

# SCHOOL OF ENGLISH

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## “Westward the course of empire takes its way”: The Political Significance of Time, Idealism and Free Will in Jorge Luis Borges’ “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.”

Between his three major works, *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, George Berkeley advances from the Cartesian position by contending that the world consists not of a mind body duality but of a homogeneity of mind allowed for by an infinitely perceptive consciousness. For Berkeley this conclusion was a rejection of a misconceived and unnecessary doubling which was being championed by John Locke; the doubling of perceptual data as matter.<sup>1</sup> Berkeley asserts that it is impossible that matter based on the primary qualities of Locke be the cause of secondary qualities of perception because there are no ‘primary’ material qualities that are accessible without ‘secondary’ perception.<sup>2</sup> Berkeley insists that his conclusions do not destabilise the subjects’ view of reality, by for example lending an equal level of reality to waking as well as sleeping life, on the contrary, he insists that his is a ‘common sense’<sup>3</sup> philosophy, as all abstract thought that would allow for Locke’s ‘primary’ qualities of matter, whether it be extension, depth, or motion<sup>4</sup> or even the concept of a triangle,<sup>5</sup> exist only as habituations of repeatedly experienced consistent patterns of, and relationships

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<sup>1</sup> Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding*, Book II, chapter viii.

<sup>2</sup> Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, pp. 44-45, 73.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Berkeley, *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, pp. 221-222.

between, different types of perceptual data.<sup>6</sup> For Berkeley, the one thing common to everything that might be conceived of as reality is not its existence as matter<sup>7</sup> but its existence as something perceived. On the surface, the idealist standpoint of George Berkeley has very little to do with the day to day functioning of human society, and this is reflected in the critical tendency to examine ‘two Berkeleys’;<sup>8</sup> the philosopher on the one hand, and the philanthropic bishop on the other.<sup>9</sup> With a few notable exceptions, which will later be explored, issues of idealism and issues of politics do tend to remain separate in Berkeley’s work. This essay will therefore draw on the works of more contemporary idealist thinkers, primarily Henri Bergson, in addition to Berkeley, with the aim of exploring the potential political ramifications of Berkeleian Idealism. Central to this analysis will be Jorge Luis Borges’ work of speculative short fiction *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* which explores how a world of pure idealism might function when taken to certain extremes. It will explore the potential dangers of Berkeleian Idealism which are implied by Borges’ work and how they perhaps relate to Berkeley’s own imperialist moral shortcomings.

Borges’ short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* is arguably a work of utopian fiction which explores what a society would look like if it were pushed to the extremes of Berkeleian, idealistic thought. The Berkeleian nature of Tlön is first proposed by the narrator as a way of contextualising the attitudes and customs of Tlönian society. Drawing on a quote from David Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*<sup>10</sup> Borges’ narrator

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<sup>6</sup> Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> Breuninger, “Improving the health of the nation: Berkeley, virtue and Ireland,” p. 163

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p131.

writes: "Hume declared for all time that while Berkeley's arguments admit not the slightest refutation, they inspire not the slightest conviction. That pronouncement is entirely true with respect to the earth, entirely false with respect to Tlön."<sup>11</sup> It then turns out, in the narrator's postscript, that this act of contextual analogy is, in fact, perhaps historically accurate: "The splendid story had begun sometime in the early seventeenth century, one night in Lucerne or London. A secret benevolent society (which numbered among its members Dalgarno and, later, George Berkeley) was born; its mission: to invent a country. In its vague initial program, there figured "hermetic studies; philanthropy, and the Kabbalah."<sup>12</sup> The way in which Borges has the narrator stumble upon the connection to Berkeley through an act of contextualisation before discovering it more concretely in the postscript has two effects. Firstly, it adds to the verisimilitude of the story as it adds to the feeling that the narrator's research is incidental, spontaneous and responsive to found objects. Secondly, it heightens the sense that Tlön is fundamentally connected to Berkeley, as the narrator seems to unwittingly come to this conclusion himself, by examining the ways in which the customs and structures of the society are described, independently of any direct assertion of Berkeleian thinking from the histories he is reading.

The fact that Berkeley is seemingly involved in the conception of Tlön in some way might also suggest that, rather than developing naturally along idealistic lines, it may have been carefully moulded as a colonial society, reminiscent of Berkeley's own failed Bermuda Project. This reading is also supported by the inclusion of "the reclusive

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<sup>11</sup> Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78.

millionaire Ezra Buckley”<sup>13</sup>, an American landowner who in 1824 bequeaths the fraternal society, responsible for Tlön, a large tract of land which includes a number of ‘Negro’ slaves.<sup>14</sup> It is at this point that the society or, ‘illusory planet’<sup>15</sup> seems to take shape in earnest. This is significant because the society finds that one generation is not sufficient to give “full expression to a country.”<sup>16</sup> This necessitates “that each of the masters that belonged to the society would select a disciple to carry on the work”<sup>17</sup> resulting in a “hereditary arrangement”<sup>18</sup> stretching back to Berkeley. Having made this discovery in the postscript, certain aspects of the preceding sections of the story potentially transition from the realm of fantasy into something far more real, political, sinister and troubling. This is particularly true of “the nations of that planet [being], congenitally, idealistic.” This fact, coupled with the idea that ‘masters’ control this proposed ‘planet’, seems to suggest that this may in fact be a program for a slave society, one where God is supplanted by a master who becomes the omniscient possessor of all knowledge, and epistemological systems, that came before: “Buckley did not believe in God, yet he wanted to prove to the non-existent God that mortals could conceive and shape a world.” Presumably, having started in 1824, this is a society that thankfully never reached its potential thanks to the outbreak of the civil war.

This non-fantastical, naturalistic reading of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, also might be said to have precedent within Berkeley’s own moral and political philosophies, which are often seen as convoluted and contradictory. Berkeley’s true beliefs in this sphere are the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

topic of much debate amongst modern historians and philosophers. In many cases, Berkeley seems to be remarkably progressive and benevolent by the standards of his day. There are instances during his time as the Bishop of Cloyne for example, where, during the harsh winter of 1739-1740, in order to “help relieve the plight of the poor, during the spring frost Berkeley donated £20 every Monday to the underprivileged of Cloyne and in a show of solidarity with his neighbours abstained from using precious flour to powder his wig until after the fall harvest.”<sup>19</sup> There is his use of tar water which, debatably, constituted a form of affordable relief for a large number of the poor.<sup>20</sup> There is also his opposition to colonialists arguments of the Earl of Shaftesbury who, proceeding from the viewpoints of his ex-tutor John Locke, reasons that because the universe is made up of independent material substances that exist outside of our minds, it might be conceivable that evil might be done to minds in order to achieve a greater good in a material universe.<sup>21</sup> Berkeley uses his own metaphysical standpoint to argue against this moral reasoning in *Alciphron*.<sup>22</sup> For Berkeley, there is no material substance, only collections of sense ideas which appear in consistent arrangements. Because these sense ideas themselves cannot be considered substances, as they cannot subsist without being perceived by a mind, Berkeley reasons that the only real substance in the universe are minds or spirits.<sup>23</sup> Because of this, it is inconceivable that any moral good might be achieved in this universe if it involves an evil towards either a minority or majority of

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<sup>19</sup> Breuninger, “A Panacea for the Nation: Berkeley’s Tar-water and Irish Domestic Development,” § 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Rickless, “Berkeley’s Criticisms of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson,” p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

minds.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, “Metaphysics and morals are not autonomous in Berkeley’s worldview.”<sup>25</sup>

Seemingly then, this argument flies in the face of the reasoning of thinkers such as Locke and Shaftesbury, both of whom, through adopting this materialist standpoint, can allow for arguments, such as Locke’s, that slavery, though undesirable, might be allowed for in the case of slaves taken in ‘just wars.’<sup>26</sup> Although Locke writes in the very first line of his first treatise of Government that “Slavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation: that ‘tis hardly to be conceived that an Englishman, much less a Gentleman, should plead for’t”<sup>27</sup> he does so, only with this proviso. Here, the fact that the concerns of a materialist reality, such as war and economics, might trump any evil towards a mind, is allowed for by Locke’s materialism.<sup>28</sup> Here again, Berkeley’s argument against Shaftesbury would seemingly come into play, slavery, being an evil committed against a mind, can never be considered as a moral good as there are no real factors to consider outside of minds as they are constitutive of the totality of the universe. This seems to bear out in certain elements of Berkeley’s own attitude to slavery. Unlike Locke, who decries slavery in general without providing examples, thus leaving room for his arguments in favour of a greater universal good, Berkeley draws attention directly to the mistreatment of Native

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> Locke, Second Treatise of Government, § 85, 172.

<sup>27</sup> Locke, First Treatise of Government, § 1.

<sup>28</sup> Locke himself, beginning from his time as Secretary to The Earl of Shaftesbury, played an active role in the establishment of race-based slavery in Britain’s North American colonies. See Bernasoni & Maaza Mann, “The Contradictions of Racism: Locke, Slavery, and the Two Treatises.”

Americans and African slaves in the North American colonies,<sup>29</sup> people who Locke argued were nearly always justifiably enslaved via his just war argument.<sup>30</sup>

Berkeley's own actions surrounding the matter of slavery are subject to much debate. Berkeley, however briefly, did own slaves, something which seems totally counter to his moral standpoint.<sup>31</sup> There is also the Bermuda project itself, which sought to convert natives by enrolling their children in his school in Bermuda, via means of kidnapping if necessary.<sup>32</sup> Berkeley hoped that missionaries trained in this way might be more readily accepted in his target communities.<sup>33</sup> His ultimate aim was to wipe out native cultures, supplanting their religions with the Anglican church. This is a clear evil in itself, although this aim, from his point of view, might ultimately have been a benevolent one, to help native people to be more readily accepted into a European American society which might otherwise wipe them out or enslave them, and to save their eternal souls from heathen beliefs.<sup>34</sup> This is complicated further however by Berkeley's involvement in petitioning for the baptism of slaves. Berkeley, and the Anglican church which he belonged to, argued that slaves should not necessarily be freed by virtue of their newfound Christianity, supporting the argument of the Yorke-Talbot Opinion.<sup>35</sup> This barrier had previously stopped many slave owners from allowing for baptism. By doing this, Berkeley and the Anglican Church opened themselves up to millions of new potential converts. Berkeley's arguments were not new, rather they provided fresh

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<sup>29</sup> Uzgalis, "Berkeley and the Westward Course of Empire," p. 119.

<sup>30</sup> Welchman, "Locke on Slavery and Inalienable Rights," p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Uzgalis, "Berkeley and the Westward Course of Empire," p. 117.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 112.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 124.

<sup>35</sup> Glasson, "'Baptism Doth Not Bestow Freedom': Missionary Anglicanism, Slavery, and the Yorke-Talbot Opinion, 1701-30," pp. 307-308.



philosophical grounding to a long line of Christian thinking, stretching as far back as Augustine, which argued that corporeal bondage was a small price to pay for eternal salvation.<sup>36</sup>

Berkeley's line of thinking here seems to contradict his own refutation of Locke and Shaftesbury, as slavery constitutes an evil directed toward a mind, and therefore constitute an inexcusable moral evil under the terms of his own argument. It might be argued that this decision was perhaps a pragmatic political one as firstly, he might have been made to tow the party line with regards to the church's position as a whole, and secondly, Christianised slaves might have been thought to have had a better chance at true freedom later on down the line. However, there is no direct evidence to suggest this. Berkeley also perhaps contradicts the argument he makes against Locke and Shaftesbury insofar as he later argues in favour of what is effectively a stoic belief in a chain of being.<sup>37</sup> While Berkeley might argue that any evil to a mind can never be a good even if it supports material concerns, seeing as material reality is only in the mind, he does not disallow for hierarchies of minds or spirits, which he argues for in his text *Passive Obedience*. In this text, Berkeley, while not referring back to them directly, builds on his previous arguments by suggesting that governance and hierarchical structures themselves are something that arise naturally from a human aversion to anarchy.<sup>38</sup> In this respect, for Berkeley, the way in which societies organise themselves is as natural and as expected as the way in which the senses organise themselves into patterns that present coherent and consistent objects to human subjectivities. For Berkeley, the way

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Breuninger, "A Panacea for the Nation: Berkeley's Tar-water and Irish Domestic Development," § 16.

<sup>38</sup> Berkeley, *Passive Obedience*, XXII.

of understanding that something is always there in a particular set of sensory configurations, is in no way fundamentally different from any other form of habituation. Habituation itself is therefore potentially ontological. Anything might be habituated, whether it be the relationships between sense data which gives the impression of an object, the expectation of object permanence, or the model of a particular society or language. In all these cases, Berkeley believes that this is allowed for by the divine language of relationships decided by the author of the laws of nature, or God.<sup>39</sup> For Berkeley then, rebellion must be totally immoral as it goes against the divine laws of nature. Berkeley holds to this even if rebellion might be in the interest of the public good in the face of a tyrant, an argument made by thinkers such as Locke.<sup>40</sup> He can argue this point because, contrary to the Hobbesian concept of a social contract, (which sees human subjectivities give up their freedom to a leader, based on their ability to establish and protect a functioning society which in turn protects them from an anarchic state of nature),<sup>41</sup> Berkeley sees the tendency of people to organise themselves into societies as part of the state of nature itself. For Berkeley then, the primacy of a ruler, even of a tyrant, is part of the will of the author of the laws of nature.

While this argument is perhaps quite easily contestable: there are no unbroken lines of succession; every government has gone through some form of rebellion or upheaval at some point, it could hold water easily enough in a cut-off, purely idealistic society such as Tlön. Such a society is so idealised and concerned with immediate experience that it no longer even recognises itself as a country in the wider context of the world, but

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<sup>39</sup> Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, § LXVI.

<sup>40</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, § 199.

<sup>41</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIV.

rather as a 'planet'<sup>42</sup> and a history unto itself. Under these circumstances, the primacy of a tyrannical leader might be so habituated and naturalised as to even go unnoticed. This reading is furthered by looking at the nature of the language of Tlön:

For the people of Tlön, the world is not an amalgam of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts - the world is successive, temporal, but not spatial. There are no nouns in the conjectural Ursprache of Tlön, from which its "present-day" languages and dialects derive: there are impersonal verbs, modified by mono-syllabic suffixes (or prefixes) functioning as adverbs. For example, there is no noun that corresponds to our word "moon;" but there is a verb which in English would be "to moonate" or "to enmoon:" "The moon rose above the river" is "hlor u fang axaxaxas mlo," or, as Xul Solar\* succinctly translates: Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned.<sup>43</sup>

On the one hand, the ontological status of Tlön here might be looked upon in a positive, utopian manner. Its language is fit to express the 'heterogeneous series of independent acts' which constitute a Heraclitan reality where no two moments of being are identical. It is an idealist language which mirrors the thoughts of romantic poets such as Blake and Shelley to whom poetry was a means of expressing the complex, transient, moment to moment, truth of reality, poets who themselves admit of an indebtedness to Berkeley.<sup>44</sup> For Shelley, Berkeley was key to lifting "the mist of familiarity [which] obscures from us the wonder of our being",<sup>45</sup> finding himself "unable to refuse [his] assent to the conclusions of those philosophers who assert that nothing exists but as it

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<sup>42</sup> Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 72.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

<sup>44</sup> Shelley, "On Life."

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

is perceived.”<sup>46</sup> It is also a language which, lacking any consistent nouns, is so heterogenous and transient that the subject might, in Shelley’s terms, no longer be “shielded by the familiarity of what is at once so certain and so unfathomable, from an astonishment which would otherwise absorb and overawe the functions of that which is its object.”<sup>47</sup> Proceeding from this argument, the language of Tlön, while poetically appealing, seems set up in such a way as to potentially overawe the subject through its constant recourse to the complexity of any given moment.

This might be thought of in terms of Henri Bergson’s concept Qualitative vs Quantitative multiplicity which he first develops in *Time and Free Will*. The language of Tlön is essentially a language which is fit to express the Qualitative multiplicity of Bergson’s concept of *la durée* (the duration), a collection of elements which permeate one and other and form our perception of the present.<sup>48</sup> For Bergson, any feelings, especially in cases of deep feelings of things such as melancholy or love, are constituted by a “thousand different elements which dissolve into and permeate one another without any precise outlines, without the least tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another; hence their originality.”<sup>49</sup> Bergson goes on to say that:

By separating these moments from each other, by spreading out time in space, we have caused this feeling to lose its life and its colour. Hence, we are now standing before our own shadow: we believe that we have analysed our feeling, while we have really replaced it by a juxtaposition of lifeless states which can be

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p. 133.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 132.

translated into words, and each of which constitutes the common element, the impersonal residue, of the impressions felt in a given case by the whole of society.<sup>50</sup>

For Berkeley, there is no such thing as constant space which constitutes only an abstract expression of what is learned to be consistently experienced by the mind. For example, Berkeley is unable to allow for any real existence for geometric shapes: “After reiterated Endeavours to apprehend the general Idea of a Triangle, I have found it altogether incomprehensible.”<sup>51</sup> Bergson extends this to the experience of time, which itself is only an abstraction, a finite moment which attempts to express a *durée* which, in reality, consists of a heterogeneity of “moments [which] permeate one another.”<sup>52</sup> Bergson uses the analogy of a curved line to describe how these interpenetrating moments operate as a “flow of time,”<sup>53</sup> suggesting that, while a curved line may be thought of as changing its direction in each moment, “every new direction is indicated in the preceding one.”<sup>54</sup> Because of this, an observer already experiences the suggestion of the future in the present, rather than a discrete series of finite presents.<sup>55</sup> This analogy expresses how moments of time interpenetrate each other in the experience of Bergson’s *durée*.

While Bergson implicates language as the reason for the necessary recourse to “lifeless states” that allow the expression of “impressions felt in a given case by the whole of society,” the Tlönian language seems to operate in the opposite direction, antithetically

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 133.

<sup>51</sup> Berkeley, *A New Theory of Vision*, §§ CXXV. CIX.

<sup>52</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p. 133.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

emphasising the qualitative multiplicity of a *durée*. Partly, this is due to its lack of nouns. A noun in essence is temporal, in general expressing an object that it is presumed will continue to be there in each preceding moment, as in the case of the word “moon,” the example which Borges’ narrator provides. There is a platonic assumption that each moment of the moon will constitute the same moon through recourse to an ideal of what is assumed to be a moon. A noun such as this is essentially presumed to be a consistent, extensive, countable, object, with an existence in absolute space, what Bergson would deem a type of a quantitative multiplicity. The Tlönian translation which is provided, “to moonate” or “to enmoon”, on the other hand, is an act or verb which inherently expresses a Heraclitan transience. There is no guarantee that in the next moment a verb won’t have ceased to act, or that the movement it represents won’t constitute something totally different in its next position. This also parallels Bergson’s assertion that the thing that moves is always merely an abstraction from the movement itself.<sup>56</sup> The English translation which Borges’ narrator provides: “Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned,” possesses no clearly defined syntactic object, possessing only a subject pronoun ‘it’ which seemingly expresses the whole scene, or *durée* of perception at once. The ‘it’ does not describe the moon, rather it seemingly describes a subjective duration of consciousness in which any element of sensation that is interpenetrating the *durée* might equally be responsible for the makeup of the flow of perception. It parallels the qualitative multiplicity of Bergson’s *durée* as the duration of perception is not formed by distinct, quantifiable elements, rather it is formed by the interpenetration of multiple sensations which constitute each other and flow continuously from one moment to the next.

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<sup>56</sup> Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, p. 165

Again, this language lends itself to a mode of being which unveils the true and detailed nature of reality by getting rid of nouns which lead to platonic familiarity and generalisation. However, this language might also easily lead a subjectivity to be overawed, as Shelley puts it, as without recourse to any form of abstraction or assumption of permanence, it would become almost impossible to engage in any action that requires recourse to a quantitative multiplicity and become completely enraptured by the *durée* of lived experience. There is also the danger that society will cease to effectively function because of the lack of nouns which allow people to communicate efficiently by agreeing that there are certain arrangements of sensation that can be agreed are consistent across a given social group, even if this agreement is accepted only to be provisional. Quantitative multiplicities, as defined by Gilles Deleuze, can also be expanded to include schools of thought in the realm of reason such as science, or anything that involves gathering reality into regular patterns that might be observed or catalogued.<sup>57</sup> Bergson suggests that they are also essentially spatial, as acts of categorisation involve externalising one thing in relation to another.<sup>58</sup> In this respect, returning to Berkeley, even the most basic act of objectification, the habituation or built assumption of a consistent and persistent arrangement of sense stimuli, is an act of quantitative, spatial, categorisation, which sets one part of reality aside from another, dividing it from the lived moment into an abstract platonic projected permanence in future moments by assigning it a noun. As Bergson argues, “in reality there are neither identical sensations nor multiple tastes: for sensations and tastes seem to me to be

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<sup>57</sup> Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 40.

<sup>58</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p. 122.

objects as soon as I isolate and name them, and in the human soul there are only processes.”<sup>59</sup>

This condition is reflected in the narrator’s description of the Tlönian experience of time when he states that “space is not conceived as having duration in time.”<sup>60</sup> In Tlön this lack of any quantitative multiplicity does not allow for any effective, even if provisional, notion of absolute linear Newtonian time, as thought of as one moment differentiated from another, as there are only the interpermeating qualitative sensations of the present moment, of which Bergson regrets having to describe as ‘several’ as even that is an abstraction of the unitary experience of the *durée*.<sup>61</sup> This state of “thoroughgoing monism, or idealism,”<sup>62</sup> as Borges’ narrator describes it, leads one school of thought to reject time altogether:

Even the phrase "all the aspects" should be avoided, because it implies the impossible addition of the present instant and all those instants that went before. Nor is the plural "those instants that went before" legitimate, for it implies another impossible operation.<sup>63</sup>

Advancing from this assertion, Borges’ narrator echoes Bergson, describing “[o]ne of the schools of philosophy on Tlön [who go] so far as to deny the existence of time, [arguing] that the present is undefined and indefinite,”<sup>64</sup> emulating Bergson’s concept of the *durée*. Furthermore, time is described only in terms of its qualitative aspects, or the

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<sup>59</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p. 131.

<sup>60</sup> Borges, *Collected Fictions*, pp. 73-74

<sup>61</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p. 121

<sup>62</sup> Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 74.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*



sensations it provides to the multiplicity of the *durée* “the future has no reality except as present hope, and the past has no reality except as present recollection.”<sup>65</sup> This denial of time is consistent with the transient nature of Tlön’s language and its total rejection of quantitative multiplicities.

As Gilles Deleuze argues, these two multiplicities are interdependent, giving rise to, and permeating one another.<sup>66</sup> This supports the argument that Tlön must in fact be designed by an agent who is able to mould a society and a language which will allow for one but not another. It would, after all, be impossible for a purely idealistic society to arise in the first place because, fundamentally, the idea of idealism itself pre-supposes and requires the idea of materialism which it is opposed to, and visa versa; this is a paradox which Arthur Schopenhauer explicates and analogises in *The World As Will And Idea*.<sup>67</sup> In this respect, the creation of a purely idealistic society must be deliberate, and potentially might be being used as a means of control in Tlön. It is hinted that this might be the case in the previously mentioned origins of the Tlönian society in antebellum America. The nations of Tlön being ‘congenitally idealistic,’ would find recourse only to qualitative multiplicities, and it would be easy for a person such as Buckley, or any one of the forbears of Tlön’s ‘masters’ to position themselves in total control of the ‘planet,’ without it ever being realised by their subjects, who have no recourse to any form of rationality or abstraction that might suggest to them that they are being treated as slaves. Even if, for instance, they managed to somehow organise some form of rebellion with their startlingly inefficient language, it would be almost impossible to organize

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 74.

<sup>67</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, pp. 20-24.

because arranging a meeting place, or deciding a leader, or differentiating between what is and isn't a weapon would all necessitate a referral to consistent nouns which don't exist in their language. The denizens of this society would be so enraptured by the qualitative multiplicity of the *durée* due to the language constructed for them as a means of control by their masters, that, in Shelley's terms, they would no longer be "shielded by the familiarity of what is at once so certain and so unfathomable, from an astonishment which would otherwise absorb and overawe the functions of that which is its object."<sup>68</sup> In this hyper defamiliarized state, these denizens might be being put to work, not realising their own enslavement, because their experience of life is essentially uniformly poetic, idealistic, and ultimately, impractical. Furthermore, because Buckley insists that "the enormous enterprise must be kept secret,"<sup>69</sup> the enslaved denizens of Tlön would never have any recourse to an outside world that would be able to attempt to communicate to them that their situation was abnormal.

This isolated idealised 'planet' might be seen as a hyper-accelerated, dystopian version of Berkeley's Bermuda project: Berkeley attempted to convince native populations to adopt Anglican religion and culture through idealistic recourse to a threat to their eternal soul, providing an avenue to assimilation and control; Conversely, Tlönian civilisation reverses this process, creating an entirely new culture which would lead its denizens to become 'congenitally' idealistic, idealism itself becoming the true means of control. This sinister, realistic reading that is hinted at by Borges is obviously not the only reading, the whole short story might be read as a pure fantasy of speculative

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<sup>68</sup> Shelley, "On Life"

<sup>69</sup> Borges, *Collected Fictions*, p. 79.

fiction. This is typical of Borges, whose stories often produce a heterogeneity of readings which blur the lines between both fantasy and reality, and fact and fiction. In the case of *Tlön*, this inability to truly distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary is a quality that is shared by both reader and the slave society that is hinted at. Ultimately, while Henri Bergson concludes that his *durée* of qualitative multiplicities provides an explanation for freedom: "the free act takes place in time which is flowing and not in time which has already flown. Freedom is therefore a fact,"<sup>70</sup> the civilisation of *Tlön* demonstrates that this very potential for freedom might be exploited for political, or imperial gain.

Word count: 5475

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<sup>70</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p. 221

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