Tlon” is not a planet, but a work of fiction created by a “secret benevolent society” founded in the seventeenth century in Europe, who wanted to invent a country, but ended up inventing a planet at the suggestion of an American millionaire, Ezra Buckley. The atheist Buckley came up with the idea of a “systematic encyclopedia of the illusory planet” (Borges, 1944: 173), and donated his enormous wealth to the fulfilment of this secret endeavor that would prove the unnecessary of God.

In a final turn of events, the Tlönian labyrinthine, rigorous realm invades the author’s universe, blurring the boundaries between reality and illusion, fact and fiction, truth and falsehood. This invasion of the unreal into the ordinary changes dramatically the attitude of the narrator. If, in the beginning of the fiction, Borges, the fictional author,

seemed baffled, even delighted by the discovery of the unknown planet, by the end of the story he speaks about it in negative, even terrifying terms.

As we are told, Tlön, with its "habit" and alluring concreteness, has disintegrated the real world by imposing upon it its "primitive language" (Borges, 1944: 179) and by replacing its history with a fictitious past. In the author's view, Tlön's deficiency lies in its reductive nature, for it is an abstract, human system with limited possibilities and systematized elements that cannot be compared to the inexhaustibly rich divine maze, with its mysterious order.

At this point in the narrative, the non-fictional reader begins to wonder if one should continue to see the story as a fiction, or if one should perceive it as something that has a connection with reality. However, when the author compares the Tlönian universe with the already existing ideologies of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism and Nazism, the real-life reader is forced by the story to reflect upon the present historical moment.

In "Tlön", the fictional reader has an important role in the writing, for it is his relationship with the encyclopedia that gives a first interpretation of the text. According to Halbert, the existence of Borges within the plot as a fictional reader provides an example of the concept of reader as conduit of a story:

*[...] as a textually-embedded reader, Borges has a tangible, observable impact on the narrative space. In a sense, the fictionally-real Borges becomes a textually-embedded representation of the empowered reader. It is, after all, in the act of reading that Borges - or more precisely, his fictive avatar, his fictionalized or fictionally real self - becomes the harbinger of Tlönian concepts and ideals. That is to say that Borges' fictional avatar, as he exists within the fictional reality as reader, is responsible for the transmission of concepts between Tlön and Earth (or, in the broader sense, between fiction and reality). Of particular interest presently is the fact that the fictional Borges' reading and subsequent re-telling of Tlönian refutations of earthly, ontological concepts [...] show that it is the reader's interpretation of a given narrative, or his/her exploration of a given narrative space, which ultimately completes it. (Halbert, 2016: 54)*

The fictional reader is also a representation of the real-life reader who is provoked to constantly interact with the text in order to establish the meaning of the fiction in the act of reading. Thus, when trying to give an interpretation to "Tlön", the non-fictional reader may say that the fiction is about man's fear of an overwhelming universe that he can barely understand. Or one may perceive this writing as a story which mirrors the real Borges's dislike of large, totalitarian machines that ultimately lead to the erasure of history and to the annihilation of individual identity. But

these would be, as the author himself would say, only two of the many possible interpretations of this work.

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### ***3. The author and the reader in “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”***

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When Borges was asked if he wrote “Pierre Menard” in order to play a joke on himself or on other people, he answered that he intended to “play an impersonal joke”, for no other reason than “the sheer fun of it” (cited by Gyngell, 2012: 24). Besides being a joke, however, this short fiction makes use of intertextuality in order to introduce some of Borges’s ideas concerning authorship and readership.

In the story, a narrator reads and reviews the literary creation of Pierre Menard, a fictional twentieth-century author, who has imposed upon himself the “unreal” destiny of creating a *Quixote* that would coincide “word for word and line for line” (Borges, 1944: 202) with that of Miguel de Cervantes. Menard’s work, “perhaps the most significant writing of our time”, represents “the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of Part I of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of Chapter XXII” (Borges, 1944: 201).

The idea of someone copying somebody else’s work and being praised for this matter is ridiculous, and the fact that Menard’s “great creation” represents a mere fragment of the original novel makes things even more laughable. Yet, Menard seems to attempt more than simply copying down a text, for this endeavor would not only be “too easy”, but also “the least interesting”. (Borges, 1944: 203) For him, the more “challenging” approach implies “coming to the *Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard*” (Borges, 1944: 204), which means discovering Cervantes’s book from a more contemporary and personal point of view. As the ironic fictional reader and narrator claims in a sophisticated manner, Menard’s identical text is different from Cervantes’s:

*It is a revelation to compare the Don Quixote of Pierre Menard with that of Miguel de Cervantes.*

*Cervantes, for example, wrote the following (Part I, Chapter IX): ... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.*

*This catalogue of attributes, written in the seventeenth century, and written by the “ingenious layman” Miguel de Cervantes, is mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes: ... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.*

*History, the Mother of truth! - the idea is staggering! Menard, a contemporary of William James, defines history not as a delving into reality but as the very fount of reality. (Borges, 1944: 209-210)*

While the quotations are "stubbornly the same" (Williamson, 2013: 37) in one light, Borges seems to suggest that attributing identical texts to authors that belong to different historical and cultural circumstances modifies the sense of the words, by striking new resonances in the minds of the readers. This entails that the significance of a literary work is not entirely predefined by the writer, but is constituted in the process of reading, when the author's and the reader's horizons of expectations interact in order to create a unique meaning.

Moreover, since the reader has the freedom to actualize the latent potentialities of a book in many different ways, we can deduce that a text may contain a great or even infinite number of probable valid readings. Yet, this variety of permitted alternate interpretations also excludes the possibility of a complete understanding of any given literary creation.

The short fiction ends in a humorous manner by telling us that Menard has enriched "the slow and rudimentary art of reading" through the new technique of "deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution" which fills with adventure even the calmest books (Borges, 1944: 213). In his playful tone, Borges seems to suggest that there is a redeeming virtue in the act of reading itself (Giskin, 2005: 121).

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#### ***4. Conclusion***

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The two texts taken into consideration imply the existence of a character that is both reader and narrator at the same time. If the fictional narrator is an embodiment on the real author in the text, the fictional reader, who gives a first meaning to the text, is a representation of the Borgesian reader who is called for a playful interaction with the narrative space.

The richness of the labyrinthine "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" implies a contextually aware reader who is acquainted with the Borgesian techniques, views and recurring themes, and who can identify and interpret correctly the various references that the writer introduced in the text. Since the elucidation of the fiction's ambiguity depends on the reader's own knowledge and disposition, there may be an infinite number of readings or interpretations of the same story.

"Pierre Menard" comes up with the previously unheard-of idea of an author writing an already written novel. With this fiction, Borges suggests that the mental processes that establish the significance of a literary work are inexorably influenced by time, place, cultural knowledge and horizon of expectations.

By refusing to prescribe a straightforward interpretation to any given book, Borges downplays the importance of the author, who doesn't hold a privileged literary

position anymore. In fact, neither the author nor the reader may establish the full meaning of a text. They can only understand it from a personal perspective.

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