



JORGE LUIS BORGES, MAGIC REALIST

IN the epilogue to the 1949 edition of *El Aleph*, Jorge Luis Borges states that with the exception of "Emma Zunz" and "Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva," "las piezas de este libro corresponden al género fantástico."¹ This statement by Borges confirms the axiom that an author's words about his own works may not always be taken at face value. Although some of the stories in the volume do fall into the category of the fantastic, it would be difficult to justify that label for "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)," "La otra muerte," or "Deutsches Requiem." However, in order to dispute Borges' statement, the term "género fantástico" must first be defined. Although Tzvetan Todorov's categories of the marvelous, the uncanny, and the fantastic are often cited,² it is my contention that by contrasting the fantastic with Magic Realism, both terms will become more clearly delineated, and this in turn will help us arrive at a clearer understanding and appreciation of Borges' short stories.

It should first of all be pointed out that the two terms are essentially dissimilar. Whereas "lo fantástico" is a genre, a type of literature that may be found in any chronological period, Magic Realism is an artistic movement or tendency that began in 1918

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires, 1971), p. 171.

² Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris, 1970). Other scholarly books and articles on the fantastic that have failed to recognize properly the existence of Magic Realism are: Ana María Barrenechea, "Essayo de una tipología de la literatura fantástica," *RI*, 30 (1972), 391-403; Irène Bessière, *Le Récit fantastique. La Poétique de l'incertain* (Paris, 1974); Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Borges: Una teoría de la literatura fantástica," *RI*, 95 (1976), 177-89; Louis Vax, *Arte y literatura fantásticas*, trad. Juan Merino (Buenos Aires, 1965).

as a direct reflection of a series of historical and artistic factors and continued in varying degrees of intensity until approximately 1970. According to the Magic Realism *Weltanschauung*, the world and reality have a dream-like quality about them which is captured by the presentation of improbable juxtapositions in a style that is highly objective, precise, and deceptively simple. The Magic Realist painting or short story or novel is predominantly realistic and deals with the objects of our daily life, but contains an unexpected or improbable element that creates a strange effect leaving the viewer or reader somewhat bewildered or amazed.

By contrast, the literature of the fantastic seems to conform rather well to the dictionary definitions of fantasy: "an imaginative or fanciful work, especially one dealing with supernatural or unnatural events or characters";³ or "fantasy fiction: imaginative fiction dependent for effect on strangeness of setting (as other worlds or times) and of characters (as supernatural or unnatural beings)."⁴ Magic Realism, involved as it is with the improbable rather than the impossible, never deals with the supernatural. Furthermore, some of the dictionary definitions of "fantastic" not only sharpen the contrast between the fantastic and Magic Realism but also associate the former with Expressionism, the artistic and literary movement against which Magic Realism rebelled; and Surrealism, which upstaged Magic Realism in the late 1920's and 1930's: "conceived or appearing as if conceived by an unrestrained imagination; grotesque; eccentric; odd . . . imaginary or groundless; not real or based on reality . . . extravagantly fanciful; irrational."⁵

These plebeian dictionary definitions may well be more useful than all the aforementioned theoretical articles and books in sharpening our perception of Magic Realism. The two basic dictionary definitions of magic also reflect clearly the dichotomy between what Carpentier has called "lo real maravilloso" and Magic Realism. According to Carpentier (and Miguel Ángel Asturias), the Indian and African cultures have made Latin America a continent or world of magic in the dictionary sense of "the art of producing

³ *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, Unabridged Edition (New York, 1967), p. 515.

⁴ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Unabridged Edition (Springfield, MA, 1965), p. 823.

⁵ *Random House*, p. 515.

a desired effect or result through the use of various techniques as incantation, that presumably assure human control of supernatural agencies or the forces of nature."⁶ On the other hand, Magic Realists, like modern-day magicians, bewilder the spectators by making reality appear to be magic: "the art of causing illusions as entertainment by the use of sleight of hand, deceptive devices, etc."⁷ According to the dictionary, as is usually the case with Magic Realism, magic is "mysteriously enchanting" and "may have glamorous and attractive connotations."⁸

Since Jorge Luis Borges is an Argentinean, and a very English-oriented one at that, it would be absurd to attribute his predilection for magic to an Indian or African cultural heritage. Borges' individual genius cannot be accounted for by generational circumstances, but it was in the early 1920's that he made his literary debut, the same early 1920's in which Magic Realism painting flourished in Germany and elsewhere, and the same 1920's in which the writings of Carl Jung became more influential. Whereas Surrealism is strongly based on each individual's Freudian subconscious dream-world, Magic Realism adheres to the Jungian collective unconscious, to the idea that all mankind is compressed into one, that all time periods are compressed into the one moment of the present, and that reality itself is dream-like. From his own texts, it's obvious that Borges shares Jung's view of the world and rejects Freud's. Moreover, the following interview with Richard Burgin could not be more explicit:

BURGIN: I take it you don't think much of Freud, either.

BORGES: No, I always disliked him. But I've always been a great reader of Jung. I read Jung in the same way as, let's say, I might read Pliny or Frazer's *Golden Bough*; I read it as a kind of mythology, or as a kind of museum or encyclopedia of curious lores.

BURGIN: When you say you dislike Freud, what do you mean?

BORGES: I think of him as a kind of madman, no? A man laboring over a sexual obsession. Well, perhaps he didn't take it to heart. Perhaps he was just doing it as a kind of game. I tried to read him, and I thought of him either as a charlatan or as a madman in a sense. After all the world is far too

⁶ *Random House*, p. 862.

⁷ *Random House*, p. 862.

⁸ *Random House*, p. 862.

complex to be boiled down to that all-too-simple scheme. But in Jung, well, of course, Jung I have read far more widely than Freud, but in Jung you feel a wide and hospitable mind. In the case of Freud, it all boils down to a few rather unpleasant facts. But, of course, that's merely my ignorance or my bias.⁹

Although Magic Realism is evident in Borges' first stories of *Historia universal de la infamia* written in the early 1930's, it was not until the 1940's that he wrote his most famous stories and it was not until the 1950's that his fame attained international proportions, coinciding with the Latin American rejection of *criollismo* and Social Realism and the reemergence of Magic Realism. It was also during this period that Borges wrote most of the essays published in *Otras inquisiciones* (1952), where both the world view and some of the specific stylistic traits of Magic Realism may be found. In "Magias parciales del *Quijote*," Borges, while commenting on the particular brand of realism in the *Quijote*, refers to Joseph Conrad's world view, which coincides with that of Borges and that of the Magic Realist painters and authors in general: "Joseph Conrad pudo escribir que excluía de su obra lo sobrenatural, porque admitirlo parecía negar que lo cotidiano fuera maravilloso."¹⁰ A similar attitude of amazement and optimism is ascribed by Borges to one of his most favorite authors: "Chesterton pensó como Whitman, que el mero hecho de ser es tan prodigioso que ninguna desventura debe eximirnos de una suerte de cómica gratitud."¹¹ In praising Quevedo as the "primer artífice de las letras hispánicas,"¹² greater than Cervantes, Borges stresses the same extreme objectivity and ultraprecision employed by the Magic Realists to invest reality with a touch of magic. Borges attributes Quevedo's relative lack of international fame to the fact that "sus duras páginas no fomentan, ni siquiera toleran, el menor desahogo sentimental."¹³ Borges discusses various styles that Quevedo used in his different works but he singles out for special treatment that of the treatise *Marcus Brutus*, almost all of whose

⁹ Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York, 1969), p. 109.

¹⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires, 1966), p. 65.

¹¹ Borges, *Otras inquisiciones*, p. 120.

¹² Borges, *Otras inquisiciones*, p. 64.

¹³ Borges, *Otras inquisiciones*, p. 55.

characteristics are typical of Borges' own Magic Realist style: "el ostentoso laconismo, el hipérbaton, el casi algebraico rigor, la oposición de términos, la aridez, la repetición de palabras, dan a ese texto una precisión ilusoria."¹⁴

One of the most incontrovertible indications of Borges' identification with Magic Realism is his constant use of oxymoron from his first stories of 1933 up through what is generally considered his best story "El Sur" (1952) and beyond. Regarding *Historia universal de la infamia*, the very title of the volume produces a bemused reaction on the part of the reader. A universal history of infamy is a rather unusual and improbable undertaking. Even more improbable is that the protagonists of the seven stories, with the exception of Billy the Kid, are not well-known historical figures. Oxymoron, strictly speaking, is the juxtaposition of apparently self-contradictory words such as "cruel kindness." Varying degrees of oxymoron¹⁵ are present in most of the titles of the volume's seven principal stories: "El espantoso redentor Lazarus Morell," "El impostor inverosímil Tom Castro," "La viuda Ching, Pirata," "El asesino desinteresado Bill Harrigan," "El incivil maestro de ceremonias Kotsuké no Suké." Although the title of the book announces the author's intent to be all-encompassing, the juxtaposition in the same volume of a nineteenth-century southern U.S. slave dealer and twentieth-century New York gangsters with an eighth-century Arab dyer, an early eighteenth-century Chinese widow pirate, and an eighteenth-century Japanese Samurai, is rather amazing.¹⁶

One of the most successful stories of the volume is "El impostor inverosímil Tom Castro," whose title reflects the oxymoron-like

¹⁴ Borges, *Otras inquisiciones*, p. 58.

¹⁵ See Edelweiss Serra, "La estrategia del lenguaje en *Historia universal de la infamia*," *RI*, Nos. 100-101 (1977), pp. 657-63. In this semiological study, Prof. Serra analyzes the parallelisms among the seven stories based on the use of oxymoron. However, she does not relate the oxymoron to Borges' world view nor does she associate it with Magic Realism. Jaime Alazraki does relate Borges' frequent use of oxymoron to his view of an apparently contradictory reality, but, like Serra, does not indicate this as a reflection of Magic Realism (*La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges* [Madrid, 1968], pp. 186-95).

¹⁶ I use the word "amazing" because it so often appears in discussions of Magic Realism. Emil Volek, in a most perceptive article on Borges, emphasizes the latter's "estética del asombro" and his "lector asombrado," but without identifying him with Magic Realism: "Águiles y la tortuga: Arte, imaginación y la realidad según Borges," *RI*, Nos. 100-101 (1977), pp. 293-310.

nature of the whole story. Whereas an impostor usually does his best to assume the physical appearance and general traits of the individual he is impersonating, Tom Castro is the "implausible impostor" because he does nothing of the kind. Incredible it may be, but there is nothing fantastic about the success of his impersonation. Lady Tichborne wanted to believe in the reappearance of her long-missing son; she was rather old; and "los ojos fatigados de Lady Tichborne estaban velados de llanto."¹⁷ Furthermore, in an oxymoron-like paradox, "la luz hizo de máscara."¹⁸ Light usually clarifies things, unmasks them, however in this case, the sudden opening of the window blinds caused Lady Tichborne to be blinded by the strong sunlight.¹⁹

The Magic Realist world view is borne out by the characters and events of the story: reality is stranger than fiction; things occur unexpectedly; absolute truth or reality is impossible for mortal man to grasp, but there is nothing in the story that would warrant its being included in the realm of fantastic literature. The transformation of Arthur Orton into Tom Castro and then into Roger Charles Tichborne is highly improbable but not impossible or fantastic. The relationship between Tom Castro and his Negro servant Ebenezer Bogle is likewise improbable. Bogle had a terrible fear of crossing the street but after Tom Castro offered the Negro his arm one day in Sydney, Australia, "un protectorado se estableció: el del negro inseguro y monumental sobre el obeso tarambana de Wapping."²⁰ Since the story is set in the nineteenth century when Great Britain was taking on itself the burden of "civilizing" a large part of the African continent, Bogle's protectorate over Tom Castro is obviously intended to amaze and amuse the reader. It is Bogle's "ocurrencia genial"²¹ which, according to the narrator, "determinados manuales de etnografía han negado a su raza,"²² that is responsible for the unexpected turn of events in Tom Castro's life. In fact, Bogle has two sudden

¹⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, *Historia universal de la infamia* (Buenos Aires, 1966), p. 36.

¹⁸ Borges, *Historia universal*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁹ In his later story "El Zahir," Borges comments on this very example: "En la figura que se llama *oxímoron*, se aplica a una palabra un epíteto que parece contradecirla; así los gnósticos hablaron de luz oscura" (*El Aleph*, p. 106).

²⁰ Borges, *Historia universal*, p. 32.

²¹ Borges, *Historia universal*, p. 32.

²² Borges, *Historia universal*, p. 32.

inspirations: the plan to have Tom Castro impersonate Roger Tichborne and the plan to marshal public opinion in England on the impersonator's side by publishing an apocryphal attack on him signed by a Jesuit. Paralleling the two inspirations, Tom's fortunes are adversely affected by two sudden deaths. Lady Tichborne dies only three years after accepting Tom as her son and thereupon her relatives bring suit against him for false impersonation. Tom would probably have been exonerated with the aid of still another Bogle inspiration but the latter, as had been anticipated, is unexpectedly killed while crossing the street. Tom is sentenced to fourteen years in prison, is released after only ten, and spends the rest of his life alternately pleading his innocence or his guilt "al servicio de las inclinaciones del público."²³

What makes the improbabilities of this story even more improbable is that its source is the 1911 edition of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. Its authenticity is further substantiated by the narrator's giving the exact dates (day, month, and year) of Tom's birth, of his appearance before Lady Tichborne, of his sentencing and of his death. This chronological precision, the initial statement of what fate had in store for Bogle, as well as the implausible situations and unexpected events were to become trademarks of several of Borges' more authentic short stories (the less essayistic ones) and of Magic Realism in general.

Although Borges' stories have usually been labeled fantastic, a more accurate approach would be to designate some of the more authentic ones as Magic Realist and some of the more essayistic ones as fantastic. Borges himself, in his 1941 prologue to *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, calls the title story a detective story and "las otras [piezas] son fantásticas."²⁴ While "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," like "El impostor inverosímil Tom Castro," is very clearly based on the typical constellation of Magic Realist traits, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "El acercamiento a Almotásim," "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*," and "Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain" are essayistic commentaries on imaginary, nonexistent countries, authors, or books and therefore more deserving of the fantastic label. "Las ruinas circulares," in which the protagonist succeeds in creating another man by dreaming

²³ Borges, *Historia universal*, p. 40.

²⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires, 1968), p. 11.

him only to realize that he too may be a dream creature, is obviously fantastic.

Whereas only one of the eight pieces of *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* may be labeled Magic Realist, in *Artificios* (1944), the second part of *Ficciones*, six of the nine stories are Magic Realist. It is no accident that Borges himself recognized the superiority of the more authentic short stories of *Artificios*. He calls them "de ejecución menos torpe."²⁵ Two of the stories are clearly essayistic, "Tres versiones de Judas" and "La secta del Fénix," while "Funes el memorioso," in addition to being somewhat essayistic, is too subjective to qualify for the Magic Realist label.

Although "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" has a relatively long labyrinthine philosophical discussion between Dr. Yu Tsun and Stephen Albert, the story may be better understood in terms of the world view and stylistic traits of Magic Realism. The ultraprecision and objectivity of the first paragraph²⁶ not only represents a refreshing departure from the more typically Hispanic florid style but also parallels the sharp-focus, Magic Realist painting of the American Charles Sheeler (1883-1965), or the German Christian Schad (1894). Sheeler was praised by his friend, doctor-poet William Carlos Williams, for "the bewildering directness of his vision"²⁷ while Schad is considered by Wieland Schmied "the coldest, sharpest, most precise"²⁸ of all the Magic Realists. The Magic Realist concept of history's being stranger than fiction is borne out by the improbable fact that Stephen Albert, a name picked out of the telephone directory in order to identify the site of the new British artillery park in France, should turn out to be a sinologist. Equally improbable is that the German spy should be a former Chinese teacher of English at a German high school in Tsingtao. The air of Magic Realism that pervades the story is strengthened by other oxymoron-like phrases: "un joven que leía con fervor los *Anales* de Tácito" and "un soldado herido y feliz"²⁹—possible but not probable.

²⁵ Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 111.

²⁶ The initial paragraphs of "Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva," "Tema del traidor y del héroe," and "El Sur" are similarly ultraprecise.

²⁷ Charles Sheeler (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1939), p. 10.

²⁸ Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland, 1918-1933* (Hannover, 1969), p. 50. The translation is mine.

²⁹ Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, p. 98.

In keeping with Magic Realism's rejection of the subjectivity and emotionalism of Expressionism, Borges' characters are capable of acting without the slightest trace of emotion and Borges never arouses the reader's sympathy for his characters. In "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," Yu Tsun kills Albert with painstaking precision reflected in the utmost simplicity of the following two sentences: "Yo había preparado el revólver. Disparé con sumo cuidado: Albert se desplomó sin una queja, inmediatamente."³⁰ The reader feels absolutely no anger at the murder of this innocent man nor does he feel any compassion for Yu Tsun who feels no fear of his impending death: "ahora que mi garganta anhela la cuerda."³¹ Even in the heinous execution of Jaromir Hladik by the Nazis in "El milagro secreto," Borges purposely prevents the reader from feeling any emotion—he is too involved in the intellectual process of finding his way out of the labyrinth. Also consistent with Magic Realism are Borges' Jungian³² ideas of the simultaneity of past, present, and future; of the relative insignificance of the individual human being; and of man's identity not only with his ancestors but with every man. Jung's and Borges' cyclical view of history is reinforced stylistically in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" by "la luna baja y circular,"³³ "el disco del gramófono,"³⁴ "un alto reloj circular,"³⁵ and "el vívido círculo de la lámpara."³⁶

Whereas "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," as the title indicates, involves the reader in a labyrinthine experience, "El fin" reflects the relative simplicity of its title. Nonetheless, it too illustrates Borges' affiliation with Magic Realism. The poetic tone which pervades the story is highly unusual for Borges and may be explained by his projecting himself into the world of *Martín Fierro*. However, José Hernández' long narrative poem does not have the same poetic and nostalgic tone as Borges' story. In "El fin" Borges creates the same poetic, tranquil, dream-like atmo-

³⁰ Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, p. 108.

³¹ Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, p. 96.

³² See Jaime Alazraki, "Estructura y función de los sueños en los cuentos de Borges," *Ibero*, 3 (1975), 9-38.

³³ Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 99.

³⁴ Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 101.

³⁵ Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 102.

³⁶ Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 105.

sphere that is found in the Munich Magic Realist painter Georg Schrimpf (1889-1938): "He also possessed a background in genuine naïveté rooted in a strongly-stamped feeling for the magical efficiency of the dreamy world of objects."³⁷ Just as Schrimpf's women gaze impassively out at the world through a window, Recabarren observes the tragic knife duel between Martín Fierro and the Negro through a window as he lies on his cot. The effect of the action's being presented through an intermediary is to make it less vivid, less emotional, more static and more plastic—as in *Parson Weems' Fable* (1929) by Grant Wood (1892-1942), and in keeping with Brecht's theory of keeping an emotional distance between the action of the play and the audience.

The tone of the story is set in the first few lines which describe the paralyzed Recabarren's awaking from his noon-day nap: "recobró poco a poco la realidad, las cosas cotidianas que ya no cambiaría nunca por otras."³⁸ This view of reality after awaking from a sleep is tinged with the same magic captured by Joan Miró (1893) in his early Magic Realist phase.³⁹ Although Borges compares reality to a dream, what Recabarren sees is not a dream; it is reality enveloped in a magic aura: "la llanura bajo el último sol, era casi abstracta, como vista en un sueño."⁴⁰ The dream-like quality of the scene is maintained by the unemotional low-key, somewhat stoic and somewhat poetic dialogue between the two combatants. It's almost as if the two men realize that they are acting out their predetermined roles in a drama written by an unknown author. The belated identification of the stranger as Martín Fierro provides the unexpected ingredient typical of Magic Realism.

The same belated identification is also evident in the final sentence of "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)," which informs the reader that the protagonist was not a historical figure but Martín Fierro's companion. The fact that Borges in a matter-of-fact manner converts the literary figures of *Martín Fierro* into the reality of his stories is also typical of Magic Realism and may be likened to García Márquez' use of Victor Hugues, Artemio Cruz and Rocamadour in *Cien años de soledad*.

³⁷ Paul Vogt, *Geschichte der deutschen Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne, 1972), p. 235. The translation is mine.

³⁸ Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 171.

³⁹ See Jacques Dupin, *Joan Miró, Life and Work* (New York, 1961-62), p. 84.

⁴⁰ Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 172.

Written in the same year of 1952 as "El fin," "El Sur" has a similar dream-like tone but is more complex, more transcendent, and is considered by Borges to be "acaso mi mejor cuento."⁴¹ What makes "El Sur" perhaps Borges' best story is its excellent application of Magic Realism to the portrayal of Argentina's national psyche. One of the reasons why "El Sur" is so appealing to the modern reader is that it is one of the very few of Borges' stories that allow for more than one interpretation. No matter how labyrinthine most of his stories may be, once they are solved, it becomes clear that there is only one solution. This is not the case in "El Sur." Borges himself suggests "que es posible leerlo como directa narración de hechos novelescos, y también de otro modo."⁴² Borges was even more explicit in an interview with James E. Irby: "Todo cuanto sucede después que Dahlmann sale del sanatorio puede interpretarse como una alucinación que él habría tenido en el momento de morir de septicemia, como una visión fantástica de la manera en que hubiera querido morir. Es por ello que existen correspondencias tenues entre las dos mitades del cuento."⁴³ Although the second half of the story may be interpreted as an hallucination as Allen W. Phillips has very carefully demonstrated,⁴⁴ "El Sur" is a better story when read "como directa narración de hechos novelescos."

The key to an understanding of the literal interpretation lies in Borges' much greater affiliation with Magic Realism than with either Surrealism or the fantastic. As has already been shown in the comments on "El impostor inverosímil Tom Castro" and "El fin," Borges has a Magic Realist world view. Truth is stranger than fiction and the most unexpected and amazing events may take place. As the character Unwin in "Abencaján el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto" says, "no precisa erigir un laberinto,

⁴¹ Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 112.

⁴² Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 106.

⁴³ James E. Irby, "Encuentro con Borges," *Universidad de México*, 16, No. 10 (1962), 8. Also reappeared in the L'Herne volume dedicated to Borges (Paris, 1964), p. 397. The English translation is mine.

⁴⁴ Allen W. Phillips, "'El Sur' de Borges," in *Estudios y notas sobre literatura hispanoamericana* (México, 1965), pp. 165-75. Edelweiss Serra, although she quotes from Irby's interview, is not quite so certain about the hallucination interpretation: "Con todo, el sentido del cuento me parece más grave y trascendente aún, sin quitar que pueda leerse en el sentido literal o en el fantástico" (*Estructura y análisis del cuento* [Santa Fe, Argentina, 1966], p. 218).

cuando el universo ya lo es."⁴⁵ The juxtaposition of self-contradictory words or phrases, oxymoron, is not only Borges' favorite stylistic device, it is one of the basic structures of many of his stories. Although critics have generally divided "El Sur" into two parts, before and after Juan Dahlmann's release from the hospital (literally or through hallucination), it is more significant to note the juxtaposition throughout the story of an overly precise, objective, expository style and the transformation, without distortions, of reality into a dream world. The story begins, as several of Borges' stories do, with a kind of encyclopedia-style⁴⁶ objective description of Juan Dahlmann's family background: "El hombre que desembarcó en Buenos Aires en 1871 se llamaba Johannes Dahlmann y era pastor de la iglesia evangélica."⁴⁷ This staccato factual style, however, is subverted by Borges' typical use of the self-questioning "tal vez," within or without parentheses: "Juan Dahlmann (tal vez a impulso de la sangre germánica) eligió el de ese antepasado" (p. 179); "Las tareas y acaso la indolencia lo retenían en la ciudad" (p. 179). The parallelism established between "tareas" and "indolencia" is still another example of a type of oxymoron. By the same token, the initial description ends with a contrast between the precision of the date and the absence of adjectives on the one hand, and the vagueness of "algo": "En los últimos días de febrero de 1939, algo le aconteció" (p. 180).

In the next two sentences the tone of the narrator changes completely. He philosophizes about destiny and tells us that Dahlmann "había conseguido, esa tarde, un ejemplar descabado de las *Mil y una noches* de Weil" (p. 181). Although the rest of the action is developed in a dream-like tone, certain phrases, clauses or sentences stand out because of their brusque, every-day unrhetorical style: "cuando el cirujano le dijo que había estado a punto de morir de una septicemia" (p. 181); "recordó bruscamente que en un café de la Calle Brasil" (p. 182); "de esa conjetura fantástica lo distrajo el inspector" (p. 184).

Most of the story's Magic Realism is based on its tone, created by the emphasis on the protagonist's remembering ("recordar")

⁴⁵ Borges, *El Aleph*, p. 131.

⁴⁶ For the biographical explanation of this technique, see Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges, A Literary Biography* (New York, 1978), pp. 89-90.

⁴⁷ Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 179. The following quotes from "El Sur" are taken from the same edition.

(pp. 181-82) or vaguely recognizing ("creyó reconocer") (pp. 183-84). It is symbolized by the emotionless, inscrutable, and improbably enormous cat living in the present: "como una divinidad desdenosa," "el mágico animal" (p. 182). The same inscrutable and enormous cat also appears as a symbol of the narrator in "Deutsches Requiem": "símbolo de mi vano destino, dormía en el reborde de la ventana un gato enorme y fofo."⁴⁸ Although the cat has not hitherto been recognized as symbolic of Magic Realism in general, it appears significantly in perhaps the very first examples of Magic Realist painting: Niklaus Stöcklin's 1917 *Rhein Lane* and in Georg Schrimpf's *Still-Life*, which was included in Franz Roh's 1925 seminal book on Magic Realism.

The element of chance is also a basic characteristic of the Magic Realist's view of the world. The protagonist is injured because he had purchased *The Thousand and One Nights* and he was so eager to read the book that he didn't wait for the elevator. Instead he rushed up the stairs and accidentally scratched his face on a splinter. That the scratch should become infected and cause a serious fever is still more implausible. The other "algo" that happened to Juan Dahlmann is equally implausible. When the young rowdies challenge Dahlmann to a knife fight, it is only the unexpected coming to life of the old gaucho and his tossing his naked dagger to Dahlmann that insures the latter's probable death.

How did Dahlmann actually die? Was the fight with the rowdies only an hallucination which permitted Dahlmann to die the hero's death that he would have preferred? As I stated above, the Magic Realism interpretation is more effective. Dahlmann, after almost dying from septicemia, is released from the hospital one morning. His rediscovery of the city at 7 A.M. parallels statements by the early de Chirico regarding the way he felt and painted reality: "I had just come out of a long and painful illness, and I was in a nearly morbid state of sensitivity . . . then I had the strange impression that I was looking at all these things for the first time."⁴⁹ Dahlmann states categorically that the morning and his being alive were greater marvels than the adventures of *The Thousand and One Nights*. In "El Zahir," the narrator tells us that "Según la doctrina idealista, los verbos *vivir* y *soñar* son riguro-

⁴⁸ Borges, *El Aleph*, p. 84.

⁴⁹ *Giorgio de Chirico* (Paris: Musée Marmottan, June 12-Oct. 31, 1975), p. 7.

samente sinónimos."⁵⁰ Borges is also quite fond of the phrase "como en un sueño"⁵¹ and his story "La espera" begins with an apparently precise, objective, unrheterical sentence in which the house number is obviously intended to recall *The Thousand and One Nights*: "el coche lo dejó en el cuatro mil cuatro de esa calle del Noroeste."⁵² As the train carried Dahlmann southward, he felt as though he were two men, the man riding on the train and the man who had suffered so much in the hospital. With his hospital experience so fresh in his mind, it's only natural that Dahlmann compares people, objects, and events of the immediate present to those of the immediate past.

Although, as Allen Phillips has pointed out, there are many indications that Dahlmann's trip south is an hallucination, it is difficult to determine exactly where in the story the hallucination, or dream, begins. According to Phillips, the hallucination starts precisely after the sentence, "Increíblemente, el día prometido llegó" (p. 181). However, the word "increíblemente" actually defines Borges' view of reality: the most implausible, incredible, and unexpected things may happen. Furthermore, a Magic Realist interpretation would indicate that the narrator makes reality seem dream-like not only at the moment when Dahlmann leaves the hospital but also at the moment he falls asleep after being injured—"Dahlmann logró dormir, pero a la madrugada estaba despierto y desde aquella hora el sabor de todas las cosas fue atroz" (p. 180)—and at the moment the anesthesiologist in the hospital sticks a needle into his arm—"se despertó con náuseas, vendado, en una celda que tenía algo de pozo" (p. 180).

Besides reflecting Borges' Magic Realist view of life and reality with a carefully structured set of parallelisms and symmetries, "El Sur" is unique among Borges' stories because it is a commentary on the basic oxymoron-like antithesis of civilization-barbarism that has prevented Argentineans from developing a true national consciousness.⁵³ Juan Dahlmann is killed because he can-

⁵⁰ Borges, *El Aleph*, p. 113.

⁵¹ Borges, *El Aleph*, p. 106.

⁵² Borges, *El Aleph*, p. 137.

⁵³ In his 1946 essay "Nuestro pobre individualismo," Borges affirms categorically that "el argentino, a diferencia de los americanos del Norte y de casi todos los europeos, no se identifica con el Estado . . . lo cierto es que el argentino es un individuo, no es un ciudadano" (*Otras inquisiciones*, p. 51).

not resist the call of his gaucho or barbarous past. Juan Dahlmann, a clerk in a municipal library of Buenos Aires, is undoubtedly killed by a drunken rowdy after picking up the dagger tossed at his feet by the ancient archetypal gaucho. If Argentina is to progress—"El Sur" tells us—the civilized elements of Buenos Aires must predominate over the barbarous rural tradition reincarnated in the military juntas led by Perón, or more recently by Onganía and Videla.⁵⁴ If Argentina is to progress, Juan Dahlmann or Juan Argentino must accept the fusion of his oxymoron-like lineage and not choose the more "macho" one . . . only at the moment of his death. In this respect, Rómulo Gallegos' hero Santos Luzardo is able to triumph over the barbarous forces of the Venezuelan *llanos* because he is closer to his rural ancestry than Juan Dahlmann and still knows how to rope a steer and fire a gun. If Juan Dahlmann had visited his ranch more frequently, he would have been more adept at handling the knife and might have been able to defend himself against his barbaric compatriot. "El Sur," with Juan Dahlmann as its protagonist, is obviously intended to be a metaphor of Argentine history.⁵⁵ However Dahlmann's death is interpreted, it does represent the triumph of barbarism over civilization, the triumph of brute force over innocent ivory-tower intellectualism, the triumph of the Perón dictatorship over the Argentine intellectuals, paralleling the Rosas dictatorship's persecution of the Unitarian intellectuals in the 1830's.

The interpretation of "El Sur" and other stories by Borges in the light of Magic Realism will hopefully help convince scholars that Borges' stories do not all fit into the category of "lo fantástico." It should also clarify the distinction between Magic Re-

⁵⁴ In his essay "Anotación al 23 de agosto de 1944," written on the occasion of the liberation of Paris, Borges indicates that the barbarism of the Nazis is totally anachronistic. By the same token, the drunken rowdy who probably kills Juan Dahlmann is a far cry from the authentic gauchos of the previous centuries: "Ser nazi (jugar a la barbarie enérgica, jugar a ser un viking, un tártaro, un conquistador del siglo XVI, un gaucho, un piel roja) es, a la larga, una imposibilidad mental y moral" (*Otras inquisiciones*, p. 185).

⁵⁵ At a round-table discussion held at California State University Dominguez Hills on April 10, 1980, Borges accepted this metaphorical interpretation but vehemently rejected the relationship between the violence of the gauchos and the violence of the Perón dictatorship. Be that as it may, since the story was written in 1952 during the Perón dictatorship, which took special delight in victimizing Borges, the analogy is inevitable.

alism, "lo fantástico," and "lo real maravilloso." Whether Borges consciously identified with the Magic Realist tendency in painting or not, some of his better stories share the same world view and stylistic traits indicated by Franz Roh and may therefore be better appreciated in this context.

University of California, Irvine

SEYMOUR MENTON



POOR MAXI'S WINDMILL: AQUATIC SYMBOLISM IN
*FORTUNATA Y JACINTA**

IN the not-so-distant past it was sufficient merely to tell students in a Galdós seminar that Maxi Rubín and Fortunata in *Fortunata y Jacinta* were obviously mismated and that their marriage was doomed to failure. I have found, however, that today's less-inhibited student frequently exhibits a curiosity bordering on the morbid about the details of Maxi's fiasco. Is there, perhaps, a specific sexual dysfunction, one that might be susceptible to treatment through therapeutic techniques—such as those of Masters and Johnson—about which American students have now read so much? Further, students ask just how realistic was Spain's most famous realist when it came to discussing the sexual basis of marriage in *Fortunata y Jacinta*.

In responding to these concerns, I have discovered what I consider to be a significant symbolic pattern in the narrative fabric of *Fortunata y Jacinta*, by means of which Galdós conveys to the reader the precise nature of Maxi and Fortunata's marital problem. The remainder of this study will deal with the theme and its variations which Galdós develops relating to the key element of the pattern—a subject much on the minds of nineteenth-century *madrileños*: water and its transmission.

Fortunata y Jacinta was written at a time when water had become generally and easily available for the first time in Madrid as a result of municipal projects energetically supported by Bravo Murillo ("Ministro de Fomentos") and the Marqués de Pontejos

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