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BORGES' ICELANDIC SUBTEXT THE SAGA MODEL

"What secret roads led me to the love of all things Scandinavian? Maybe the ties of blood, since my people on my father's side came from Northumberland, which once was Viking country. (This rather far-fetched explanation is hardly sufficient; nobody yearns for what is already his.) Maybe a copy of the *Völsunga Saga* my father gave me about half a century ago, translated by William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon into a kind of archaic, almost purely Saxon English. Maybe an impressive illustration in a history of the world – under their horned helmets, the Vikings, spears in hand, seemed to be looking me in the face, while in the background I could see the long ships with boldly striped sails bellying out dramatically. Maybe the magic of certain words, Denmark, Norway, fjord, Odin, and Thor, the god of thunder, whose name survives in Thursday. Maybe the stiff and stubborn symbols of a runic alphabet. These things, of course, are guesswork. Later, there came Tacitus' *Germania*, whose compressed and difficult Latin I was once able to decipher; and the stormy figure of Charles XII, who swept Voltaire into epic writing; and the fiery prose of Thomas Carlyle. Still later, the discovery – even yet not clearly understood – that Germanic culture reached its flowering in Iceland, the Ultima Thule of the classical world."

Jorge Luis Borges
(Preface to *Seis poemas escandinavos*, 1966).

Arriving in Iceland in 1973, Jorge Luis Borges quoted William Morris, through whose powerfully archaic English translations he first became acquainted with the sagas and ancient heroic verse of the north: the journey was "a pilgrimage."¹

From the very start of his literary career, Borges has made broad and frequent reference to the widely differing poetry and prose mediums of the North, in his fictional works themselves as well as essays and commentaries. In some cases he cites Icelandic literature – "the crown of all medieval Germanic literature"² – directly as a model for particular works. He has described how strongly he was moved by reading William Morris' translation of *Völsunga saga*, a prose narrative based on preserved epic poetry, during the formative childhood years when he was immersing himself in Stevenson, Kipling and other writers whose influences upon his work are both well-documented and unquestioned.³

Borges has been an enthusiastic champion of Old Norse literature in the Spanish-speaking world, collaborating in a translation of Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*⁴ and publishing a collection of essays and lectures on Medieval Germanic literature⁵ which can be read in one sense as a gloss on

his own creative work. Over and above their purely literary merits, Borges would seem to have found in the Icelandic sagas and poems a kindred spirit. That he both consciously and instinctively emulated their artistic principles seems difficult to question in the light of the examples which will follow. Apart from necessary background information, the present study is confined to the saga tradition, and its relevance in general terms for Borges' narrative structures. His debt to other Icelandic literary forms would appear to be no less significant.

Classical Icelandic literature, for the purposes of this article at least, can be divided into three broad categories; these are the main headings used by Borges himself in his essays on the tradition.

The first of these is the heroic and mythological poetry preserved for the most part in the *Poetic Edda*, most of which was probably brought to Iceland from Norway, either in its present form or as a body of tales which were soon reworked, at the time of the settlement (ca. 874-930). For the most part the heroic verse concerns semi-historical personalities and the territorial confrontations, formalized into themes of love and loyalty, which resulted from the Germanic migrations across the continent several centuries earlier. Typically, the pace of the verse distinguishes it from either Old English or Greek digressive heroic verse, explained by Borges in the following way: "A diferencia de los lentos y elegíacos anglosajones, los anónimos poetas de la Edda son rápidos – a veces hasta la oscuridad – y enérgicos. Frecuentan la desesperación y la cólera, no la melancolía."⁶ In a similar way, it could be said, the succinct and rapid Borgesian prose epic, condensed into the short story form, has little in common with the slow roll of the European epic novel. Certain of the heroic themes recur throughout Borges as well, particularly the individual confronting death or other machinations of fate ("La espera," "El otro duelo," "La otra muerte").

As it has come down to us, the mythological poetry is scarcely "religious" in the modern sense of the word. Much of it portrays the "human" aspects of the Norse gods, often humourously, and is set in a weirdly shamanist environment of illusion and rapid phenomenological transformation, with conceptual play not unlike the characteristically Borgesian conceit (such as Odinn's sacrifice of himself to himself, Heimdallur as the son of nine mothers, and untold other examples). An undisputable parallel is the one-sided coin which lands the wrong way up in "El disco," even though its setting is Anglo-Saxon rather than Norse. The main body of mythological verse was retold in the racy, subtly-structured prose narrative of Snorri Sturluson which Borges translated, and its phenomenology appears to have exerted a powerful influence upon much of his employment of illusion.

The second category, pedigree Icelandic literature, is the literature of the sagas, prose narratives recounting the turmoil, feuds and resolutions of the age of settlements and beyond. The heroic ethic of the sagas and much of their presentation are derived from the Edda verse traditions, but stylisti-

cally they are characterized by an intense objectivity on which the author almost never intrudes. They are dramatized history, unadorned prose borne along by the strengths and weaknesses of the characters it portrays.

Within the sagas we also find "scaldic verse," the third broad literary category, which is often quoted as a source for the content of the narrative or spoken by the main protagonists at crucial points in the action. It is characterized by rigidly formal alliteration and other stylistic devices, and by the use of "kenningar" – wildly baroque imagery and "naming" metaphors, often elaborated to the point of obscurity. Borges became absorbed early on in the allusive phenomenology of the kenningar, as the meticulous detail of his essay from 1933⁷ bears witness.

If we trace the development of Borges' art purely in terms of his Icelandic influences and models, the following general outline can be perceived. The writer himself describes his first literary creations as lacking the clear and concise style for which he was later to be famed. "Yo antes escribía de una manera barroca, muy artificiosa,"⁸ he says in relation to his first works, which he has never allowed to be republished ("Inquisiciones," "El tamaño de mi esperanza," and "El idioma de los argentinos," from 1925, 1926 and 1928 respectively). This early trait would explain his fondness for kenningar, as he hints in a postscript to his essay: "el ultraísta muerto cuyo fantasma sigue siempre habitándome, goza con estos juegos."⁹ Their appeal is clear as an absorbing subject for study by a writer exploring the resources and boundaries of language, and, equally, inviting as a model for a writer whose constant appeal is to the intellectual imagination of his readers.

Alazraki sums up the influence of kenningar in the following terms: "Es evidente que las historias de infamia, escritas y publicadas durante los mismos años, están contaminadas en lo que toca a su prosa, por esos juegos verbales."¹⁰ Yet it is obvious that their influence extends, with varying degrees of immediacy, beyond the *Historia universal de la infamia*. This is demonstrated by Alazraki to be the case with "El Zahir,"¹¹ and Lusky has pointed out "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis tertius" as another example from *Ficciones* (1944).¹² The sheer formal complexity of the kenningar, their underlying philosophy and world view, calls for a separate analysis outside the scope of the present article. Suffice it to say for the moment that the perceptive mechanism which underlies them contributes to Borges' symbolism in particular ways, creating motifs whose significance can be understood on a number of levels, without obscuring the clarity of his narrative style. They increasingly become displays of mental rather than verbal vitality.

Progressively more characteristic of the mature work is Borges' gradual adoption of the unobtrusive pose familiar from the authors of the sagas. We can take up a hint dropped by Borges and examine some of the points made by the English critic W. P. Ker, whose work in Norse studies he describes as grossly underestimated¹³ and which it seems likely he knew

early on in his own writing career. "The tone of the Sagas is generally kept as near as may be to that of the recital of true history,"¹⁴ says Ker, who also mentions "their economy of phrasing in the critical passages, the brevity with which the incidents and speeches are conveyed, the restriction of all commentary to the least available compass."¹⁵ He goes on: "One of the conditions of this manner of composition and this device of phrasing is that the author shall be able to keep himself out of the story, and let things make their own impression. . . . The intellectual coolness of the Sagas is a pride that keeps them from pathetic effusions; it does not impede the dramatic passions, it merely gives a lesson to the sensibilities and sympathies, to keep them out of the way when they are not wanted."¹⁶

Borges can of course be forgiven for drawing attention to the work of a critic whose analyses offer an almost exact parallel to his own work; in the same interview he states, as elsewhere, that he has learned his style from Kipling and the Icelandic sagas.¹⁷ But what does Borges himself say about the style and techniques of the sagas? His very choice of words offers a confirmation of their relevance not only for his "endlessly recurrent" writing, but also for capturing the atmosphere of the very Buenos Aires where he sits and writes in defiance of received notions of history and literary realism. In his essay on Evaristo Carriego, Borges says "Lo más directo, según el proceder cinematográfico, sería proponer continuidad de figuras que cesan,"¹⁸ and then enumerates a number of vague figures passing through his mythical Buenos Aires. Describing some of the characteristics of the Icelandic sagas he says: "El orden es estrictamente cronológico; no hay análisis de los caracteres; los personajes se muestran en los actos y en las palabras. Este procedimiento da a las sagas un carácter dramático y prefigura la técnica del cinematográfico."¹⁹

There is scarcely any need to quote examples of Borges' familiar reluctance to intrude upon his material, his unwillingness to explain the significance of his stories or even go into all but the most necessary detail. Such is the tacit acceptance of the basic tenets of Medieval Icelandic literature as they are mediated through his work that, for example, D. L. Shaw endorses them by criticizing Borges for being too explicit in the conclusions of "La forma de la espada" and "Tres versiones sobre Judas."²⁰ By giving us a framework of reference in which to interpret the parasemantic meaning of the text in such cases, the argument runs, Borges has made uncharacteristic transgressions over the holy soil which marks off the freedom of historical events to determine themselves from the didactic expediences of those who wish to dominate history. One of the most appealing aspects of the Icelandic sagas is their absence of dogmatism, despite being written by Christians and often clerics and describing a pagan world three centuries earlier; the same could be said for the freedom Borges grants us to form our own conceptions in a world whose values are increasingly being defined for us.

"Emma Zunz." "El inmortal." "El muerto." "El Aleph" and "Hombre

de la Esquina Rosada" are some of the examples of Borges' marked tendency towards the gradual unravelling of plot, albeit in relatively few words, by means of assuming earlier and apparently insignificant detail into crucial points of the (tragic) action. Suffice it to cite the yellow windows and Emma's preying fear of men. "Deferred relevance" is equally characteristic of the sagas, as pointed out by Borges, who possibly assigns a greater significance to this narrative technique than would other Norse scholars: "En las sagas, *como en la realidad* (my italics), hay hechos que al principio son oscuros y que luego se explican y hechos que parecen insignificantes y luego cobran importancia."²¹ A farmer's sheep strays into the land claimed by someone else under the tenuous law of settlements, leading man to create a protracted feud which ends with scores of deaths experienced in as many different ways – a supremely Borgesian conceit.

By transferring the burden of explanation to the action itself, the author abolishes the formal parameters between the reader and the text, or as Ker puts it: "The result is attained by following the order of impressions in the mind of one of the actors, or of a looker-on."²² The corollary of this, the other side of the one-sided coin, is that the reader and the character share any elements of uncertainty which the author sees fit to introduce into the plot. This is of particular relevance for any comparison of *Gylfaginning* and the work of its Spanish translator, in which the device is found frequently in a variety of forms. Without an omniscient author to elucidate, some details will inevitably remain unanswered: history, like the universe, has its black holes in space.

One way in which Borges renounces the responsibility for informing his readers of what is actually taking place is by adopting the techniques of the oral transmission of literature. Many of his stories begin with a vague apology that they have long been preserved as spoken tales without any consensus as to their definitive form: "Lo cierto es que alguien la oyó de alguien."²³ Examples can be found in "El desafío" and, more significantly, "La intrusa" (*Elogio de la sombra*) which Borges claims is consciously written in the terse and economical style of the sagas.²⁴ Certain oral-formulaic phrases, although by no means confirmation of specifically Icelandic influence, do show an awareness of the broad tradition. Again it is Borges himself who provides us with a direct link with his own writing: "hay incertidumbres verosímiles; el narrador dice: Unos cuentan las cosas de esta manera, otros de otra. . . ."²⁵ We also find Borges introducing verse quotations as sources²⁶ in a similar manner to that of the Icelandic chroniclers' characteristic reliance upon the authority of scaldic verse.

The subservience of the author to his material, the positing of the independent existence of characters, clearly offers Borges considerable scope for employing the devices of realism even when the action of his narratives is strongly coloured by the fantastic – a point which has particular bearing upon one of his major models, Snorri Sturluson's

Gylfaginning. For the purposes of this article, we can confine ourselves to one point, the recurrence of characters in a number of sagas as different writers approach a collective, independently existing body of material from different angles. "Por ser todos reales, muchos de ellos reaparecen en otras sagas. Lo mismo han hecho algunos novelistas modernos (Thackeray, Balzac, Zola, Galsworthy) con sus personajes imaginarios"²⁷ says Borges, but the principle underlying this device is more complicated, more "Borgesian" than that. The subject matter of the sagas, like so much of that on which Borges claims to have based his stories, has been orally preserved, and existed in many different versions before someone, most often anonymously, writes down his version, selecting and organizing the material as any author would do. In Icelandic, the word "saga" is ambiguous: it applies equally to "historia" and "ficción," and simply means "something told."

W. P. Ker explains: "As a result of the selective practise of the Sagas, it sometimes happens that an important or an interesting part of the record may be dropped by one Saga and picked up casually by another. Thus in the written Sagas, one of the best stories of the two Foster-brothers (...) Thorgeir and Thormod the poet, is preserved not by their own proper history, *Fostbraedra Saga*, but in the story of Grettir the Strong; how they and Grettir lived a winter through in the same house without quarrelling, and how their courage was estimated by their host."²⁸ In Borges' case this "solidarity and interconnection"²⁹ is manipulated as a procedure for explaining motives without infringing the law of the invisible author, as shown in "Hombre de la Esquina Rosada" and "Historia de Rosendo Juárez." This would also apply if we accept Alazraki's contention³⁰ when he explains the dream in "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz" by way of Martín Fierro (*El Hacedor*, 1960). We can even point to the two versions of "El desafío" told by Borges in the same story, which deserves a separate study. This tale of courage and the formal conventions of vengeance is not only unmistakably Icelandic in presentation, including a direct quotation from *The Saga of the Faroe Islanders* in its resolution, but is described by Borges in the following terms, referring to an early prototype: "This story is one I have been retelling, with small variations, ever since."³¹

The object of this article has been to present a general summary of some of the main features which Borges' writing and the classical Icelandic sagas have in common. Constant references by Borges to Icelandic literature as a whole, of which the saga tradition only forms a part, surely deserve further attention. He has told the Spanish-speaking world that, through the sagas, the Icelanders invented the novel, "ese descubrimiento es tan secreto y tan estéril para el resto del mundo."³² A similar assertion could be made of the short story, and the new qualities with which Borges has endowed the form through his rediscovery of Icelandic literature, both its conventions and its spirit.

Notes

1. "Þið getið andað hérna fyrir stjórnvöldum" ("The authorities here give you room to breathe"), Jorge Luis Borges. Interview with Matthías Johannessen. *Samtöl II* (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1978), p. 219.
2. "An Autobiographical Essay", a *New Yorker* profile reprinted in *The Aleph and other stories 1933-1969* (London: Picador, 1973), p. 161.
3. in Johannessen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 220.
4. *La alucinación de Gylfi*. Prólogo y traducción de Jorge Luis Borges y María Kodoma (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1984).
5. *Literaturas germánicas medievales*. Written in collaboration with María Esther Vázquez (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1980).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
7. "Las kenningar" in *Historia de la eternidad* (1936).
8. James E. Irby, "Encuentro con Borges", *Vida Universitaria*, Monterrey (Mexico), 1964, p. 14. Quoted in Jaime Alazraki, *La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges. Temas, estilo* (Madrid: Gredos, 1983), p. 437.
9. "Las kenningar", p. 349. (The edition used for page references is Jorge Luis Borges, *Prosa completa*. Vols. I and II (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1980). It will be referred to as *Prosa completa*).
10. J. Alazraki, *Op. Cit.*, p. 425.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Mary H. Lusky, "Jorge Luis Borges y su lucha con el lenguaje" *Cuadernos Americanos*, 190, p. 221.
13. Johannessen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 227.
14. W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance. Essays on Medieval Literature*. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1957), p. 212.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.
17. Johannessen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 224.
18. Evaristo Carriego, p. 18 (*Prosa completa*, vol. I).
19. *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, p. 37.
20. Donald L. Shaw, "Acerca de la crítica de los cuentos de Borges", *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 346, p. 157.
21. *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, p. 87.
22. *Op. Cit.*, p. 237.
23. "La intrusa", p. 373 (*Prosa completa*, vol. II).
24. Johannessen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 242.
25. *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, p. 89.
26. Evaristo Carriego, p. 19 (*Prosa completa*, vol. I).
27. *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, p. 92.
28. *Op. Cit.*, p. 187.
29. *Ibid.*
30. J. Alazraki, "Borges, or style as an invisible worker", *Style*, 9, p. 329.
31. "An Autobiographical Essay", p. 146.
32. *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, p. 99.