

“Ontology and Metaphysics: The Fantastical Object in Borges’ Fictions”

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The following essay explores the issues of idealism, ontology, and the fantastical in the work of Jorge Luis Borges. Borges’ fascination with philosophical idealism began when he was introduced to philosophy as a child by his father, the thinker within this school who most influenced him being, as he admits, George Berkeley. Examining Borges’ attitude towards Berkeley’s radical idealism, the discussion focuses on its ontological dimension, demonstrating how Berkeley engages in a reductivist move in which ontology—in its Greek, Parmenidean sense—is replaced by epistemological processes in light of the dictum *esse est percipi* (“to be is to be perceived”). Within this framework, the question of the ontological status of the fantastical object in the Borgesian text is investigated, idealistic and fantastical objects being analyzed and compared in his short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” In a more general sense this comparison demonstrates that, considered from an ontological perspective, literary fantastical objects are not in fact idealistic objects but more closely resemble the paradoxical objects in Meinong’s theory, thus constituting what Todorov calls the “hesitation experienced by a person [reader] who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.”

KEY WORDS: Jorge Luis Borges, George Berkeley, Meinong, Ontology, Philosophical Idealism, the Fantastic.

There remains, of course, the problem of the *material* of some objects. (Borges 1964, n. 5)

Borges’ co-edited anthology (with Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo) entitled *Antología de la Literatura Fantástica* was first published in Buenos Aires in 1940 (Borges, Ocampo, and Bioy Casares). Containing a collection of fantastic stories, it constituted one of the milestones in the infiltration of the fantastic genre into South American literary discourse and its growth across the Latin American space (Duncan 16–46). This “dead genre,” as Todorov defined it in his classic work, in fact went on, to become one of the key contributors to the growth of Latin-American literature in the twentieth century. Although it is thus no coincidence that Borges’ name is closely associated with it, his idea of the genre appears to have differed quite radically from the dubious field of literary-writing strategies. The intrusion of the supernatural into reality that forms the crux of fantastical works in their diverse forms constitutes in his eyes a way of perceiving reality *per se*. Take, for example, the strange case of Bustos Domeq. As Monegal observes,

In his memoirs, Borges recounts a strange and amusing anecdote about his joint writing with his close friend Bioy Casares. During the 1940s, the two collaborated from time to time under the pen name Honorio Bustos Domeq—an anagram of their fathers’ names. In an interview, Borges described Domeq as an independent entity that erupts from the writing partnership and imposes itself onto reality: “[Domeq was] a fantastic author with

his likes and dislikes, and a personal style that is meant to be ridiculous; but still, it is a style of his own, quite different from the kind of style I write when I try to create ridiculous characters.”... Thereafter, in his autobiographical essay, he accentuates Domeq’s individuality and independence: “In the long run, he ruled us with a rod of iron and to our amusement, and later to our dismay, he became utterly unlike ourselves, with his own whims, his own puns, and his own very elaborate style of writing.” (1978, 366, 246)

A fantastical writer created by Borges and Bioy Casares, Bustos Domeq invades the life of Borges the writer of fantastic stories, via a Hofstadterian “strange loop” that destabilizes Borges’ sense of reality to the point of swiftly causing him to stop writing in Domeq’s name. The distinctive character of Borges’ works in relation to other Latin-American and European fantastical works, indeed, is a function of the stress he lays upon its ontological nature, this allowing him to engage in a philosophical inquiry into the ontological status of “true” reality.

The ontological issue of reality being up in the air in his eyes, he sets out to investigate it by philosophically exploring the fantastical literary genre. This blending of philosophy and the fantastical constitutes a deliberate ploy on his part, serving to convey his view of the unique role philosophy plays in human life. Borges reflects on this role in a conversation with Richard Burgin:

I think that people who have no philosophy live a poor kind of life, no? People who are too sure about reality and

about themselves. I think philosophy helps you to live... I think that philosophy may give the world a kind of haziness, but that haziness is all to the good... So that, in a sense, philosophy dissolves reality, but as reality is not always too pleasant, you will be helped by that dissolution. (142–143)

In his groundbreaking work on the subject, Todorov defines the fantastic as the "hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). In other words, readers approach texts expecting them to conform to the reality with which they are familiar. When faced with something that appears impossible in that context, they are forced to question their own perception of the reality of the "real." This "hesitation" is produced by four structural factors: a) the reader must assume that the figures live in a world similar to her own, recognizing it as realistic; b) he or she must choose between adopting a natural or "supernatural" explanation of the events that occur within it; c) he or she must dismiss symbolic or poetic license as accounting for the supernaturalism, agreeing to adopt a "hesitant" approach to the implausibilities in the plot. The acceptance of "natural" explanations lead to the text's classification as "uncanny," admission of "supernatural" explanations prompting its categorization as "marvelous"—only sustained hesitation preserving the fantastical effect; and d) he or she may identify with the figures in the text who experience the same sense of uncertainty.³ According to Todorov, the fantastic thus occurs when an inexplicable incident violently interposes itself onto reality, demanding the reader's attention and restless hesitation.

While Todorov focuses on the linguistic and narrative mechanisms that preserve this textual construct, Borges characteristically develops the philosophical dimension of the issue, addressing the ontological aspect of the fantastical invasion—namely, its impact on the fundamental substratum of reality. This philosophical development of the fantastical finds expression in Borges' literary works in two forms. Firstly, he creates a supernatural construct that departs from the basic laws of reality—such as two parallel time frames (as in "The Other Death," in which Pedro Damian's fall in battle is both by decapitation as a coward and a hero's death) or the freezing of a moment in time for the duration of a year (as in "The Secret Miracle"). More rarely, he introduces a fantastical object whose existence is logically or physically impossible into a rational depiction of reality. Thus, for example, the Aleph that Borges-the-protagonist sees in Daneri's cellar is a "small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance. At first I thought it was revolving; then I realized that this movement was an illusion created by the dizzying world it bounded. The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished."² Similar objects are the Book of Sand, which contains infinite number of pages, Shakespeare's memory that passes from one person to another and Odin's one-dimensional disk. These fantastical objects typically

prompt the protagonists to reflect on their nature and form of existence, this contemplation (ex)posing the full weight of the ontological question of their relation to real existence and heightening the ontological haziness that threatens to dissolve reality (to use Borges' words), created by the invasion of the supernatural.

For our present purposes, the fantastical object is of central importance for two reasons. Firstly, it constitutes a crossroads intersecting diverse aspects of Borges' texts: philosophy (the issue of the essential nature of reality), literary representation (the nature and scope of the depiction of objects in the text), the boundaries of language (how can a supernatural object be described?), and poetics (the narrative devices that create the fantastical text). Secondly, it allows us to examine Borges' unique contribution to the development of the philosophical aspects of the fantastical literary genre and elucidate the way in which he treats the ancient ontological question that has preoccupied philosophical minds since the days of Parmenides—the reality of the real. As I hope to show below, his discussion of the reciprocal relations between ontology, philosophy, and literature may add a significant and unique contribution to more general debates within literary theory, in particular those pertaining to the ontological status of literary fiction.³

One of the most prominent texts in which Borges directly addresses the ontological status of the fantastical object is the oddly named story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1964, 3–18).⁴ Since its initial publication, this has become one of the flagships of Borges' literary oeuvre in particular and the fantastical genre in general. An ontological clash between three types of objects—the physical-materialistic, the idealistic, and the fantastical—lying at its heart, it serves as a perfect example for our present ontological-literary discussion.

First published in *SUR* in 1940, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (henceforth "Tlön") was also included in the *Antología de la Literatura Fantástica*, subsequently also making its way into his magnum opus *Ficciones*. In the prologue to the latter, Borges observes:

The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a résumé, a commentary.... More reasonable, more inept, more indolent, I have preferred to write notes upon imaginary books. Such are "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain," "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" (1962, 15–16)

"Tlön" is thus a short story belonging to the "fictional essay" genre Borges favoured so much that it constitutes one of the hallmarks of his oeuvre. Blending a theoretical-essay style with fiction—or, in more general terms, the language of Logos and the texture of myth: what Genette [1997] would identify as a blurring

of the border between the hypertext (a text that relates to another text) and the hypotext (the original text). More accurately, it is a hypertext that relates to an imaginary hypotext). This type of writing presaging the content of the story—the idea to publish a systematic encyclopedia about a fictitious planet—it constitutes an exemplary case of a perfect match between form and content, the fictional essay genre and completely original storyline.⁵

The plot goes as follows. During a discussion of writing first-person narratives, Borges and Bioy Casares feel the pernicious presence of a mirror, causing the latter to recall a reference in *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* to the fact that "one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar had declared that mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men" (1). Upon investigation, the said passage transpires not to exist in any of the volumes of the encyclopedia to which the two men have access. Bioy then brings the forty-sixth volume from his home—identical to that owned by the protagonist with the single exception that it possesses 917 pages rather than 921. The four extra pages deal with the entry "Uqbar"—a strip of land in Iraq or Asia Minor that does not actually exist. Thereafter, in the eleventh volume of the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* which Borges accidentally discovers, the entry "Uqbar"—this brief description of the non-existent territory that appeared in a pirate edition of the *Cyclopaedia*—is replaced by a

vast methodical fragment of an unknown planet's entire history, with its architecture and its playing cards, with the dread of its mythologies and the murmur of its languages, with its emperors and its seas, with its minerals and its birds and its fish, with its algebra and its fire, with its theological and metaphysical controversy. And all of it articulated, coherent, with no visible doctrinal intent or tone of parody. (5)

This unknown planet is Tlön. Although this volume contains allusions to those that precede and follow it, these are not found. The postscript, written in 1947, resolves the conundrum of Tlön, being based on a manuscript accidentally discovered in 1941.

It transpires that at the beginning of the seventeenth century a "secret and benevolent society arose to invent a country." Sometime later, its members realized that one generation would be insufficient for the systematic construction of a complete land, thus deciding that each would choose a disciple as his successor. Around 1824 in Memphis, TN, one of the members enlisted the "ascetic millionaire Ezra Buckley" to their cause. Expanding its aims, he suggested inventing a whole planet and publishing a methodical encyclopedia about it. One hundred and twenty years later, an investigative journalist chanced upon the forty volumes of the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön*—the emended version of the imaginary world called "Orbis Tertius" (Latin: Third World)—in one of the town's libraries. This discovery has horrific consequences, the contact with Tlön and accommodation to its lifestyle causing the world to col-

lapse: "Enchanted by its rigor, humanity forgets over and again that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels" (16).

The admixture of reality and imagination pervades all the strata of the story. It is the "true" detective tale of a fictional text (encyclopedia); a secret association invents an imaginary planet that in turn invades and destroys reality. This multilayered blending heightens and sharpens the fantastical effect, the reader "hesitating" between the natural explanation—the detective plot that revolves around the activities of the secret and benevolent society—and supernatural explanation of the presence of Tlön in reality. In fact, the roots of this commingling lie in the ontological features of certain objects in the tale.

Significantly, the story is divided into three parts. Although at first glance, this portioning is arbitrary, closer inspection reveals that the three segments represent three types of objects, each possessing a different ontological status. In this manner, the first part relates to the materialistic, seemingly-actual objects of Uqbar, the second to the idealistic objects of Tlön, and the postscript to fantastical objects. As a whole, the tale thus presents us with an ontological hierarchy of three kinds of objects that elucidates the status of the third—the fantastical. Let us closely survey this strange ontological hierarchy.

A fictitious strip of land in Iraq or Asia Minor, Uqbar is described in four modest pages at the end of the forty-sixth volume of several pirate editions of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. According to the protagonist, the entry is "very plausible, quite in keeping with the general tone of the work" (2). On a re-reading, however, "we discovered beneath its rigorous prose a fundamental vagueness," its borders being determined by "nebulous references points"—rivers, craters, and mountain ranges—and only fourteen of the toponyms being familiar. While some exist in reality and others do not, however, they are all physical objects that are possible entities in the world of fact. Uqbar is thus a pseudo-scientific representation of a fictitious strip of land, the existence of the objects within it being subject to the principle of verification employed by logical positivists or Popper's rule of falsifiability. The presence of an imaginary piece of land in an encyclopedia seems to be no more than a prank or intellectual amusement, subordinated to a materialistic-positivist philosophic approach that identifies truth with the existence of raw material facts.

At this point, however, Borges inserts an aside that heralds the story's ontological development. One of the bibliographical references that appears at the end of the entry is to a 1641 work by German theologian named Johannes Valentinus Andrea, who "in the early seventeenth-century, described the imaginary community of Rosae Crucis—a community that others founded later, in imitation of what he had prefigured" (3). This ontological shift between the fictional and the real, which defies the materialist-positivist view, applies to certain objects on Tlön.

The eleventh volume of the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön* forms an elaborate and methodical depiction of an unknown planet: "At first

it was believed that Tlön was a mere chaos, and irresponsible license of the imagination; now it is known that it is a cosmos and that the intimate laws which govern it have been formulated, at least provisionally" (6). Tlön differs fundamentally and essentially from Uqbar. While Uqbar is merely a strip of land in the known world, Tlön is the initial step towards the invention of a whole planet, an entirely separate realm from our existence. As we shall see below, Borges observes that this project is attributed to an "ascetic millionaire Ezra Buckley"—an "obscure man of genius" who directed the work of the "secret society." Informed by one of the members of the plans for the invention of this country, Buckley derides its modest proportions, suggesting that they be expanded to the documentation of a whole planet in a systematic encyclopedia.

Borges draws a direct line here between the idealist philosopher George Berkeley—a seventeenth-century member of the society—and Ezra Buckley, who launches the project in the eighteenth century. He also highlights the latter's radical atheism, which forms a perfectly symmetrical counterpart to the (equally radical) theism of Bishop Berkeley. In a paradoxical assertion, he notes that "Buckley did not believe in God, but wanted to demonstrate to this non-existent God that mortal man was capable of conceiving a world" (13). As we shall see below, this form of atheism plays a major role in helping us understand Tlönian ontology.

The eleventh volume gives precise details of Tlönian language, literature, science, and culture. The cornerstone of Tlönian ontology is clear: in contrast to our world, which is dominated by materialism-positivism, Tlön is governed by philosophical idealism: "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 heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial" (6).

This strange characteristic is typical of Borges' writings, whose penchant for this stream of thought is well known—as reflected, for example, in a celebrated essay: "Of the many doctrines registered by the history of philosophy, perhaps idealism is the oldest and most widespread.... Idealism is as ancient as metaphysical restlessness itself."⁶ Situating this view within the history of thought is not a simple task in light of the fact that it covers numerous perspectives—monism, theology, absolutism, and pluralism. The simplest way of defining it is negatively: idealism represents various philosophical methods whose common denominator is the premise that the foundation of reality is non-material. In other words, idealism is first and foremost anti-materialistic.⁷ According to Borges, "its most acute apologist, George Berkeley, flourished in the eighteenth century; contrary to what Schopenhauer declares... his merit cannot be the intuition of that doctrine but rather the arguments he conceived in order to reason it."⁸ One of the founders of the "secret and benevolent society," Berkeley's philosophy is in fact the shaping force and *weltanschauung* of Tlön.

Berkeley (1685–1753) formulates the fundamental principles of

his thought in section 3 of his *The Principles of Human Knowledge*:

Everyone will agree that our thoughts, emotions, and ideas of the imagination exist only in the mind. It seems to me equally obvious that the various sensations or ideas that are imprinted on our senses cannot exist except in a mind that perceives them—no matter how they are blended or combined together (that is, no matter what objects they constitute). You can know this intuitively [= 'you can see this as immediately self-evident'] by attending to what is meant by the term 'exist' when it is applied to perceptible things. The table that I am writing on exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I would still say that it existed, meaning that •if I were in my study I would perceive it, or that •some other spirit actually does perceive it. Similarly,

'there was an odour'—i.e. it was smelled;

'there was a sound'—it was heard;

'there was a colour or shape'—it was seen or felt.

This is all that I can understand by such expressions as these. There are those who speak of things that •unlike spirits• do not think and •unlike ideas• exist whether or not they are perceived; but that seems to be perfectly unintelligible. For unthinking things, *to exist* is *to be perceived*; so they couldn't possibly exist out of the minds or thinking things that perceive them.⁹

The essence of existence being to be perceived (*percipi*) by something (mind, soul, spirit, or I myself), the foundation of Berkeley's idealism lies in the assertion that the act of perception forms the grounds of existence. Developing this notion, Berkeley counters the platonic view that imagined concepts are "resemblances" or "copies" of objects outside the mind.¹⁰ Nothing existing in and of itself without being perceived, this principle also dictates the concept of matter, "material substance" being rejected out of hand—the notion of 'being' (*esse*) being "the most abstract and incomprehensible of all" (section 17). If perceived from the Greek perspective of "inert, senseless substance in which extension, shape and motion actually exist," matter thus contains within it a contradiction, thereby being reduced to a preconception (section 9). The possibility of imagining imperceptible objects in and of themselves is thus an impossibility, merely being the imagination of concepts without consideration of the role played by the perceiver (section 23). In short, as Berkeley succinctly observes in section 24:

It takes very little enquiry into our own thoughts to know for sure whether we can understand what is meant by 'the absolute existence of perceptible objects outside the mind'. To me it is clear that those words mark out either a direct contradiction or else nothing at all.

Once the idea of matter has been eradicated, Berkeley proceeds to make a fundamental distinction between the passive "ideas" that are the product of the mind ("all those bodies that compose the mighty structure of the world, have no existence outside a spirit; for them to exist is for them to be perceived or known" [section 6]) and the spirits that form an "incorporeal active substance," thus serving to create ideas (section 26).¹¹

This anti-materialist argument is buttressed by a theological claim. Noting that even those ancient philosophers who "maintained the being of a God, have thought matter to be uncreated and coeternal with God" (section 92), Berkeley asserts that the latter premise lies at the basis of skepticism, atheism, and irreligion: "I needn't tell the story of how great a friend *material substance* has been to atheists in all ages. All their monstrous systems depend on it so obviously and so necessarily that once this corner-stone is removed the whole structure of atheism collapses."

Berkeley's introduction of a theological apologetic into his idealistic construct is far more than a reflection of the merging of philosophy and theology that characterizes his thought. God in fact plays a central role in the foundation of reality in his philosophical system, in the well-known variation on the "divine guarantee of the truth" theory espoused by medieval thinkers, as well as Spinoza, Descartes, and Leibnitz. For Berkeley, the continued existence of reality depends upon its perception in the thought of the "mighty spirit"—i.e., on the Spirit of God. If 'being' is 'being perceived', what guarantees the continued existence of reality if I shut my eyes? His answer is the omnipresent Spirit of God, this "wise and good agent" (section 107) being the "Author of nature" (section 147) that establishes nature as a constant reality governed by stable laws.

This assertion has far-reaching implications. Firstly, it assumes an essential disparity between human perception, which can only create a precarious, unstable reality, and that of "another, more powerful spirit" (section 33) capable of creating a strong, stable reality:

The (1) ideas imprinted on the senses by the author of nature are called 'real things'; and those (2) that are caused by the imagination, being less regular, vivid, and constant, are more properly called 'ideas' or 'images' of things that they copy and represent. But our (1) sensations, however vivid and distinct they may be, are nevertheless ideas; that is, they exist in the mind, or are perceived by it, as truly as (2) the ideas that mind itself makes. The (1) ideas of sense are agreed to have more reality in them—i.e. to be more strong, orderly, and coherent—than ideas made by the mind; but this doesn't show that they exist outside the mind. (section 33)

The "ideas imprinted on the senses," the consequence of actual reality, are real things independent of our assumption that they exist outside the spirits that perceive them. They may be called "exter-

nal with regard to their origin" because they are not "generated from within by the mind itself, but imprinted from outside by a spirit other than the one that perceives them" (section 90). In other words, "being" is being perceived" and "reality" is nature as it is perceived by God.

Here emerges the second—purely theological—pillar of Berkeley's thought. Dependence upon the perception of God's Spirit means that reality as a whole is no more than a divine theophany: "... everything we see, hear, feel, or in any way perceive by sense is a sign or effect of the power of God; as is our perception of the motions that are produced by men" (section 148).

Berkeley's philosophical idealism thus transpires to rest on a number of premises like stones comprising an arch. The keystone is the ontological principle that "being" is "being perceived" by a spirit, existence thus being a function of the act of perception rather than existing as in the form of metaphysical substantiation. This anti-materialist orientation negates the existence of matter (what Kant later called the "thing-in-itself" [*Ding an sich*]) and the Greek notion of the metaphysical "primal matter" (ἄλη). Ideas perceived and activated by a spirit (i.e., all the things in the world) are diametrically opposed to "perceptive substance," which is the active, creative source of ideas. Reality as a stable system organized and governed by laws and sensory data both being the outcome of the activity of God's "mighty spirit," an ontological disparity exists between the sensory data imprinted externally and the inner products of the human spirit, such as imagination and memory. Nature as a whole constituting a sign and consequence of God's ability, Berkeley's philosophy can be understood as a "theophanic idealism."

Let us now reexamine *Tlön* in light of Berkeley's philosophy. Borges leaves no room for doubt regarding the nature of the planet's reality:

Hume noted for all time that Berkeley's arguments did not admit the slightest refutation nor did they cause the slightest conviction. This dictum is entirely correct in its application to the earth, but entirely false in *Tlön*. The nations of this planet are congenitally idealist. Their language and the derivations of their language—religion, letters, metaphysics—all presuppose idealism. (6)

The planet obeys the law of Berkeleyan idealism, the *Encyclopedia of Tlön* detailing its idealist worldview. Its languages contain no nouns, being based on verbs in its southern hemisphere and adverbs in its northern hemisphere. Its literature is studded with "ideal objects, which are convoked and dissolved in a moment, according to poetic needs" (7). Its culture is unsurprisingly dominated by a single discipline—psychology—to which all others are subject, every philosophical system *a priori* being perceived to be a mere "dialectical game." Nothing existing on it apart from the products of consciousness, the planet's metaphysicians thus do not seek "for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding"

(8). Needless to say, materialism is regarded as an arbitrary method that leads to unfounded paradoxes, such as that of Zeno.¹² All these can be perceived as an amusing *Gedankenexperiment*—the development *ad absurdum* of the workings of a civilization governed by Berkeley's radical idealism.

Precisely at this point, however, a rather strange ontology makes its appearance, the *Encyclopedia of Tlön* passing from the Tlönian view of reality to a description of existence on the planet. Here, it becomes apparent that Berkeley's idealism has influenced the very ontological nature of certain objects—the *hronir*. Arriving at the heart of his ontological discussion, Borges states:

Centuries and centuries of idealism have not failed to influence reality.¹³ In the most ancient regions of Tlön, the duplication of lost objects is not infrequent. Two persons look for a pencil; the first finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but closer to his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hronir* and are, though awkward in form, somewhat longer. Until recently, the *hronir* were the accidental products of distraction and forgetfulness. It seems unbelievable that their methodical production dates back scarcely a hundred years, but this is what the Eleventh Volume tells us. (11)

The ontological irruption in which idealism shapes reality is itself an idealistic move, the principle of "being perceived" fashioning existence. Tlön represents not just the *possibility* of the existence of an idealistic civilization but the actual reality of such a civilization. The *hronir* embody the latter, constituting the duplication of lost items that perfectly matches the expectations of the searcher. In other words, the seeker remembers something and during his search for it engages in an ontological projection of his expectations and memories of reality. Hereby, a secondary object is created, which duplicates the original, this existing in the planet's reality.

Significantly, the *hronir* possess an ontological rather than merely psychological status, embodying Berkeley's fundamental principle, according to which *esse is percipi*. The recent systematic efforts at their "methodical production" include that undertaken by the head warden of one of the prisons on the planet. The inmates being told that certain tombs existed in an ancient river bed and promised freedom to "whoever might make an important discovery," they were shown photographs of what they were to find in the months prior to the excavation. After a series of unfruitful attempts, they finally "unearthed—or produced—a gold mask, an archaic sword, two or three clay urns and the moldy and mutilated torso of a king whose chest bore an inscription which it has not yet been possible to decipher. Thus was discovered the unreliability of witnesses who knew of the experimental nature of the search ... Mass investigations produce contradictory objects" (12).

The production of objects on the basis of the expectation or

memory of those who search for them is fraught with ontological instability due to the fact that the principle of fluidity of mental states is projected onto the ontological status of the created items. This fluidity is of great importance to the science of archaeology, for example, archaeologists being able to employ it to confirm every contradictory theory, the *hronir* making possible the "interrogation and even the modification of the past, which is now no less plastic and docile than the future" (12). Nor is it implausible that the *hronir* should be created of themselves, objects duplicating one another up to endless degrees. Second and third-degree objects exaggerating the aberrations of the original (*exageran las aberraciones del inicial*), however, the *hronir* thus form a type of object that combines two idealistic principles: Berkeley's *percipi* (as the product of expectation or memory) and platonic mimesis (representation, copy), in which the duplication is always imperfect and ontologically inferior to the original.

Tlön also contains another ontological type of object: "Stranger and more pure than any *hron* is, at times, the *ur*: the object produced through suggestion, educed by hope (*la cosa producida por sugestión, el objeto educido por la esperanza*)" (12)—the golden mask being a prime example. While the *hronir* are produced by expectation or memory, the *ur* is created via an autonomous and introvertive move of autosuggestion, sheer hope projecting it onto reality. It is thus "stranger and more pure" than the *hronir*—stranger because its source is completely internal, deriving from the depths of conceptual reality alone, with no connection to external reality; purer, because in idealistic terms it is the product of the activity of the spirit alone. The *hronir* and *ur* thus constitute two types of Berkeleyan idealistic objects, the first created from expectation, the second from hope, the first duplicating an existing object, the second produced solely by the spirit. Together, they impose an ontological presence on Tlönian existence, thereby constituting, as we observed above, an ontological irruption into the realistic description of the planet.

At the end of the first section, Borges asserts that all these objects—whether originating from the exterior (the *hronir*) or interior (the *ur*)—are ontologically unstable and fluid:

Things became duplicated in Tlön; they also tend to become effaced and lose their details when they are forgotten. A classic example is the doorway which survived so long [as] it was visited by a beggar and disappeared at his death. At times some birds, a horse, have saved the ruins of an amphitheater. (12)

On what grounds does this ontological fluidity rest? At first glance, Borges develops Berkeley's fundamental philosophical principle *ad absurdum* here. If existence consists of "being perceived by the spirit," the continued activity of the spirit in time constantly determines the existence of idealistic objects. This may represent a Buddhist variation on Berkeley's idealism.¹⁴ An alternative understanding,

buried deep within the story plot, however, relates to the theological dimension of Berkeley's philosophy.

As we saw above, Berkeley's thought may be identified as "theophanic idealism." God's mighty Spirit that constantly perceives reality serving as the guarantee of its stability, the "ideas of sense" human beings experience possess "more reality"—i.e., are stronger, more orderly, and more coherent—than ideas made by the human mind (section 33). At the same time, however, Tlön was invented by the ascetic millionaire Ezra Buckley, a sworn atheist who "did not believe in God, but he wanted to demonstrate to this nonexistent God that mortal man was capable of conceiving a world" (13).

The theological tension between Berkeley and Buckley—the former's radical theism and the latter's radical atheism—might suggest at first glance that Tlön embodies an atheistic variation on Berkeley's philosophy, revolving solely around the principle of "*esse is percipi*," without any divine guarantee of existence. If all that exists is human consciousness, idealistic objects will exist, blur, and fade away in accordance with the stream of human consciousness. This theological interpretation might also operate in the reverse direction, however, the planet constituting an example *par excellence* of the disparity between the activity of the human and divine spirits. As we noted above, in section 33 of the *Principles of Human Knowledge* Berkeley stresses the ontological hierarchy between the products of the human spirit (which constitute "ideas or images of things") and the externally-produced ideas "imprinted on the senses" (which, possessing "more reality" because guaranteed by the mighty Spirit of the "author of nature," are stronger, more orderly, and more coherent). If we pursue this line of interpretation, Tlön's highly-realistic design forms a stable ontological ground for the ontological deviance of human idealistic objects—both the external source that duplicates existing objects (the *hronir*) and the internal source that imposes objects on reality (the *ur*). Both dichotomous understandings are possible theologically, this theological "hesitation" (which the text itself appears not to resolve) forming one of the hallmarks of the power of Borges' writings and what I have called elsewhere his "religious agnosticism" (Mualem 2015).

If we survey the ontological nature of Tlönian objects, they comprise items whose existence derives from their being perceived by the human mind, this being true not only of the *hronir* and *ur* but also the imaginary planet as a whole as conceived by a secret and benevolent human society. Although they constitute an ontological irruption into the framing description given in the *Encyclopedia*, they also suffer from chronic ontological fluidity.

Tlönian objects are diametrically opposed to Uqbarian objects. While the latter are physical things that are possible in our world, belonging to materialist-positivist philosophy, the former are wholly idealistic, resting on human perception. Here we find demonstrated a perfect dichotomy that manifests the time-honored antithesis between materialism and idealism that has been such a staple of discussion in Western thought.

The realistic design of the story nonetheless remains firmly stable up until this point. The objects we have encountered so far do not threaten reality. In Uqbar, they are merely possible objects of a fictitious strip of land, whose existence is true or false according to the principle of verification/falsification. On Tlön, they are idealistic objects described within the framework of its immense "thought experiment" or a form of mischievous intellectual amusement on an imaginary planet found between the pages of the eleventh volume of the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön*. When we come to the postscript, however, we are confronted with ontological objects of a completely different sort that invade the realistic context of the story and shake its foundations. Unlike the possible objects of Uqbar and the idealistic objects of Tlön, those of *Orbis Tertius* are essentially fantastical.

The 1947 postscript added to the 1940 story breaks the linear timeline, the time-mingling threatening for the first time the tale's highly realistic, detective nature. In a lecture delivered in Montevideo, Borges defines time warps as one of the characteristics of fantastical literature.²⁵ Herein, the story sheds its realistic skin, revealing its fantastical coat. The postscript brings us face to face with the enormous project conceived by Ezra Buckley of publishing a methodical encyclopedia of the fictitious planet. The forty volumes of the *Orbis Tertius* encyclopedia are discovered—fortuitously or by design—in a library in Memphis, TN, the imaginary planet thus finding its way into human culture and memory, eventually proving to be a violently-destructive influence:

Manuals, anthologies, summaries, literal versions, authorized re-editions and pirated editions of the Greatest Work of Man flooded and still flood the earth. Almost immediately, reality yielded on more than one account. The truth is that it longed to yield.... The contact and the habit of Tlön have disintegrated this world. Enchanted by its rigor, humanity forgets over and again that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels. (16)

In the not-too-distant future, when someone will undoubtedly discover the hundred volumes of the *Second Encyclopedia*, the world will collapse entirely: "The world will be Tlön" (*ibid*).

The disintegration may be explained in two ways. From a socio-historical perspective, it represents a cultural process in which "the symmetry with the appearance of order" works its magic on human thought.²⁶ From a philosophical perspective, the *Encyclopedia of Tlön* is entirely a product of the human mind and thus an essentially idealistic phenomenon. The imaginary planet's domination of human reality in the story consequently signifies the yielding of materialism-positivism to the enchantment of Berkeleyan idealism. A series of troublesome events—the appearance in diverse places of certain objects in Tlön—shuffles the cards, however, opening the door for an ontological interpretation, and thence a fantastical fashioning of affairs. Let us examine the ontological watershed more closely:

It happened in an apartment on Laprida Street, facing a high and light balcony which looked out toward the sunset. Princess Faucigny Lucinge had received her silverware from Pointiers. From the vast depths of a box embellished with foreign stamps, delicate immobile objects emerged: silver from Utrecht and Paris covered with hard heraldic fauna, and a samovar. Amongst them—with the perceptible and tenuous tremor of a sleeping bird—a compass vibrated mysteriously. The princess did not recognize it. Its blue needle longed for magnetic north; its metal case was concave in shape; the letters around its edge corresponded to one of the alphabets of Tlön. Such was the first intrusion of this fantastic world into the world of reality (*Tal fue la primera intrusión del mundo fantástico en el mundo real*). (14)

The appearance of a Tlönian object is indeed strange and troubling, representing the violent intrusion of a supernatural event into reality that makes the reader "hesitate" over its true nature. The prerequisites for the fantastic Todorov adduces are apparently present here: the reader identifies reality as similar to the world in which she lives, "hesitates" between a natural and supernatural explanation, and identifies with the narrating protagonist's ontological uncertainty. An ontological investigation of the intruding object, however, evinces that to all intents and purposes it is real, its primary qualities (weight, volume, length, breadth), secondary attributes (colour, form), and magneticism (the needle turning north) all obeying the laws of physics. Only the Tlönian script and language are foreign. This is thus a linguistic rather than ontological event.

The compass can also be explained in terms of the continuation of the plot—the plan made by the Tlönian society to produce an encyclopedia of *Orbis Tertius*, "a world which is not too incompatible with the real world. The dissemination of objects from Tlön over different countries would complement this plan..." (16). A natural and rational account can thus be given of the appearance of the compass such that the fantastical object collapses and the ontological hesitation dissolves. Todorov calls this type of phenomenon "uncanny" (following Freud's *unheimlich*)—a mysterious event that, while prompting a sense of unease, can ultimately be given a natural-factual explanation. The appearance of the compass thus does not signify the occurrence of a genuine fantastical event.

The latter takes the form of a second object, to which the protagonist is made witness by a "stroke of chance" when passing through Cuchilla Negra. The night he and his companion spent there was interrupted by the drunken ravings of their neighbour whom, upon arising in the morning, they found lying dead in the corridor:

In his delirium a few coins had fallen from his belt, along with a cone of bright metal, the size of a die. In vain a boy tried to pick up this cone. A man was scarcely able to raise it from the ground. I held it in my hand for a few minutes;

I remember that its weight was intolerable and that after it was removed, the feeling of oppressiveness remained. I also remember the exact circle it pressed into my palm. The sensation of a very small and at the same time extremely heavy object produced a disagreeable impression of repugnance and fear.... These small, very heavy cones (made from a metal which is not of this world) are images of the divinity in certain regions of Tlön. (15)

While the natural account the narrator subsequently gives of this occurrence—the plan to "disseminate objects from Tlön over different countries"—is sufficient in the case of the compass, it does not suffice with regard to the cones. The fact that the cones serve a ritual purpose bestows upon them a metaphysical quality, the supernatural weight in relation to their size and material not being explicable naturally or rationally. Moreover, the fact that they are made of material from an imaginary planet cannot be accounted for in logical terms. As Borges observes in a footnote: "There remains, of course, the problem of the *material* of some objects."¹⁷ Here, fiction violently invades reality, idealism the material.

The protagonist's encounter with the cones is thus an intrusive fantastical event that subverts the story's realistic frame. Although the fantastical occurrence is not possible logically, it happens in front of the eyes of the reader, who accepts the protagonist's testimony. The fantastical foundation of the incident is purely ontological, relating to the supernatural material of which the cones are made. This is the fantastical event *par excellence* as defined by Borges in his Montevideo lecture—the "contamination" of reality by the imaginary.¹⁸ The violent intrusion of the fantastical incident thus creates the text's fantastical effect and generates the reader's restless, undetermined fantastical "hesitation."

The story thus sets before us an array of diverse types of objects in hierarchal order ascending from the real to the fantastical: a) the various material objects of Uqbar, which are physically possible; b) the *hronir* and *ur* of Tlön, which possess a Berkeleyan idealistic status, their existence depending on the fact of being perceived by the human spirit independent of any need of divine intervention for their stability and thus marked by "ontological fluidity"; c) the Tlönian compass—an "uncanny" event with a natural explanation; and finally d) the fantastical objects of *Orbis Tertius*—the conicum-images whose weight and material are entirely supernatural and logically paradoxical, their weight not matching their size and their ore deriving from a fictitious planet. Not being possible objects in the real world, they are intrusions from an illogical, supernatural source.

Here, we should recall the reference to Johannes Valentinus Andreae Borges weaves into the text. Author of one of the bibliographical sources of Uqbar, the early-seventeenth-century German theologian described the imaginary society of *Rosae Crucis*, later to be founded in accordance with his model. At first glance, the fantastical cone of *Orbis Tertius* brings to mind this society, both being

created as imaginary entities that then take on real life. Ontologically speaking, however, they are very different objects. The Rosae Crucis is an imaginary society that later came to life, thus essentially constituting a group of possible objects. The cones, on the other hand, derive from a material that is impossible within the realistic framework of the story. This comparison sharpens the ontological incongruity of the fantastical object.

The hierarchy of objects in the story outlined above allows us to evince the distinctive nature of the fantastical object. It is neither a possible object in the world nor a purely idealistic object, an imaginary product of the spirit. Nor is it a pseudo-fantastical object that can be explained rationally on the basis of mental or causal processes. The ontological incongruence of the cones in fact derives from a fundamental logical contradiction: 1) It forms part of the reality of a realistic-materialist-positivist plot; and 2) it possesses at least one aspect that contravenes the basic laws of existence. This contradiction is impossible logically as well as physically. As the Aleph in the story of that name comprises a point in space that contains space in its entirety—a part that includes the whole to which it belongs—is an *a priori* logical contradiction of space, so the Tlönian cones, which are made of an imaginary material, constitute what Parmenides refers to as *nihil fit ex nihil*.²⁹

According to Heidegger's formulation, the appearance of the fantastical object in the protagonist's realistic reality is an *ereignis* (event; literally: an occurrence taking place in front of our eyes) comprising the appearance of an impossible ontological entity. This constitutes the ontological source of the reader's "hesitation": how can this be a realistic event (that corresponds to his/her world) that at the same time is also logically impossible? In the case of the cones, the incongruence relates to the heart of ontology. They are neither "what-is"—"material causality" in Aristotle's phrase (being imaginary), nor "what-is-not" (being present in reality, imprinting their weight, for example, on the narrator-protagonist's palm). They thus comprise a third ontological state that is neither what-is nor what-is-not—along the lines of Plato's objects belonging to the world of becoming that lie between the Parmenidean infinite existence (the perfect what-is) and nothingness: "But if there be anything which is of such a nature as to be and not to be, that will have a place intermediate between pure being and the absolute negation of being" (*Republic* 5).

These are the things that form and pass away that we know in our world—blocks of wood that turn to ash when burnt, the child who is born and dies. Although this "becoming world" is what Parmenides negates as an "illusion," Plato's objects therein do not in fact create a logical incongruence between simultaneous existence and non-existence, existing at a certain point in time (the child's birth) and not-existing at another point (her death in old age). The fantastical third state—the simultaneous existence of the possible and impossible—is thus something else. We may elucidate its precise ontological nature via Alexius Meinong's *Gegenstandstheorie* (1904).

In his theory of objects, Meinong discusses the ontological and semantic status of both existing and non-existing objects. Within this framework, he presents his notorious "principle of independence." This rests on two premises: a) that every object possesses a "set of essential qualities" (*Sosein*) independent of its existence (*Sein*) or non-existence (*Nichtsein*) (M5). Or as Ernst Mally elegantly states: "Objects with *Nichtsein* (without *Sein*) have *Sosein*" (Rapaport 156). From this perspective, an object's nature (its set of essential qualities) is not conditional upon its ontological status—i.e., on the issue of its existence or non-existence; and b) that "not every object has Being" (M2). There are thus "objects of which it is true that there are not such" (Meinong 2:490). Put more simply, there are objects that do not exist. Meinong's principle of independence thus maintains that no object is dependent upon its ontological status. The nature of objects being independent of the question of their existence, in a certain sense there are some objects that do not exist.

Meinong heightens this logical paradoxicality by stressing that the principle of independence applies "not only to objects which do not exist in fact but *also to objects which could not exist because they are impossible*. Not only is the much heralded gold mountain made of gold, but the round-square is as surely round as it is square" (quoted in Chisolm 60 [italics added]).²⁰ It thus also applies to objects whose existence is logically impossible because they are inherently contradictory, such as the round-square.²¹ Within this framework, Meinong posits the existence of what he calls a third ontological mode—namely, the *Quasisein*. As Rapaport notes:

Meinong considers for a while a third 'degree' of *Sein*, weaker than existence and subsistence, which he calls 'Quasisein'. He introduces it as a way out of a version of the problem of negative existential: if 'A doesn't exist' is true, then since 'A doesn't exist' is about A, there is something that this assertion which it is about, and so A has some sort of being after all. (157)

Meinong immediately retracted his radical argument that the "principle of independence" apply to impossible objects, also rescinding his proposal that a third ontological state exists between what-is and what-is-not, replacing the concept of the *Quasisein* with that of the *Aussersein*. Rather than maintaining the existence of an intermediate ontological state, he thus proceeds to argue that the quality of existence is simply "external" to the essence of an object *per se*—the pure object: "Neither being [*Sein*] nor non-being [*Nichtsein*] can be situated essentially in the object in itself." In this way, he believed, the paradox of the existence of logically-impossible objects (such as a three-sided square) could be avoided.

Meinong's rejection of the existence of the *Quasisein* was based on the claim that it allows for the existence of all objects, possible and impossible. This precluding any opposite state (such as truth being negated by a lie or existence by non-existence), it be-

comes in his view utterly meaningless.²² While this may be a logically-required move on his part, for our present purposes the *Quasisein* is of great importance in the literary context. In our effort to conceptually adapt Meinong's theory to literary theory (without claiming complete correspondence between them, of course), we may say that Meinong's "third ontological mode," the *Quasisein*, may shed light on the question of the ontological status of fantastical objects in the text.²³

As we have seen, the tension of the fantastical is created by the appearance of an impossible object in a realistic tale—i.e., from the strain between (1) the clear presence or occurrence of an ontological event and (2) the evident logically-paradoxical form of its nature. In ontological terms, the fantastical object belongs neither to the category of the what-is (being impossible) nor to that of the what-is-not (because it is actually present, constituting an ontological occurrence), the reader thus remaining uncertain and confused regarding the enchantment of the fantastical effect. He or she must therefore take the third road of *Quasisein*, wherein the realistic text contains objects of which it is true to say that they do not exist. Put

more generally, we may say that the fantastical object possesses a *Quasisein* nature in the framework of the realistic text, imposing a *quasi-sein* entity on ontological reality (*sein*). The fantastical effect of the text therefore derives from the reader's ontological "hesitation" in the face of an impossible object that appears right before his or her eyes.

In section 6.54 of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein unforgettably states that

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)²⁴

Climbing beyond Borges' stories, we may use them to elucidate the question of the ontological status of the fantastical object as a *Quasisein* event.

NOTES

¹The fantastic thus differs from the genre of "fantasy," the former only containing a single unrealistic event vs. the latter's subversion of reality as a whole.

²<http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/borgesaleph.pdf>.

³Cf. plato.stanford.edu/entries/fiction.

⁴Page numbers here follow the internet edition: http://art.yale.edu/file_columns/0000/0066/borges.pdf.

⁵It is tempting to regard "Tlön" as a simulacrum according to the post-modern definition of the latter given by Baudrillard—i.e., a representation that "bears no connection to any reality whatsoever": see https://web.archive.org/web/20040209024621/http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html.) As we shall see below, from the perspective of the idealistic philosophy that dominates the story, this interpretation is untenable.

⁶<http://heavysideindustries.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/borges-a-new-refutation-of-time.pdf> (p. 282).

⁷For a survey of philosophical idealism, see Dunham, Grant, and Watson.

⁸"A New Refutation of Time," 282. Borges' affinities with Berkeley's idealism are firm and consistent, evident as early as his essay "Berkeley's Crossroads," published in *Inquisitions* in 1925, several years prior to any of his fictional works: see Borges 1966, 182–183.

⁹<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/berkeley1710.pdf> (p. 10). Small dots enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought.

¹⁰"But", you say, 'though the ideas don't exist outside the mind, still there may be things like them of which they are copies or resemblances,

and these things may exist outside the mind in an unthinking substance.' I answer that the only thing an idea can resemble is another idea; a colour or shape can't be like anything but another colour or shape" (section 8).

¹¹"A spirit is an active being. It is simple, in the sense that it doesn't have parts. When thought of as something that perceives ideas, it is called 'the understanding', and when thought of as producing ideas or doing things with them, it is called 'the will'" (section 27).

¹²In order to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of materialism on Tlön, Borges elaborates on the "sophism" of the nine copper coins that caused such a scandal on the planet: "On Tuesday, X crosses a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds in the road four coins, somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain. On Friday, Z discovers three coins in the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the corridor of his house. The heresiarch would deduce from this story the reality—i.e., the continuity—of the nine coins which were recovered. It is absurd (he affirmed) to imagine that four of the coins have not existed between Tuesday and Thursday, three between Tuesday and Friday afternoon, two between Tuesday and Friday morning. It is logical to think that they have existed—at least in some secret way, hidden from the comprehension of men—at every moment of those three periods" (9).

¹³Siglos y siglos de idealismo no han dejado de influir en la realidad.

¹⁴From a Buddhist perspective, it might be said that the existence of idealistic objects on Tlön comprises a dynamic and ephemeral form of *pratītyasamutpāda*—the "dependent origination" of things on the axis of time.

¹⁵This lecture never being published in its original oral form, the only remaining record of it is summaries produced by those who heard it. In it, Borges adduced four signature features of the fantastical: a) the story's reflection on itself, which creates an infinite effect of a shifting reflection; b) time warps, which break past-present-future linearity; c) "contamination"

(*contaminación*) between reality and dreaming; and d) the presence of the double, which breaks the logic of identity. For a précis of the lecture, see Monegal 448–454: http://www.autoresdeluruguay.uy/biblioteca/emir_rodriguez_monegal/bibliografia/prensa/artpren/numero/num_05.htm.

¹⁶ In a rare political critique (made in 1940 in a nationalist-infused Argentina), Borges observes in "Tlön": "Ten years ago any symmetry with a resemblance of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism—was sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet?" (16).

¹⁷ Queda, naturalmente, el problema de la *materia* de algunos objetos (15, n. 5) (original italics).

¹⁸ Borges quotes Coleridge in similar fashion in his well-known essay on "Coleridge's Flower": "If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when awoke—Ay!—and what then? I wonder what my reader thinks of that imagining. To me it is perfect" (1966, 11).

¹⁹ In arguing that "Nothing comes from nothing," Parmenides claims that the world cannot have come into existence because if so it would have come from nothing (Frg. B8 9–10). If the world came into existence, the actual moment that it came into existence would be arbitrary—a brute fact. There being no brute facts, the world could not have come into existence: see *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. Principle of Sufficient Reason: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sufficient-reason/>.

²⁰ For a critique of Meinong's principle of independence, see Perszyk 45–55.

²¹ According to Meinong, the principle of independence is modified by the principle of indifference: "The object is by nature indifferent to being, though one of its two objectives of being [being/non-being] subsist."

²² For an extensive discussion of Russell on Meinong's third "mode of being," see Rapaport.

²³ For a comprehensive discussion of Meinong's theory in its relation to the phenomenology of literary texts, see Smith.

²⁴ <http://people.umass.edu/phil335-klement-2/tlp/tlp-ebook.pdf>.

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