

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”

Discussion Questions

1. If you had to describe and summarize this short story to a friend in a couple sentences, what would you say? What genre of literature would you describe this story as being a part of, and why?
2. When was the last time you consulted an analog encyclopedia? What are the current tools for consulting reference material? In what ways are they different, more advanced, more limiting? Can we still “stumble upon” hidden facts and entries like Borges did? Did anyone try to look up “Uqbar” or “Tlön”?
3. Who does the narrator hypothesize created Tlön? Why is this important?
4. “Copulation and mirrors are abominable. For one of those gnostics¹, the visible universe was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism². Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and extend it” (Volume XLVI of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*).

Why is this excerpt from the entry on “Uqbar” important? What theme or central motif does it develop in the story?
5. What do the inhabitants of Tlön think about psychology, materialism, and geometry? How does this relate to its creation?
6. The narrator also specifies how the “literary matters” in Tlön are different from our current world. In what ways are they different with regard to translation, works of literature, criticism, and how does this relate to the attitude of the inhabitants of Tlön? In what ways does this also relate to the translation exercises that we just completed?
7. What is Borges trying to say when he writes that our world is being slowly conformed to the ideas of Tlön and that “A scattered dynasty of recluses has changed the face of the earth?” How can you relate the act of creating the world of Tlön to your own experiences as students in Norway? What are examples of control that you have over the recording of your own “world,” or narrative?
8. Why did Borges choose to divide the story into two sections and a “postscript”? What does the postscript indicate about Parts I and II? How do we reconcile this story with the introductory statement to the prologue of the short story collection: “The eight pieces of this book do not require extraneous elucidation.” (“Las siete piezas de este libro no requieren mayor elucidación”). If this is the first ambitious story in the collection “The Garden of the Forking Paths,” what do you anticipate the other stories will be about?
9. What do you think is one of the messages that Borges is trying to convey through this story? Consider the fact that Borges himself was the directorship of the National Public Library of Argentina (*Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina*).
10. How does this story help to introduce and relate to our thematic focus?

¹ (adj.) of or relating to knowledge, esp. esoteric mystical knowledge.

² (n) a fallacious argument, esp. one used deliberately to deceive.

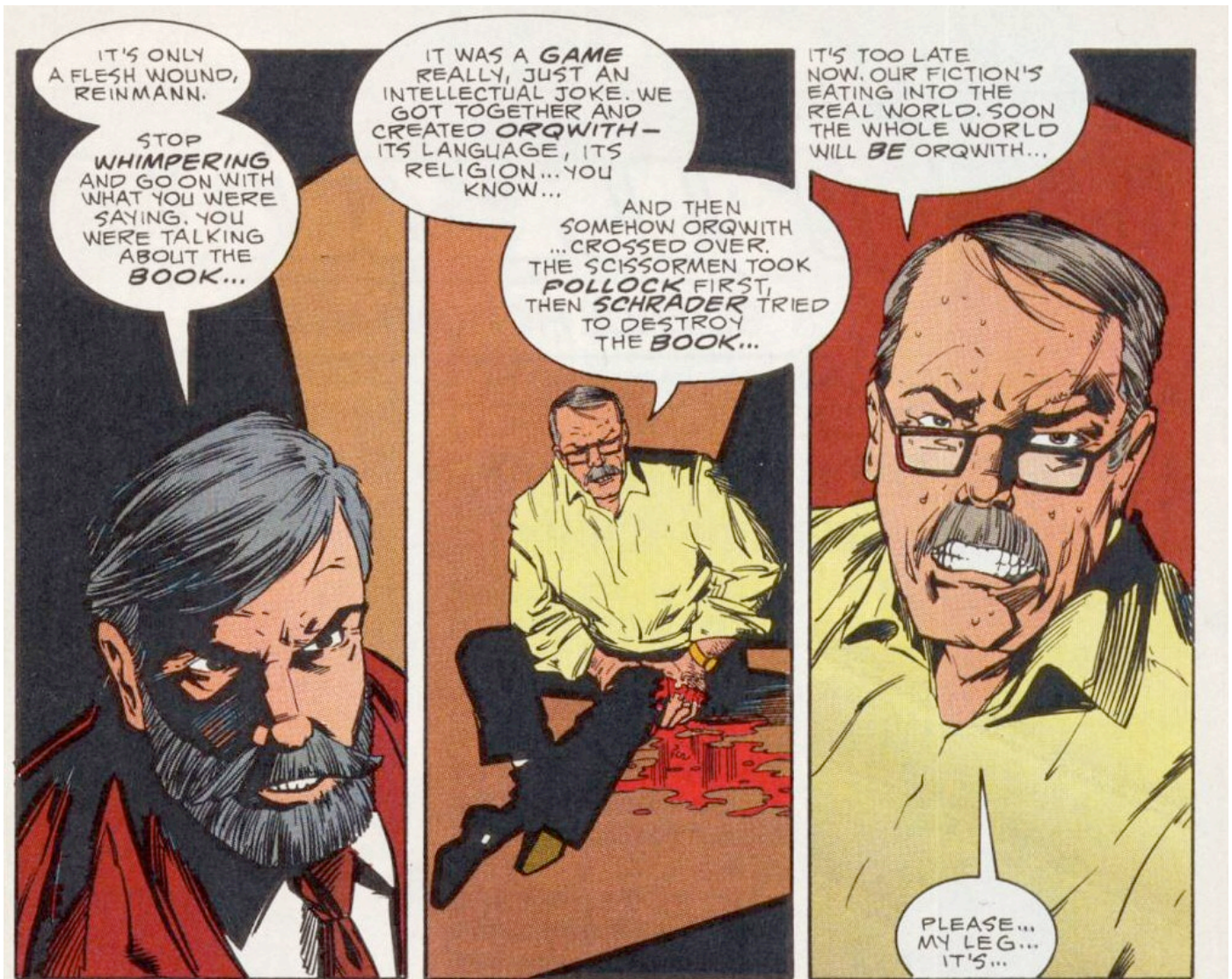
Supplemental Discussion Questions

10. In the DC comic book *Doom Patrol*, the Scissormen are a fictional race of beings that come from the metafictional city of Orqwith:

[They] function as Orqwith's answer to the Spanish Inquisition, attacking non-fictional entities in the "real" world. They attack using the large scissors they have in place of hands which they use to literally cut people out of reality, leaving a white outline where they were, much like cutting a picture out of a magazine.

("Scissormen," from *Wikipedia*)

In what ways does this relate to the short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"? Do you think that the comic book writers deliberately took ideas from Borges' short story?



11. How does Noam Cohen's article "Borges and the Foreseeable Future," from *The New York Times*, use "Tlön" as an example of Borges' stories as being prophetic in nature?

"Borges and the Foreseeable Future"

By Noam Cohen, for *The New York Times*, January 6, 2008

THE Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges might seem an unlikely candidate for Man Who Discovered the Internet. A fusty sort who from the 1930s through the 1950s spent much of his time as a chief librarian, Borges (1899-1986) valued printed books as artifacts and not just for the words they contained. He frequently set his stories in a pretechnological past and was easily enthralled by the authority of ancient texts.

Yet a growing number of contemporary commentators — whether literature professors or cultural critics like Umberto Eco — have concluded that Borges uniquely, bizarrely, prefigured the World Wide Web. One recent book, "Borges 2.0: From Text to Virtual Worlds" by Perla Sassón-Henry, explores the connections between the decentralized Internet of YouTube, blogs and Wikipedia — the so-called Internet 2.0 — and Borges's stories, which "make the reader an active participant." Ms. Sassón-Henry, an associate professor in the language studies department of the United States Naval Academy, describes Borges as "from the Old World with a futuristic vision." Another work, a collection of essays on the topic from Bucknell University Press, has the provocative title "Cy-Borges" and is expected to appear this year.

Among the scores of Borges stories, a core group — including "Funes the Memorious," "The Library of Babel" and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" — first appeared in the United States as "Labyrinths" in the early 1960s. With their infinite libraries and unforgetting men, collaborative encyclopedias and virtual worlds conjured up from the printed page and portals that watch over the entire planet, these stories (along with a few others like "The Aleph") have become a canon for those at the intersection of new technology and literature.

New Directions, the publisher of "Labyrinths," reissued the collection in May, for the first time in more than 40 years. In a sign of the changing times it includes an introduction from William Gibson, the cyberpunk author. (The original, by contrast, came with a preface from André Maurois of the Académie Française.)

By 1955 Borges had lost his sight yet was appointed director of the National Library of Argentina. Assessing his predicament (the digital age predicament) of having access to so much information and so few ways to process it, Borges wrote in "Poem of the Gifts," "No one should read self-pity or reproach into this statement of the majesty of God, who with such splendid irony granted me books and blindness at one touch."

What follows are excerpts from prophetic Borges short stories — translated by Andrew Hurley in "Borges: Collected Fictions" (Penguin Books) — and examples of those prophecies fulfilled.

Life Is Like A Blog

THEN "Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day; he had never once erred or faltered, but each reconstruction had itself taken an entire day. 'I, myself, alone, have more memories than all mankind since the world began,' he said to me. ... And again, toward dawn: My memory, sir, is like a garbage heap." "Funes" (1942)

NOW The path from diary to blog to the frequently updated “microblog” has now descended to “life-logging.” Not content merely to record their thoughts or even daily activities, life-loggers record and preserve everything they see, hear, say and read during the day. The world-recognized early adopter is Gordon Bell, a 73-year-old computer programmer who wears an audio recorder as well as a tiny camera that snaps a picture every 60 seconds. A 2006 profile in *Fast Company* described Mr. Bell as at one time being “worried about filling up his hard-drive space too quickly.” He adds a gigabyte of information a month and figures that an average 72-year-old person would require one to three terabytes, “a hefty amount of storage.”

Universal Library

THEN “From those incontrovertible premises, the librarian deduced that the Library is ‘total’ ... that is, all that is able to be expressed, in every language. ... When it was announced that the Library contained all books, the first reaction was unbounded joy. All men felt themselves the possessors of an intact and secret treasure. There was no personal problem, no world problem, whose eloquent solution did not exist.” “The Library of Babel” (1941)

NOW In announcing that an ambitious international project to digitize universities’ book collections had passed the 1.5 million mark, one of its organizers, Raj Reddy, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University, proclaimed in November: “This project brings us closer to the ideal of the Universal Library: making all published works available to anyone, anytime, in any language.” To others, the Internet itself is the Universal Library, where readers can search for recipes, medical treatments, barroom trivia or perhaps even Google themselves.

Infinite Encyclopedia

THEN “Who, singular or plural, invented Tlön? The plural is, I suppose, inevitable, since the hypothesis of a single inventor — some infinite Leibniz working in obscurity and self-effacement — has been unanimously discarded. It is conjectured that this ‘brave new world’ is the work of a secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebrists, moralists, painters, geometers, ... guided and directed by some shadowy man of genius. There are many men adept in those diverse disciplines, but few capable of imagination — fewer still capable of subordinating imagination to a rigorous and systematic plan. The plan is so vast that the contribution of each writer is infinitesimal.” “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940)
