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"Real" Fiction and Fictional "Reality": On the Dialectics of Reality and Fiction and the Adherence to Subjectivity in Borges' Tlön

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Abstract. This paper takes the short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges as its subject of study, exploring its unique creative characteristics—the dialectical relationship between "real" fiction and fictional "reality". The article first adopts a narrative perspective to deconstruct the simulacrum narrative trap constructed through the tone of an academic essay, textual cross-references, and a metafictional afterword, thereby elucidating the "real" in fiction. It then moves to the intellectual level to explain how the world of Tlön relies on idealistic language, an anti-causal view of space-time, and "hrönir" to reconstruct the concept of reality, thereby illustrating the "real" in fiction; The final section points out the civilizational symbols and ideological crisis implied by the dissolution of the boundary between reality and fiction. At the novel's conclusion, faced with the dimensional reduction and invasion of reality by the fictional narrative, Borges upholds his subjectivity through the detached stance of "calmly revised translation of the manuscript" , affirming the value of individual resistance through independent thought and creativity.

Keywords: Jorge Luis Borges, *Tlön*, *Uqbar*, *Orbis Tertius*, fiction, "reality"

1. Introduction

Borges once said: "I do not write novels; I create facts [1]." As "a writer among writers" [2], he uses his own reading and writing experiences as the subject matter of his writing to create facts. Among his short stories, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (hereinafter referred to as *Tlön*) is the pioneering work of his fantasy novels and also the culmination of his creative ideas. It is called the "true starting point" of Borges' novel creation and the "narrow gate" and "knot" of his fictional works [2]. Encyclopedia, labyrinth, self-reference, and other recurring themes in his works can almost all find their clues in *Tlön*. It can be said that without *Tlön*, there would be no novels like *The Circular Ruins* and *The Book of Sand*, which are "as sharp as a dagger, as powerful as a boulder, and yet as light as a cloud" [2]. Academic circles have conducted research on themes such as narrative techniques, philosophical connotations, metafictional characteristics, and the dissolution of the boundary between fiction and reality in *Tlön*. Early foreign studies mostly emphasized its escape from reality and intellectual game, such as interpreting it as Borges' thought experiment of creating a utopia amid the turmoil of World War II, regarding Tlön as a "tentative utopia". Mid-to-late studies

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have become more complex and multifaceted. John R. Clark points out that *Tlön* integrates multiple literary genres such as detective stories, academic papers, and apocalyptic science fiction, creating a rather bumpy "interrogative" effect; meanwhile, it implies satire on totalitarian ideology [3]. Domestic studies mostly focus on its philosophical connotations or expressive techniques. Can Xue regards *Tlön* as Borges' most important and representative work. She approaches it from the perspective of dialectical philosophy and reveals its characteristics as an ideal society that is the highest crystallization of human thinking [4]. Li Ruowei focuses on fantasy aesthetics and analyzes the expressive techniques that blur the boundary between reality and fantasy [5]. In recent years, there have also been studies on the metafictional nature, spatial construction, and historical narrative criticism of *Tlön* [6].

Overall, existing studies have achieved certain results, but there is still room for deepening in textual analysis, especially in the dialectical relationship of how the fictional appearance of "reality" supports the "real" power of fiction. This paper intends to reveal the layers of nested narrative structure and explain the philosophical construction of the Tlön world, organically unifying narrative techniques and philosophical connotations under the dialectical theme of fiction and reality. It conducts a close reading of *Tlön* to reveal Borges' creative intentions and illustrate his embodiment of the creative motif of "the integration of fiction and reality".

2. "Real" fiction: the dazzling literary trap of *Tlön*

Borges adopts the plain tone of academic essays and, through carefully designed narrative strategies, gives fiction a dizzying "real" appearance. On the one hand, he lists a mixture of true and false proper nouns, constructing a "labyrinth of details" that makes readers voluntarily abandon suspicion amid complex information. On the other hand, he creates an illusion of authority through mutual reference and intertextual verification between fictional books. The self-revelation of the "postscript" further blurs the boundary between fiction and reality. These carefully arranged literary traps are precisely the key to Borges' establishment of "real" fiction.

2.1. The labyrinth of details

Tlön begins with a disarming sentence: "I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia [7]." This opening is more like an academic essay by a scholar in his study, establishing the plain and rigorous style of the subsequent text. The narrative subject "I" is an erudite and serious person, so under "my" account, there appear many specific place names, personal names, school names, and book titles. The existence of these proper nouns itself constitutes a dizzying and intimidating effect.

In addition, Borges adopts the strategy of "mixing the true with the false". "Bioy Casares" is a real person, Borges' literary ally. This person appears at the beginning, and "we" even had dinner together, making the entire novel seem quite candid. Later, "Herbert Ashe" is a fictional character, but the author gives a detailed description of his appearance and hobbies. The real parts act like bait, prompting readers to discover the "credibility of the incredible", which makes his fiction extremely natural [7].

The use of place names is also the same:

The entry read: Uqbar's southern border is the Tsai Khaton depression and the Aksa delta, where wild horses breed on the islands [8].

Faced with such a text, readers not only have no desire to investigate further but instead tend to believe that everything is real.

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2.2. The authority of books

Borges wanted "to write a unique book, a Platonic book of books that contains everything" [9]. The story of *Tlön* begins with a fictional entry in a pirated encyclopedia and gradually constructs the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön*, which serves as the source of the Tlön world. This all-encompassing book shows all aspects of the Tlön world and can be called Tlön's "Platonic book". At the same time, the author completes the background of the birth of this encyclopedia through fictional discussions and lists of names. Confirming the existence of a world with an encyclopedia is very convincing, because we are accustomed to taking the authority of an encyclopedia for granted [7].

In addition, mutual references between books can also be used to enhance the realistic effect of fictional creation:

the four books mentioned in the bibliography we have not found to this day, although the third one—Silas Haslam: *History of the Land Called Uqbar*, 1874—can be found in the catalog of Bernard Quaritch's bookstore. The first one, *A Brief Introduction to the Uqbar Region in Asia Minor*, published in 1641, was written by Johannes Valentinus Andreae. This is significant; two years later, I accidentally found that name in De Quincey's works (*Collected Works*, Volume XIII), only to learn that the man was a German theologian who described the hypothetical Rosicrucian brotherhood in the early 17th century [8].

Various names like needles pulling threads shuttle through different fictional bibliographies, forming a self-referential, circularly argued fictional system, just like looking up a dictionary—a strange noun is explained or confirmed by more strange nouns, making people feel that it is all very serious and creating a strong realistic effect.

2.3. The self-revelation of the postscript

The most dazzling narrative strategy of *Tlön* is none other than the writing of the "postscript". This part begins with the label "Postscript 1947", yet the entire novel was actually written in 1940, which reminds readers that everything is Borges' fictional narrative trick. The postscript claims that the preceding text is a work "I" published in *The Collection of Fantasy Literature* in 1940. This technique is metafictional "self-reference": it tells readers that everything they just read is nothing but a piece of "fantasy literature", not a true account. However, this revelation instead pushes readers into a deeper cognitive fog.

For Borges, the world is a mirror reflecting other mirrors [7]. The "postscript" adopts this strategy of "mirrors reflecting each other"; the "revelation" itself is like a mirror reflecting a mirror, still within the fictional system. Foucault once said: "Advancing toward death, language turns its back on itself: what it encounters is like a mirror: to stop this death that intends to stop itself, it can only possess one ability, which is to give birth to its own image in the infinite game of multiple mirrors [10]." Borges' postscript is precisely the embodiment of this posture of "language turning its back on itself": on the one hand, it denies the authenticity of the preceding text; on the other hand, it continues the narrative subject and the academic essay-style narrative tone, and even appears a large number of details that can be mutually verified with the previous part. The postscript is just another virtual image reflected by fiction itself from the mirror. From this perspective, the postscript makes "the work become a virtual, circular mirror, ending in a beautiful closed form" [10].

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3. Fictional "reality": a carefully planned philosophical fantasy

Borges intentionally integrates philosophy into novels [11], turning philosophical speculation into material for literary creation, making his novels extremely intellectual, elegant, and exquisite. *Tlön* is his representative work. Although the "center of the fictional ivory carved ball" Tlön created by the novel is a completely false place, its fiction has a realistic foundation [12].

3.1. The Tlön language without nouns

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis holds that the structure and lexical categories of language largely determine how speakers perceive and understand the world. In the Tlön world, people's language is a direct reflection of their way of thinking. For them, the world is a continuously generating flow of phenomena, and objective existences do not have the eternity or extension of "things"; they are only gathered together by chance.

Interestingly, there are no nouns in the primitive language of the Tlön people. The essence of nouns is a classification system, and the premise for the existence of a classification system is the recognition of stable differences between things; yet Tlön rejects classification: "All mental states are immutable: even to name them—that is, to classify them—implies falsification [8]."

Borges' questioning of classification systems and language is not an isolated case. At the end of the essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins", he quotes a fictional "Chinese encyclopedia" (*Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*) that classifies animals in a bizarre way:

a. belonging to the Emperor, b. embalmed, c. tame, d. suckling pigs, e. sirens, f. fabulous, g. stray dogs, h. included in the present classification, i. frenzied, j. innumerable, k. drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, l. et cetera, m. having just broken the water pitcher, n. that from a long way off look like flies [13].

The absurdity of this classification lies in the chaotic and ridiculous classification system it presents when juxtaposed. It breaks our trust in the a priori self-evidence of classificatory order. Borges hereby reveals a conjecture to readers: perhaps any human classification of the universe is arbitrary and speculative, because "we do not know what the universe is" [14]. The practice of *Tlön* breaks the law of one-to-one correspondence between words and things, and even directly cancels the human classification order itself.

3.2. The wonderful Tlön world that pursues "beauty" rather than "truth"

Tlön is "one of the best stories Borges ever wrote" [15]. Its obscure style is due to the large number of philosophical fantasies it covers, which comprehensively construct a wonderful world whose essence is the pursuit of "beauty" and "wonder".

First, from the perspective of time and space, the primitive existential law of Tlön is Berkeley's "fierce idealism". In the universe of Tlön, there is no cause and effect [7]. The Tlön people do not understand that space can continue in time. "To see the smoke on the horizon, then the burning field, then the half-extinguished cigar, is considered an example of association" [8]. Borges' thought is deeply influenced by Berkeley and Hume [9]. The Tlön people in his writing believe that that series of phenomena does not have internal causal relationships, and they do not have a metaphysical view of matter, nor do they believe that space is continuous and unified.

Second, if the linguistics of Tlön embodies its dissolution of "things", then the metaphysics of Tlön completely subverts the epistemological tradition of Western philosophy since Aristotle that "all men by nature desire to know". "The metaphysical systems of Tlön... they do not seek truth, nor

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reality, but wonder. They consider metaphysics a branch of fantastic literature." In Tlön, the value of a metaphysical system depends on whether it is strange, exquisite, and surprising enough.

Philosophy is just an insignificant branch in the vast fictional narrative created by Borges, a part of the fictional world he created. This idea is reflected in the novel *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* through the character Menard, forming an intertext with *Tlön*:

My sole purpose is to astonish. The ultimate objects demonstrated by theology or metaphysics—the external world, God, chance, the form of the universe—are not prior to or more universal than my novel. The only difference is that philosophers publish those beautiful works in the middle of their work, while I resolve to make them disappear [8].

Finally, Borges also depicts the literary view of the Tlön world. The most outstanding and most consistent with Tlön's idealism is the literary view that "the author does not exist", that is, "the single author does not exist". The Tlön people believe that all creativity in the world stems from the same mind. The Tlön people treat texts in the way they treat collages, attributing disparate texts to the same writer, which naturally gives rise to endless possibilities for the interpretation of texts [11].

3.3. Fictional concepts construct "reality"

The paragraph that best embodies Borges' imagination in the entire *Tlön* is precisely the one describing the unique "hrönir" phenomenon on the planet Tlön. Hrönir is the plural form of hrön, and "hrönir" (copied objects) can be understood as copies of "hrön" (original objects). On the planet Tlön, the existence of things is guaranteed by the existence of subjects, and subjects can create things out of thin air based on memory or expectation. The novel describes the classic scene of the birth of hrönir: "Two people look for a pencil; the first finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, just as real, but more in keeping with his expectations. This second pencil is a hrönir."

The replication of hrönir has a unique distortion logic based on mental projection. Borges describes this generational evolution extremely delicately in the text:

The second and third-degree hrönir—that is, hrönir derived from another hrön, or hrönir derived from a hrön of a hrön—exaggerate the aberrations of the first; the fifth is almost unchanged; the ninth is liable to be confused with the second; the eleventh has a purity that the original does not possess. The process is periodic: the twelfth-degree hrön begins to degenerate [8].

Borges calmly dissolves the absolute boundary between the "original (true)" and the "copy (false)". In our common sense, a copy must be a poor imitation or information loss of the original; but in Tlön, the eleventh derivative can even be purer and more perfect than the objective prototype in reality.

This characteristic makes "the methodical production of hrönir of great assistance to archaeologists, enabling them to question and even modify the past, making the past as plastic as the future". It can be seen that the history of Tlön has been completely stripped of its objective materialist foundation. Nostalgia can override reality without waiting for reality to fade away. Because as long as Tlön archaeologists "miss" or "expect" a certain history, they can directly create unearthed cultural relics that meet expectations out of thin air through mental projection, and reconstruct a set of unquestionable "pseudohistory" through the superposition of hrönir.

The idealism of Tlön is capable of producing reality. The perception of the Tlön people can not only "anchor" the creations of reality but also reversely derive a more perfect reality. What is more interesting is that this ultimate object, conceived entirely by suggestion and hope and purer than any ordinary hrön, is even given a proper name—"ur". This is precisely the perfect literary footnote to the "hyperreality" predicted by Baudrillard: it is the map that precedes the territory, the map that gives birth to the territory, that is, the symbols related to reality have completed the complete

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substitution of reality. In Tlön, fiction is no longer a reflection of reality; with its purity beyond reality, it completes the comprehensive strangulation and replacement of objective existence.

4. The dissolution of boundaries: fictional invasion as a "real" process

When fiction is realistic enough, self-consistent enough, and in line with humanity's hidden desire for order, it acquires the ability to reshape reality—the Tlön world is no longer just knowledge recorded in an encyclopedia, but is presented as an embodied force, and the postscript describes exactly this process.

4.1. From symbols to entities

The postscript begins by directly declaring the fictionality of all previous texts. This deconstructive metafictional self-revelation also gives *Tlön* richer connotations. Earlier, the author divided *Tlön* into four layers of fictional worlds, but in fact, before the third part, the fantasy literary world was not shown to readers. The postscript defines all previous words as "fantasy literature", but its text can instead be mutually verified with the previous part, creating a more dizzying complex fictional effect.

After finishing the creation of "fantasy literature", "I" accidentally learned that the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön* was actually written by a secret society funded by a millionaire. They attempted to "surpass God" and create a planet out of thin air. The revelation of this truth ties up the foreshadowing of the previous text and also promotes the complete intersection of fiction and reality. Subsequently, fictional symbols such as compasses engraved with Tlön characters and small cones symbolizing Tlön deities appeared in reality one after another. The appearance of these entities marks a turning point: Tlön is no longer just a fictional game played by millionaires or scholars, but begins to occupy physical space. However, at this time, the invasion still stays at the level of being perceptible, knowable, easy to wear, and easy to discard, like a tentative tentacle extended by the Tlön world to reality.

4.2. The reconstruction of the real knowledge system

As the crystallization of human elite thinking, Tlön has an amazing unity and coherence [4]. Compared with the truly real reality which is chaotic, accidental, and illogical, Tlön's highly ordered fiction like chess conforms to human rational preferences, thus quickly replacing the existing knowledge system. When people all over the world begin to think in the Tlön way, the original reality collapses on its own in collective forgetting.

Borges once confessed his fear of Plato's "Ideas" [15]. He found that humans always prefer rational eternity to chaotic fragments, and Tlön is the ultimate embodiment of this preference. It is a mirror image of the real world, but more complete, more self-consistent, and more sublime. Yet as Nabokov said, it is "a magnificent castle with an empty stage inside" [16].

The intellectual fascination with pure Ideas and the existential fear constitute Borges' ambiguous ideological tension, which also prompts him to reflect:

They do want to give in. Ten years ago, any semblance of orderly harmony—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism—was enough to bewilder people [8].

Combined with the context of the times, Borges, with a high degree of self-reflexivity, keenly realized that obsession with order can easily lead people to blindness. This is not only a reflection on his own ideological limitations but also a sharp irony against extreme ideologies such as Nazism.

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4.3. The real power of fiction

As "a labyrinth planned by humans" [8], Tlön provides an alternative narrative that is more in line with human rational preferences. Just as *Imagined Communities* proposes that "nationalism creates nations" [17], countries, money, laws, religions, and even the concept of time are essentially products of collective fiction. Borges' dissolution of the boundary between reality and fiction stems precisely from his profound understanding of the "fictional essence" of civilization: fiction always exists within reality and can influence, shape, and subvert reality.

This mechanism of rewriting reality through writing forms a wonderful intertext inside and outside the novel. Within the text, the compilation by the secret society leads to Tlön's dimensionality-reducing invasion of reality; outside the text, the joint writing of Borges and his allies seamlessly extends this social experiment to the real world where readers live. Faced with this "symbolic crisis released from the magic bottle" [18], compared with Baudrillard's pessimistic eschatology, Borges shows the gentleness of a scholar. At the end of *Tlön*, "I" am under the ruins, peacefully "revising the unfinished manuscript of my Quevedo-style translation of Browne's *Urn Burial*" [8]. Although this posture is passive, it affirms the value of individual resistance: even if the objective world is swallowed by symbols in collective forgetting, as long as one maintains independent creation and thinking, one can still keep the spark of reason by the "invisible sun" within.

5. Conclusion

In summary, *Tlön*, as the pioneering work of Borges' fantasy literature, is a grand thought experiment on the "dialectics of reality and fiction". In the "real 'fiction'", he induces readers to dissolve their doubts through exquisite narrative traps; while in the "fictional 'reality'", Tlön, as a labyrinth reflecting reality, mirrors the reconstruction of objective existence by symbols.

Borges warned of the symbolic crisis of modern society ahead of his time and, in the ruins of collapsing reality, practiced a passive yet proud resistance through the narrator's posture of peacefully revising the translation. This is an adherence to subjectivity—even in the present when fictional symbols flood reality, as long as one maintains a clear cognition, humans can still retain the possibility of creation and thinking.

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