

Legion: we are many
unclean spirits join the swine

tamed. He plucked asunder the chains, and broke the fetters in pieces. Always he was in the mountains, writes St Mark, and in the

Excerpt from

The Rings of Saturn

by W.G. SEBALD

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ing of annihilation? As these things were going through my mind I was watching the sand martins darting to and fro over the sea. Ceaselessly emitting their tiny cries, they sped along their flight-paths faster than my eyes could follow them. At earlier times, in the summer evenings during my childhood when I had watched from the valley as swallows circled in the last light, still in great numbers in those days, I would imagine that the world was held together by the courses they flew through the air. Many years later, in Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius, which was written in 1940 at Salto Oriental in Argentina, I read of how a few birds saved an entire amphitheatre. The sand martins, I now saw, were flying solely at the level that extended from the top of the cliff where I was sitting out into empty space. Not one of them climbed higher or dived

Woven silk

Tlön

watching birds / 4101 -

at the cliff's edge / at the bottom

lower, to the water below them. Whenever they came towards me, fast as bullets, some seemed to vanish right beneath my feet, as if into the very ground. I went to the edge of the cliff and saw that they had dug their nesting holes into the topmost layer of clay, one beside the other. I was thus standing on perforated ground, as it were, which might have given way at any moment. Nevertheless, I laid my head back as far as I could, as I did as a boy for a dare on the flat tin roof of the two-storey apiary, fixed my eyes on the zenith, then lowered my gaze till it met the horizon, and drew it in across the water, to the narrow strip of beach some twenty yards below. As I tried to suppress the mounting sense of dizziness, breathing out and taking a step backwards, I thought I saw something of an odd, pallid colour move on the shoreline. I crouched down and, overcome by a sudden panic, looked over the edge. A couple lay down there, in the bottom of the pit, as I thought: a man stretched full length over another body of which nothing was visible but the legs, spread and angled. In the startled moment when that image went through me, which lasted an eternity, it seemed as if the man's feet twitched like those of one just hanged. Now, though, he lay still, and the woman too was still and motionless. Misshapen, like some great mollusc washed ashore, they lay there, to all appearances a single being, a many-limbed, two-headed monster that had drifted in from far out at sea, the last of a prodigious species, its life ebbing from it with each breath expired through its nostrils. Filled with consternation, I stood up once more, shaking as if it were the first time in my life that I had got to my feet, and left the place, which seemed fear-some to me now, taking the path that descended from the cliff-top

clouds of poisonous algae

to where the beach spread out on the southerly side. Far off in front of me lay Southwold, a cluster of distant buildings, clumps of trees, and a snow-white lighthouse, beneath a dark sky. Before I reached the town, the first drops of rain were falling. I turned to look back down the deserted stretch I had come by, and could no longer have said whether I had really seen the pale sea monster at the foot of the Covehithe cliffs or whether I had imagined it.



Recalling the uncertainty I then felt brings me back to the Argentinian tale I have referred to before, a tale which deals with our attempts to invent secondary or tertiary worlds. The narrator describes dining with Adolfo Bioy Casares in a house in Calle Gaona in Ramos Mejia one evening in 1935. He relates that after dinner they had a long and rambling talk about the writing of a novel that would fly in the face of palpable facts and become

entangled in contradictions in such a way that few readers – very few readers – would be able to grasp the hidden, horrific, yet at the same time quite meaningless point of the narrative. At the end of the passage that led to the room where ~~we~~ ^{the beach couple} were sitting, [the author continues] hung an oval, half-fogged mirror that had a somewhat disquieting effect. We felt that this dumb witness was keeping a watch on us, and thus we discovered – discoveries of this kind are almost always made in the dead of night – that there is something sinister about mirrors. Bioy Casares then recalled the observation of one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar, that the disturbing thing about mirrors, and also the act of copulation, is that they multiply the number of human beings. I asked Bioy Casares for the source of this memorable remark, the author writes, and he told me that it was in the entry on Uqbar in the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. As the story goes on, however, it is revealed that this entry is nowhere to be found in the encyclopaedia in question, or rather, it appears uniquely in the copy bought years earlier by Bioy Casares, the twenty-sixth volume of which contains four pages that are not in any other copy of the edition in question, that of 1917. It thus remains unclear whether Uqbar ever existed or whether the description of this unknown country might not be a case similar to that of Tlön, the encyclopaedists' project to which the main portion of the narrative in question is devoted and which aimed at creating a new reality, in the course of time, by way of the unreal. The labyrinthine construction of Tlön, reads a note added to the text in 1947, is on the point of blotting out the known world. The language of Tlön, which hitherto no one had mastered, has now invaded the

academies; already the history of Tlön has superseded all that we formerly knew or thought we knew; in historiography, the indisputable advantages of a fictitious past have become apparent. Almost every branch of learning has been reformed. A ramified dynasty of hermits, the dynasty of the Tlön inventors, encyclopaedists and lexicographers, has changed the face of the earth. Every language, even Spanish, French and English, will disappear from the planet. The world will be Tlön. But, the narrator concludes, what is that to me? In the peace and quiet of my country villa I continue to hone my tentative translation, schooled on Quevedo, of Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* (which I do not mean to publish).

what survives
4 lines?

into

Excerpt
Stops
here

giving way? m