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Utopias and the Pursuit of Knowledge: Reading Jorge Luis Borges

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Abstract: The irrefutable primacy that desire and curiosity attain in the pursuit of knowledge often manifests itself in the Icarian endeavour towards exhausting all possible avenues of knowledge attainment. This utopian wish to reach a stage where all options to know would already be exercised finds a corollary in a parallel anxiety to not forget anything, which is itself another utopian wish. Both knowledge and memory are confined within the realm of language and signification, and just as meaning making is analogous to desire in that they are both never fully realised, a utopian world is a paradox as both knowledge and memory are offset by gaps and erasures. For John Locke, for instance, it would be futile to even attempt to know everything due to its impossibility and one must recognise and respect the limits of human knowledge.

The present paper aims to critically examine the manner in which Jorge Luis Borges's writing exposes and explores the futility of a utopian wish towards knowledge attainment by its sustained focus on depictions of utopian language-systems and their limits. His stories "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "The Library of Babel", and "Funes the Memorious" satirize the desire for utopia. My attempt, through this paper, is to critically comment on how the nexus of desire, memory and signification constrains all attempts towards utopias in thought and practice and renders them imaginary.

Keywords: Epistemology, Utopia, Knowledge, Language, Limits, Desire, Paradox

The human condition characterized by the will to know is coterminous with the Cartesian subject's anthropocentrism that seeks to explain Being, through thinking sustained in the form of metaphysical binaries. This symptomatic condition of modernity firmly establishes man as the subject capable of reason who perceives and defines the object(s) in the phenomenal world. The critique of these binaries that constitute the epistemological endeavors of the subject of Cartesian modernity has been a feature of poststructuralist and postmodernist thought. This paper aims to critically examine the manner in which Jorge Luis Borges's writing exposes and explores the futility of a utopian wish towards knowledge attainment by its sustained focus on depictions of utopian language systems and their limits.

The irrefutable primacy that desire and curiosity possess in the Cartesian pursuit of knowledge manifests itself in the Icarus like endeavor aimed at exploring all possible avenues of knowledge attainment. The shortcomings of such an unbridled aspiration to know have been

demonstrated through various literary representations, notably *Doctor Faustus* and *Paradise Lost*. Such representations have critiqued a spirit of exploration and wonder. It is no coincidence that the Fall was linked specifically to the desire to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Modernity leads to an exploration of the defining characteristics of subjectivity as well as the perception of the world from the eyes of the subject. This in turn produces contrasting ideas of what the world is, and should be. The (im)possibility of self-realization leads to a fragmented perception of the phenomenal world as one tries to understand the self as separated from the other. These binaries that define modernity in their extreme lead to a polarization of ideas that get manifested in diverse imaginations of utopias.

Among various fundamental debates between religion and science since the early modern period, arguably nothing has been more debated than the idea of utopia. Thomas More's coinage of the term in his eponymous book needs no introduction and it can be argued that most utopias are beset by idealism and are characterized by a perfect symmetry and order in thought and thus unachievable. More's conception is almost exactly contemporaneous with innovations that have characterized modernity, like the conquest of the New World, modern literature, politics and consciousness (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 1). Frederic Jameson suggests that two lines of descendance from More's text should be posited, one intent on the realization of the Utopian form, the other a covert yet omnipresent Utopian impulse that finds expression through a variety of actions and desires. The former shall be more systemic and will include revolutionary political practice aimed at founding new societies, alongside literary exercises in the written genre. These attempts would also entail systemic self-conscious Utopian secessions from the existing socio-political order in the form of intentional communities as well as attempts to project new spatial totalities in the aesthetic of the city itself (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 2-3).

While constructs like Paradise would be seen as ideal by the Church in them aiming to ensure a state of stability, the proponents of scientific temper would prefer to view an unquenchable quest for knowledge as utopian, as it is touted to be a place where all desires are fulfilled. These two opposite conceptions of utopia are united by their inherent shortcomings, the former due to the perennial flux of the society and the latter due to the imminent conflict of differing desire. In his story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," Borges explores the various facets of political and philosophical idealism, including its fatalistic underside. Objects that supposedly aid man's epistemological quest towards being, like encyclopedias and mirrors are important in Borges's story. Encyclopedias and similar compendiums serve as a literary reflection of man's epistemological quest towards Being, located in and defined by space and time. Thus, they celebrate the modern condition of exploration and pursuit towards an understanding of the Self that is supposedly achievable through othering. Their attempts to provide accurate and painstaking details in order to give an accurate but *post-facto* representation of the contemporary world are only undercut by mirrors whose illusory nature only parodies representation, as they offer a warped representation of the present or the *now*. Mirrors exemplify a troubled form of self-knowledge wherein there is a realization that the perceived Self has an exterior dimension that is visible to others (Merleau-Ponty 129,140). More importantly, they have the peculiar ability to reproduce the visible reflections of the world in

their own figural reality. Both attempts to offer logical and symmetrical picture of the realities they represent. One could also claim that simultaneously, both these objects are telling of the shortcomings of such an attempt, as they reflect the gaps and problems in the reality of the world being reflected and intensify the desire for a utopia devoid of the flaws of the existing reality. However, the conception of a utopia achieved by utilizing the information-rich and symmetrical frameworks of encyclopedias and mirrors respectively can be dangerously totalitarian as it promotes an outlook of the world in the form of binaries. Borges challenges and attacks this outlook by conceiving a meta-fiction whose fluctuating narrative styles mirror the progress of the narrative, thus satirizing even the reader's propensity to fall prey to the polarizing tendencies of utopias.

It is no surprise then that the narrator of Borges's short story owes the discovery of Uqbar to the "conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia" (Borges 27). The narrator is engaged in a polemic with the novelist Bioy Casares about the composition of a novel in the first person wherein contradictions and a disfiguration of facts would allow certain readers to perceive a banal and atrocious reality. This sets the stage for the conception of a utopia, as it is highly allegorical of the quotidian world beset by contradictions. At the same time, Borges also critiques modernity's obsession with causality by placing the characters in his fictional world(s) in situations which are contingent and accidental. Thus, the narrator of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" claims that his discovery of the world of the hitherto-unheard region of Uqbar was purely accidental and coincidental arising out his sudden view through a mirror's reflection of a "fallaciously" titled encyclopedia which was actually supposed to be a laggardly reprint of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1902. It is worth noting that descriptions of Uqbar in the encyclopedia entry exactly match the tautological cartographic projects of our world wherein descriptions and boundaries are always relative to other places on Earth.

The utopian form and impulse as identified by Fredric Jameson in his book *Archaeologies of the Future* finds its place in Uqbar whose literature never refers to reality but to the imaginary regions of Mlejnas and Tlön. By constructing these regions as being removed from reality, Borges alludes to the process of conceptualizing totalizing utopias completely different from the phenomenal reality. From an accidental discovery of information about Uqbar, the narrator is led on to a further discovery of *The First Encyclopedia of Tlön* through coincidence. This encyclopedia describes methodically the unknown planet's entire history.

As the narrator speculates about the possible inventors of Tlön, he suggests that the "brave new world" (a disguised reference to Aldous Huxley's 1931 dystopian novel of the same name) was the product of the active imagination of a "secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebraists, moralists, painters, geometers directed by a man of genius" (Borges 32). Thus, Borges satirizes the vision of a literary utopia that aims to accommodate all conflicting ideas and desires in an organic unity. Yet again, encyclopedias are a useful weapon as this process of inventing a planet would proceed with a description to the minutest detail using a 14-part encyclopedia that would be exhaustive and inclusive of the planet's zoology, terrains and landscapes, philosophies, history and poetry, in order to make it impossible to distinguish it from reality. Further, as Frank Palmeri suggests, the title of this tale

that designates Tlön as “Orbis Tertius” or “of the third world” is a reflection of the wishful ambition of the creators of Tlön to ensure that this newly discovered world would constitute an alternative to both the first world of the West and its totalizing antagonists (Palmeri 128). The reference to Huxley’s novel further indicates that there is a wide gap between Tlön’s utopian promise and eventual dystopian failure. The grotesque progression of Borges’s story as described by John R. Clark as “the first world, Uqbar, imagines the fictitious Tlön, or a second world, that eventually supplants Uqbar itself, and finally invades our world, the Third World and supersedes it” (Clark 78). It mirrors the totalitarian impulses of the early twentieth century in the form of both Hitler’s Fascism and Stalin’s Communism. Thus, instead of offering a third alternative to Western dominance and its fascist alternatives, it ends up epitomizing dystopia itself. This is shown in the story through the discovery of the astonishingly heavy sacred metal of Tlön that effectively depicts the dystopian consequences that totalizing systems of the political left and right, utopian in origin, have led to in the twentieth century. Borges further satirizes the “pardonable excess” with which the zoology and topography of Tlön has been hailed by popular magazines. The narrator attempts to reason that the various contradictions of that volume of the encyclopedia suggest that other volumes exist. Figures like the Argentine writer Bioy Casares who was a frequent collaborator with Borges often make an appearance in his stories in a fictionalized version of themselves. Borges systematically launches a layered attack on metaphysics by using frameworks of empiricism to speak about idealism. Empiricism hypothesizes that there is an objective reality independent of humans and this can be understood through inductive logic. It does not assume *a priori* knowledge.

Idealism refers to attempts that account for all objects and experiences as representations of the human mind. It ascribes an independent reality to certain principles like imagination and creativity. The languages invented by the inventors of Tlön have an underlying desire to overcome linguistic aporias. The narrator ironically evokes Hume’s critique of Berkeley only to reject the suitability of this critique for Tlön. “Hume declared for all time that while Berkeley’s arguments admit not the slightest refutation, they inspire not the slightest conviction” (Borges 13).

The nations of this planet are congenitally idealist. Their language and the derivations of their language- religion, letters, metaphysics- all presuppose idealism. The world for them is not a concourse of objects in space; it is a series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial. There are no nouns in Tlön’s conjectural *Ursprache*, from which the ‘present’ languages and dialects are derived: these are impersonal verbs, modified by monosyllabic suffixes (or prefixes) with an adverbial value. For example: there is no word corresponding to the word ‘moon’, but there is a verb which in English would be ‘to moon’ or ‘to moonate’. ‘The moon rose above the river’ is *hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö*, or literally: ‘upward behind the onstreaming it mooned.’ (Borges 32-33)

At the outset, it seems like a coherent fictional world has been created. However, this assumption is undermined by the glaring inconsistencies in the narrative which lead to the suggestion that all utopias ultimately lead to a chaotic world riddled with paradoxes. The

seemingly idealist language systems have contradictory linguistic structures. The languages in the southern hemisphere do not have nouns, while those of the northern hemisphere have nouns formed by an accumulation of adjectives. In both these cases, the absence of direct nomenclature leads to the breakdown of the subject-object binary that constitutes modernity. As the literature of the Northern hemisphere abounds in ideal objects, it is possible to evoke and dissolve these objects according to poetic needs. The refusal to believe in the reality of nouns paradoxically causes their number to be endless. Thus, the narrator claims that the languages of Tlön contain all the nouns of the Indo-European languages- and many others as well. Even in Tlön's literature, the idea of the single subject gains precedence and all works of fiction contain a single plot with its imaginable permutations. A book without its counter-argument is considered incomplete. This paradox that seeks to uphold idealism by attempting to accommodate dualism is evident in disciplines too, since psychology remains the superlative discipline in Tlön. As the people of Tlön reject spatiality and conceive the universe as a series of mental processes that develop successively in time, idealism reaches its extreme end and leads to a complete invalidation of all science. One school even negates time by reasoning that the present is indefinite and the future and past are extensions of the present. This again evokes the imagery of mirrors that the story opens with as it is only mirrors that cannot capture temporal or spatial particulars but only aid in a representation of the present moment, the now. As pointed out by the narrator (who has by now transformed into a critic or an academic writer), Borges critiques the idealism of Bertrand Russell (*The Analysis of Mind*, 1921, p. 159) here which held that the planet has been created a few minutes ago, furnished with a humanity that "remembers an illusory past" (Borges 34).

The peculiar characteristics of the languages of Tlön and the inherent idealism in literary practices also affect the event of reading. According to Derek Attridge, the act of reading demands an ethical response on the part of the reader to uphold its own specificity as well as the specificity of the text being read. It demands an engagement with literature as a constantly occurring event "as a verb rather than as a noun: not something carried away when we have finished reading it, but something that happens as we read or recall it," (Attridge 9). The responsibility entails an understanding of the contexts in which the literary text is located as well as the (consequent) awareness of their exceeding by the latter. This would not be possible if all books had one author who is a-temporal and often invented, as happens in Tlön. In his parable "Kafka and his Precursors," Borges had described a conundrum of reading and writing wherein the author creates his precursors and invents his own canon which would not have been possible had he not written a single line. Then the striking similarities of the writing of his precursors would not be perceived (Borges 236). Even the act of reading allows the reader to join the dots between two or more texts by different authors which can be traced in a chronological manner. However, the act of reading undergoes a transformation at Tlön: by attributing all texts to a single atemporal author, no reading is singular as all other books were being written by the same author simultaneously, thereby eliminating any attempts at chronology. In such a case, the critics invent authors and attribute two dissimilar texts to the same authors to "determine scrupulously the psychology of this interesting *home de lettres*" (Borges 37). Thus, they have made it convenient to circumvent concerns of intentionality, temporality, signification, form and structure that characterise language systems and their

literature. Yet another paradox presents itself when centuries of idealism at Tlön results in lost objects being duplicated at will. These secondary objects called *hrönir* are methodologically produced (fabricated) to make possible “the interrogation and even the modification of the past.” Even though there is a rejection of objects and materialism, the production of *hrönir* is commonplace. Even as Tlön had been conceptualised to displace the world, it ends up being a *hrönir*, a new reality produced by wish fulfilment (Clark 78).

The shifting narratorial style(s) and inconsistencies in form also mirror the content. Through the flitting narratorial styles, Borges parodies even his narrator and literary criticism. The narration that commences with the narrator’s voyeuristic urge to read every possible text written on Tlön (that gets completed with the discovery of the volume *Orbis Tertius*) is akin to the spirit of exploration and adventure that underlies the pursuit of knowledge to its extreme. As the narrative progresses, the narrator forgets about the fictionality of Tlön and dutifully begins to describe every possible detail much like an encyclopaedia which alludes to the ontological endeavours of knowledge or of religion. The post-script reads like apocalyptic fiction, contradicting the meticulous description of Tlön. However, towards the end, the narrator leaves aside his excitement and voluntarily withdraws into indifference as he translates Thomas Browne’s *Urn Burial* into Spanish, which he does not wish to get published. The reference is ironic as Browne’s text described the discovery of a burial urn in Norfolk. By publishing a translation, the narrator indicates that he shall spur yet another cycle of the process that he faced in his discovery of Tlön, especially the conflation of reality and fiction towards the end, when fictional objects from Tlön were discovered in the real world on Earth. These disruptions are intentional and aimed at subverting the expectations of the reader. Borges’s critique of utopias is echoed by Jameson who states, “Literary utopia shouldn’t be seen as the representation of an ideal society, but as a reflection of our own incapacity to conceive [utopia] in the first place” (Jameson, “World-Reduction in Le Guin” 230). Borges’s experiments with form and narrative thus underline his scepticism towards binaries. His approach is ironic as he cannot either accept or reject binaries. However, through his story, he presents the literary utopia as a “determinate type of praxis, whose first operation is the “neutralization” of the real” (Jameson, “Islands and Trenches” 6) Borges urges the reader to think about the indeterminate nature of reality and how utopias are aimed at homogenizing reality.

The utopian wish to reach a stage where all options to know would already be exercised finds a corollary in a parallel anxiety to not forget anything, which is itself another utopian wish. Both knowledge and memory are confined within the realm of language and signification, and just as meaning making is analogous to desire in that they are both never fully realised, a utopian world is a paradox as both knowledge and memory are offset by gaps and erasures.

In the story “Funes the Memorious,” the protagonist Ireneo Funes has an infallible perception and memory. After gaining consciousness post an accident that left him paralyzed, he realized that the present “was almost intolerable in its richness and sharpness” (Borges 91). His perception of himself changes as he thinks that before the accident, he was “blind, deaf, addle-brained, absent minded.” This ability of being able to remember everything leads to his attempts to transcend known borders of thought, representation and signification. He proceeded

to invent an original system of numbering which he never wrote down, and as his memories were an inter-connection of visual images, muscular sensations, thermal sensations, he associated numbers with signifiers that were aimed at very different chains of signification. He even projects an analogous language but discards it due to its ambiguity. Ambiguity here is seen by him as a trait of ordinary humans. However, contradicting himself, he tried to reduce his past days to seventy thousand memories, this ontological project is analogous to the generalisations and classifications by the ordinary human. Just like Locke who had to reject the postulation of a language in which each individual thing would have its own name, Funes was dissuaded by the interminable nature of his project as he realised that even till the time of his death, he would not have finished classifying the memories of his childhood. Thus, this seemingly advantageous and utopian position that Funes was in, that would ensure no slips in memory and language turned into a curse for him. His perennial awareness of the changes around him, even the changes in his own face when seen in the mirror surprised him every time. Though he learnt all languages without an effort, he became incapable of thought. As the narrator tells us, this was so because to think meant *forgetting* differences, generalizing and making abstractions. Thus, memory that is seen as a tool enabling thought is equally helped by the slips in it, as they enable thought. The world of immediate details that Funes was surrounded by crippled his ability to think. Instead of taking humanity to hitherto unexplored heights of thought and perceptions, Funes cannot bear the weight of his memory and collapses in the web of his mind. Eventually, Borges shows that Funes was also a mortal despite his seemingly superhuman ability as he passed away at the age of twenty-one just like other mortals commonly do, afflicted by the congestion of lungs. Even though his gift was bestowed upon him by accident and he did not possess an inherent desire to explore the boundaries of knowledge, his fleeting ambition to change structures of language and signification prove to be utopian in the end in that they are never realised.

Thus, Borges seeks to undo the Cartesian project of modernity and the associated processes of perceiving identity and othering by rendering being in flux. Through this exercise, he contributes to the philosophical debates on the nature of existence and the various epistemological and ontological questions that have been pondered upon since antiquity. He critiques modernity through a critique of the various dualities like the subject and object, utopias and dystopias, empiricism and idealism, predestination and free-will, the linear and circular, conceptions of time and finally, whether meaning is contained within the text or is inferred by other contexts. His stories satirize the desire for utopia. He utilizes the nexus of desire, memory and signification to demonstrate that all attempts towards utopias in thought and practice are rendered imaginary.

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