

The Four Cardinal Points of Borges

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I.

In these brief remarks on the narrative prose of Jorge Luis Borges, I propose to attempt something at once seemingly impossible and totally obvious. Viewing the immense richness and complexity of Borges' narrative resources, one quickly perceives the apparent impossibility of describing that author's artistic orientation in a short essay. Yet like the fiction of no other contemporary writer (to judge from the growing amount of critical comment accorded to his work), Borges' prose writings invite, inspire, perhaps even demand analysis and interpretation. Thus the perfectly obvious intention of this paper.

To ascribe to Borges' artistic world four key aspects, four cardinal points, is, to be sure, arbitrary. Still, this approach need not produce necessarily invalid judgments. Schematic yes, but with any luck, in some way telling.

The narrative prose encompassed by these observations extends from "Hombres de las orillas," published in September of 1933, to "Pedro Salvadores," which appeared in the English translation of Norman Thomas di Giovanni in the *New York Review of Books* in mid-August 1969. This appearance preceded its Spanish-language publication in Jorge Luis Borges' latest collection of prose and poetry, *Elogio de la sombra*, published in Buenos Aires by Emecé on 24 August 1969—the 70th birthday of the author.

"Pedro Salvadores" is, in Borges' words, a "straightforward story" of a new type he has begun to write. The first narrative of this new style was "La intrusa," published in 1966. The general observations of this paper, I feel, apply as fully to this later narrative mood as to the above-mentioned first story by Borges (which in its subsequent appearances carries the title "Hombre de la esquina rosada"). And for those familiar with the author's more celebrated in-between stories—those of *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*—the appropriateness of these cardinal points will, I hope, be apparent.

Borges believes in the superiority of his recent narratives—"La intrusa" especially, which he now refers to as his best story, and "Pedro Salvadores," which pleases him for its simplicity. He has excused his earliest story as (again his own words) "psychologically false" and as so much "fancy work." Urged to consider that it was his first

story and showed signs of having been carefully worked over and polished, he has replied, "Yes, but I think I may have overdone it."

Let us examine, then, these points of reference as they relate to Borges' fiction. They seem conveniently to characterize the stories he fashioned from his own materials—the stories of the late thirties and of the forties. But to put the theory to the test, we shall see how they apply to his latest fiction, specifically to "Pedro Salvadores," the two-page account that Borges prefers to call an anecdote, something *not* his but only recounted to him. I hope to show in some detail how, in the retelling, this episode of the Rosas terror becomes his.

II.

The cardinal points of Jorge Luis Borges are four and may be considered as corresponding to the points of the compass. Borges' south is, of course, his deeply sensed nationality as an Argentine. It is reflected not only in his literary use of Argentine settings and events, but also in the manner in which he absorbs and synthesizes borrowings from the most disparate sources. This sort of assimilation characterizes the special type of Argentine *criollismo* which must be understood in order for one to grasp the particular meaning in Argentina of the term *criollo*.

The circumstances of the author's life have combined to produce a man who, owing to chronic nearsightedness which led gradually to virtual blindness, has withdrawn from aggressive participation in the present, and has seen fit to draw drama and excitement vicariously from many sources, none perhaps more noteworthy than the participation of his ancestors in the turbulent events of his country's history. The names are woven into his pages: in the paternal line, his grandfather, Colonel Francisco Borges, whose mother, Carmen Lafinur, was sister to poet Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur whose lineage, in turn, is traced back through Gerónimo Luis de Cabrera, founder of Córdoba, to include Juan de Garay, founder of Buenos Aires after the grim failures of Juan Díaz de Solís and Pedro de Mendoza; on his mother's side, his great-grandfather, Colonel Isidro Suárez, who as an exile died during the Rosas siege of Montevideo, whose ten-year-old brother was executed by the *mazorca* at the wall of the Recoleta, and who in that young and violent land was a cousin to the despised dictator himself; a great-uncle, Francisco Narciso de Laprida, who was president of the Congress of Tucumán that initiated the movement for independence; and an uncle of Colonel Isidro Suárez, Miguel Estanislao de Soler, who was Jefe del Estado Mayor of General José de San Martín.

If Borges has any identity whatever, it is as an Argentine, and, as an American poet has expressed it, "that has made all the difference." Those who would call him "Europeanized" and criticize his indifference to Argentine reality surely understand very little about the writer and about the true meaning of the term *criollo* as applied to inhabitants of the city of his birth.

If the direction north has special significance as the principal point of orientation, then I would be inclined to say that Borges' north is most evidently language—this being

extended to include its chief mode of aesthetic expression, literature, as well as the preoccupation with the techniques of that expression, literary style. Borges has stated on numerous occasions that the most significant feature of his childhood (and I have heard him extend "childhood" into "lifetime") was his father's library of English books. There is perhaps no more eloquent testimony to the truth of this statement than Borges' admission that the most vivid images that remain with him of his early years in Palermo are not of people or places or events, but of books, their feel, their smell, and the illustrations they carried. A curious statement, but one that illuminates the paths along which his life subsequently led him. His destiny, he understood at an early age, was to be a writer. And during the threescore years that have run their course since his first attempt at fashioning language—a successful translation of Oscar Wilde's story "The Happy Prince"—he has made few exceptions to a total dedication to that career.

To talk with Borges today is to relive with him and renew with him the pleasures of a life devoted to literature. Although he no longer sees and cannot read, many of those pleasures are still close to him and can be immediately recalled from the vast archive of verses—of all types and in several languages—that he has stored in his mind. At least as surprising is Borges' insistence that he has never made the slightest effort deliberately to memorize any of these lines. The beauty or felicity of the verses (or at times their exceptional badness) has sufficed to fix them in his recall. "If you have to make an effort to learn certain verses," he has said, "then they're not worth the trouble, don't you think?"

Borges' literature is made up of other literatures, and he is quick to acknowledge influences in his work. In his magical journey across a great sea of pages, he has stopped at many ports. The rich cargo he has laid aboard is a source of deep satisfaction. When his sight failed some fifteen years ago, he made a decision not to content himself with the wealth of familiarity with literature he had already acquired. He deliberately set up for himself a quest that he has pursued since 1955 and that he continues to pursue today. He took down from the upper shelves of his library a collection of books on Old English that he could no longer see, and with his students embarked on a journey back into the beginnings of that tongue which, more than any other, has enriched his life. Thus, language, in a broad, fundamental sense, continues in his later years to be a point to which he is oriented, a north by which he still guides himself.

The east of Borges' compass may be said to constitute the most distinctive feature of his writings. It could be described as a fascination with philosophical and metaphysical questions that manifests itself, in part, in the incorporation of these problems as elements of his prose fiction. His interest in these matters goes back to the philosophical works he read as a boy and discussed with his father, a teacher of psychology. In these conversations, Borges recalls, they discussed philosophical ideas on a thoroughly adult level, and his father did not treat such concepts as unusual or difficult or as requiring any more elaborate explanation than the mysteries and fantasies of the novels of Stevenson or Wells or Chesterton. In this way metaphysical problems came to form part of Borges' general reading, or literary background.

Following a seven-year period of education and literary apprenticeship in Switzerland and Spain, Borges returned to Buenos Aires where, waiting at the pier to welcome the family home, was his father's friend Macedonio Fernández, the man who was to influence Borges' attitude and style of thought more than any other person. With Macedonio, Borges subsequently developed an intellectual skepticism toward most commonly held beliefs of a spiritual or practical nature as well as a fondness for a personal brand of philosophic idealism that Macedonio had evolved. Together they read and discussed many books and writers in a genial tone; among them Schopenhauer, Hume, and Francis Bradley. Macedonio preferred to talk about the books he was too lazy to write. His, apparently, was an oral genius. And he had a great gift for comic invention. He was capable of saying to Borges, "Do you think we ought to commit suicide now, so as not to have to hear 'La cumparsita' played again?" Or (and this is an instance where a saying directly inspired by Macedonio was later used by and attributed to him) on describing a poorly attended lecture by an inveterate and boring speaker: "There were so few people there that if anyone else had failed to attend the lecture, he wouldn't have been able to get in."

Borges acquired many things with Macedonio Fernández, and when Borges began to write his first stories, in the late 1930s, the essentially philosophical concepts and metaphysical questions (especially those touching on time, infinity, and identity) that had been so firmly and—thanks to Macedonio—so casually assimilated as part of Borges' literary environment, were quite naturally incorporated as fictional or narrative elements of his prose. After the first two stories signed with his own name had been published—"Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*" and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"—the narrative formula was set, and thereafter his very peculiar, very original prose style would be instantly recognizable. Borges himself, perhaps more clearly than anyone else, has described this feature of his writings, saying: "I am quite simply a man who uses perplexities for literary purposes."

The remaining point, the west of Borges' compass, is the least studied aspect of his narrative mood. James E. Irby, in a dissertation dealing with the structure of Borges' stories, touches on this feature, and other critics have talked vaguely and occasionally of the uncommon abundance of knives, swords, murders, *guapos*, *compadritos*, conspiracies, intrigues, violence, vengeance, ambushes, plots, and executions. But only recently, in Ronald Christ's *The Narrow Act*, a study of Borges' art of allusion, in the chapter entitled "The Achievement of Form," is serious attention given to what I consider the fourth and final cardinal point: the strong, ever-present narrative ingredient of drama. This element may take the form of vivid color, melodrama, mystery, or very tight clockwork plotting, but it is characteristically present in his fictions and occupies the place that, in the stories of others, would be occupied by psychological probing or exposition—features notably absent in Borges' tales.

Borges' inordinate fondness for western films, gangster movies, fantastic literature, and detective fiction (perhaps explained by the concept of psychological transference or compensation), has accounted for much of the enjoyment he has derived from everyday

life. All of these interests have exerted a great influence on his writing. To begin with, he has produced in collaboration with his close friend Adolfo Bioy Casares: the don Isidro Parodi detective stories, an extravagant detective tale entitled *Un modelo para la muerte*, two Argentine gangster film scripts, two fantastic tales included in a book called *Dos fantasías memorables*, two anthologies of detective short stories, as well as a successful detective novel series (*El Séptimo Círculo*), published by Editorial Emecé. Moreover, with Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo he has edited a very important anthology of fantastic literature. These interests no doubt have accounted for the tone of certain of his own stories—the remarkable “La muerte y la brújula,” “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” “Emma Zunz,” “El acercamiento a Almotásim,” “La espera,” and others. But most significantly, his passion for fantasy and detective fiction, for gangster films, tales of *guapos*, *mavelos*, and *compadritos* has influenced the narrative structure of virtually all his prose fiction. Drama, usually in obvious and explicit form, is a feature of his style (we recognize him by it); moreover, it has come to represent for him a fundamental quality of the aesthetic effect he ideally hopes to achieve. It is in *Ficciones* that we find the following statement, perhaps one of the most significant formulations in all his work: “El hecho estético no puede prescindir de algún elemento de asombro.”

That “asombro” is translated, in Borges’ fiction, into the various forms of drama, melodrama, or sudden revelation that hold his stories firmly together. We need only recall those tales we have read to understand that the aesthetic effects Borges attains—the impression or impact they leave with the reader—are derived from the “asombro,” that is, the culmination not of a single reflection or insight, but rather the discharge of narrative tension accumulated by an intricately plotted and controlled dramatic situation.

III.

Now, to test the applicability of these four features, let us turn to an example of Borges’ new, “straightforward” fiction—the succinct narrative, “Pedro Salvadores,” found in his latest work in Spanish, *Elogio de la sombra*. If this proposed scheme is at all valid, it should lead to a reasonably full appreciation of Borges’ art as manifest in this tale. I am indebted to Norman Thomas di Giovanni for his permission to use the English translation of this story, which he has prepared in close collaboration with the author. The Spanish original has but seven paragraphs; in the English version there are eight. I shall deal exclusively with the translation.

“Pedro Salvadores” is Borges’ account of a true story, a story he had heard many years before he wrote it down. In the first paragraph he states, in his own voice, two things:

I want to leave a written record (perhaps the first to be attempted) of one of the strangest and grimmest happenings in Argentine history. To meddle as little as possible in the telling, to abstain from picturesque details or personal conjectures is, it seems to me, the only way to do this.

Here we have two quite different aspects. There is starkness and honesty in the author's intention to leave "a written record" of this incident (such, of course, is the function of prose), and the professed determination to accomplish this without descending to "fancy writing" is both disarming and subtly deceptive. But we are drawn closer by a promise of drama—the relating of "one of the strangest and grimmest happenings in Argentine history." In one paragraph, two sentences, three of the four aspects discussed above are evoked. The fourth, the author's concern with philosophical ideas, quickly comes into play in the next expository paragraph. Here we are given once more a forthright look into the narrator's art; like the magician before his trick, Borges shows us his hand, seeming to fulfill the promise he has just made: "A man, a woman, and the overpowering shadow of a dictator are the three characters. The man's name was Pedro Salvadores; my grandfather Acevedo saw him days or weeks after the dictator's downfall in the battle of Caseros." In these lines Borges proceeds directly to the telling of the story he has announced; and a key element in the structure of the inner narrative has been inserted (as we shall see) in the reference to the meeting between Borges' grandfather and Pedro Salvadores.

Next appears the first feature of a philosophical nature—a brief allusion to the concept of destiny, and the casual evocation of the question of identity, which the author will develop more fully near the story's end: "Pedro Salvadores may have been no different from anyone else, but the years and his fate set him apart." The paragraph continues, providing, in terms as succinct as those in which the cast of characters was presented, the setting of the story. The scene of the events is suggested as being as typically anonymous as Salvadores is himself:

He was a gentleman like many gentlemen of his day. He owned (let us suppose) a ranch in the country and, opposed to the tyranny, was on the Unitarian side. His wife's family name was Planes; they lived together on Suipacha Street near the corner of Temple in what is now the heart of Buenos Aires. The house in which the event took place was much like any other, with its street door, long arched entrance-way, inner grillwork gate, its rooms, its row of two or three patios. The dictator, of course, was Rosas.

Now the stage is set and the announced drama begins. In the next paragraph the only violent incidents of the story occur. The sparse and unembellished account of the rapid series of happenings both fulfills the author's promise "to abstain from picturesque details" and reflects a cinematographic narrative technique that Borges has used successfully before (e.g., in "Hombre de la esquina rosada").

One night, around 1842, Salvadores and his wife heard the growing, muffled sound of horses' hooves out on the unpaved street and the riders shouting their drunken *vivas* and their threats. This time Rosas' henchmen did not ride on. After the shouts came repeated knocks at the door; while the men began forcing it, Salvadores was able to pull the dining-room table aside, lift the rug, and hide himself down in the cellar. His wife dragged the table back in place. The *mazorca* broke into the house; they had come to take Salvadores. The woman said her husband had run away to Montevideo. The men did not believe her; they flogged her,

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What was Pedro Salvadores? Who was he? Was it his fear, his love, the unseen presence of Buenos Aires, or—in the long run—habit that held him prisoner? In order to keep him with her, his wife would make up news to tell him about whispered plots and rumored victories. Maybe he was a coward and she loyally hid it from him that she knew. I picture him in his cellar perhaps without a candle, without a book. Darkness probably sank him into sleep. His dreams, at the outset, were probably of that sudden night when the blade sought his throat, of the streets he knew so well, of the open plains. As the years went on, he would have been unable to escape even in his sleep; whatever he dreamed would have taken place in the cellar. At first, he may have been a man hunted down, a man in danger of his life; later (we will never know for certain), an animal at peace in its burrow or a sort of dim god.

The final sentence of the story is properly a part of the paragraph just cited. But Borges withholds it, with considerable effect, while he occupies himself with resolving the external structure of the narrative. Now we have a reference to the encounter between Borges' grandfather and Salvadores that was prefigured at the story's beginning. The balance of the brief paragraph generates a calculated falling, anticlimactic tone, which provides the necessary contrast with the story's last sentence:

All this went on until that summer day of 1852 when Rosas fled the country. It was only then that the secret man came out into the light of day; my grandfather spoke with him. Flabby, overweight, Salvadores was the color of wax and could not speak above a low voice. He never got back his confiscated lands; I think he died in poverty.

Now the final element of the tale: "As with so many things, the fate of Pedro Salvadores strikes us as a symbol of something we are about to understand, but never quite do." Close readers of Borges will perceive a familiar ring in this final line. It is a lucidly expressed insight and, of course, echoes the closing lines of Borges' essay (included in *Otras inquisiciones*), "The Wall and the Books," which reads as follows:

Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of revelation which does not occur is, perhaps the aesthetic phenomenon.

IV.

I hope it is clear that in "Pedro Salvadores" Borges blends the four aspects we have discussed into a prose narrative in which we cannot fail to sense the presence of his hand. The consciousness of his Argentine nationality, his acute awareness of language and the theory and practice of literary art, his persistent artistic concern with the perplexities of philosophical and metaphysical speculation, and his highly developed appreciation of the essence of drama are surely all present and apparent in this story. It may even be said that they constitute the principal ingredients of the prose style of Jorge Luis Borges.

I wish now to express my profound admiration for the man, seated here with us,

who, because of his special gifts and because he frequented for so many years the great and memorable books and writers of all time, has, I think, somehow become contaminated by immortality.

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