

Ernesto Sabato, Author of "Death and the Compass"

Maarten van Delden

I.

Ernesto Sabato spent much of his literary career in the shadow of Jorge Luis Borges. When somebody once mentioned to Borges that Sabato was being promoted by his Italian publisher as "the rival of Borges," Borges merely observed that no one had ever described him as "the rival of Sabato" (Molachino and Mejía Prieto 169). Borges's astute, slightly mocking comment pointed to the fact that the relationship between the two men weighed much more heavily on Sabato than on Borges.

Sabato entered the Argentine literary world in the 1940s via *Sur* (Roggiano 20-21), the very journal with which Borges was for many years closely associated. For a period of time, the two men were part of the same social and literary circle (Rodríguez Monegal 347; Torres Fierro 24). Yet from the very beginning of his career Sabato expressed reservations about Borges's work. In the mid 1950s, in the wake of Juan Domingo Perón's fall from power, a polemic exploded between the two men regarding the political significance of Peronism.¹ In the years that followed, Sabato's criticisms of the work of his older colleague became increasingly vehement. Eventually, a rapprochement took place between the two, as demonstrated by a series of dialogues in which they engaged at the behest of Osvaldo Barone between December 1974 and March 1975. Nevertheless, even in these very cordial exchanges, it was evident that there were significant differences between the two authors.

Sabato attacked Borges directly in a number of his essays. But Borges was also a strong presence in the younger man's fiction. Borges even makes a brief appearance in the flesh in Sabato's second novel, *Sobre héroes y tumbas*. One of the novel's protagonists meets Borges strolling down the calle Perú in Buenos Aires: "se encontró con una mano pequeña, casi sin huesos ni energía. Su cara parecía haber sido dibujada y luego borrada a medias con una goma" (210). Borges's feeble physical presence stands in contrast to the kind of

¹ See Gazzera for the texts of this polemic.

full-bloodedness for which Sabato made himself the spokesman. But Borges's impact was most noticeable in Sabato's first novel, *El túnel*. In this essay, I will argue that *El túnel* offers a polemic against Borges as well as a rewriting of one of Borges's best-known stories. Taking a cue from Borges himself, I will suggest that if we were to attribute "La muerte y la brújula" to Ernesto Sabato, what we would get would be *El túnel*. But before undertaking this analysis, I will summarize Sabato's criticisms of Borges as he expressed them in his essays.

II.

In order to understand Sabato's objections to Borges's work, one needs to begin by considering Sabato's view of the relationship between art and mass culture. For Sabato, mass culture is linked to the forces of standardization, mechanization, and dehumanization that have been unleashed by modernity. In *Hombres y engranajes*, Sabato describes the country that represents modernity in its purest form, the United States of America, as "el paraíso mecanizado [...] el país de las fabricaciones en serie, de las diversiones en serie, de los asesinatos en serie" (45). He goes on to depict the masses of modern society as

ese conjunto de seres que han dejado de ser criaturas humanas para convertirse o ser convertidos en objetos numerados, fabricados en serie, moldeados por una educación estandarizada, embutidos en oficinas y fábricas, sacudidas diariamente al unísono por las noticias lanzadas desde una Central Desconocida (73).

Sabato repeatedly voices an apocalyptic view of mass culture, which he presents as a key element in the spiritual enslavement of humanity:

Mediante el periodismo, la radio, el cine y los deportes colectivos, el pueblo embotado por la rutina podrá dar salida a una suerte de panonirismo, a la realización colectiva de un Gran Sueño. De modo que al huir de las fábricas en que son esclavos de la máquina, entrarán en el reino ilusorio creado por otras máquinas: por rotativas, radios y proyectores (52).

In Sabato's sharply negative view of modernity, mass culture turns us all into robots.²

For Sabato, only art can save humanity from the horrors of modernity. In art, the individual, the true and authentic individual, reigns supreme. As Sabato puts it in *Hombres y engranajes*, "el Ar-

² *Hombres y engranajes* was published in 1951. The half century that has transpired since then has not led Sabato to modify his views on mass culture. If anything, phenomena such as television and the computer appear to have strengthened his convictions, as is evident from Sabato's most recent book, *La resistencia*.

tista es el Único por excelencia" (73). But not all art wins his approval. Sabato is an advocate of modern art, or what he calls "el arte de hoy" (68). Such art constitutes a reaction against nineteenth-century realism and naturalism, which Sabato rejects for their excessive focus on the external dimension of life. Modern art also adopts an antagonistic stance towards mass culture, which Sabato describes as a historical descendant (or degraded version) of nineteenth-century realism and naturalism:

El cine, la radio, el teatro y las historietas del mundo mecanizado han llevado hasta sus últimos extremos los caracteres de este realismo burgués que en sus formas más altas se produjo en un Dickens o en un Zola (69).

Sabato emerges as a strong proponent of the typically modernist idea that a great divide separates genuine art from mass culture.³ "¡Qué lejos Dimitro Karamazov del villano o del héroe de un film del lejano Oeste!" (77) he remarks at one point in *Hombres y engranajes*. In a text from 1971, he argues that there is a clear hierarchy in the world of artistic expression: "Una novelita policial que leemos para hacer la digestión no tiene la misma jerarquía que *Jud el Oscuro*" (Sabato *Claves*: 20).

The comment about Dostoyevsky shows how important the question of the representation of character is to Sabato's concept of art. This question also helps us understand how Borges fits into Sabato's discourse on mass culture. The two authors have fundamentally different views of human psychology. Sabato repeatedly stresses his belief in the infinite complexity of human character. His novels serve to illustrate and explore this complexity. Borges claims to have no interest in human psychology, and he regularly mocks certain features of the psychological novel. Sabato cites Borges's objection to this type of novel: "Borges se queja de que en las novelas llamadas psicológicas la libertad se convierte en absoluta arbitrariedad: asesinos que matan por piedad, enamorados que se separan por amor" (Sabato, *Hombres* 72). Sabato may well have taken this criticism personally, since this is exactly what appears to happen in *El túnel*. Borges's indifference to psychology is part and parcel of his defense of the well-plotted narrative. From Sabato's perspective, however, this preference for strong, coherent plots pushes Borges in the direction of mass culture:

³ See Andreas Huyssen for a critical discussion of the history of this idea in modernism.

La coherencia a que se refiere Borges sólo se concibe en las novelas paradójicamente llamadas de aventuras, en los folletines y, sobre todo, en las narraciones policiales de tipo científico. En ellos impera ese rigor que se puede instaurar mediante un sistema de convenciones simples y cartesianas, como en una geometría o una dinámica; pero ese rigor implica la supresión de los atributos verdaderamente humanos (Sabato, *Hombres* 72).

That it is precisely Borges's proximity to mass culture that troubles Sabato is clear from the fact that the Borges story he most loves to hate is a detective story, "La muerte y la brújula". In his attacks on Borges, Sabato returns again and again to this particular text.

Sabato presents Borges as too close to mass culture, but at the same time he views him as excessively preoccupied with questions of style and aesthetics. In "Sobre los dos Borges", Sabato notes that "En Borges hay una sola fidelidad y una sola coherencia: la estilística". He also observes that "El mismo confiesa que rebusca en la filosofía con puro interés estético lo que en ella pueda haber de singular, divertido o asombroso". For Sabato, style and aesthetics are an evasion of more serious matters. He suggests that we compare Borges with Tolstoy to see "el abismo que hay entre una literatura que se propone un deleitoso juego y otro que investiga la (tremenda) verdad de la raza humana" (46).

Sabato concedes in "Sobre los dos Borges" that the theme of the truth is not absent from Borges's work. He recognizes the older man's strong interest in epistemological issues. But he dismisses Borges's approach to these issues. He objects, in the first place, to Borges's ironic and relativistic stance with regard to the question of the truth:

Lo atrae lo que la inteligencia posee de móvil, de bipolar, de ajedrecístico; juguetero, inteligente y curioso, le atraen las sofisticuerías, lo subyuga la hipótesis de que *todos pueden tener razón*, o mejor todavía, que *nadie verdaderamente la tiene* (48).

Yet immediately after pegging Borges as an irresponsible and superficial relativist, who believes that it is simply impossible to know the truth, Sabato proceeds to depict Borges as an extreme rationalist, who is convinced that every one of the world's secrets can be unlocked by the mind: "la razón gobierna al mundo y hasta sus sueños y magias han de ser armoniosos e intellegibles, y sus enigmas, como los de las novelas policiales, tienen una clave" (50).

Ultimately, the key term on which Sabato's argument rests is *reality*. In Sabato's eyes, Borges's stories evade the real world. The older man's detective stories, in particular "La muerte y la brújula", provide Sabato with the best examples of this failure to engage with

reality. For Sabato, "La muerte y la brújula" is like a diagram. "En este cuento", he complains, "no se cometen asesinatos [...] se demuestra un teorema" ("Sobre los dos Borges" 51). Character, so important to Sabato's sense of the real, is irrelevant to this story. In *Uno y el universo*, Sabato observes that "El detective Erik Lönnrot no es un ser de carne y hueso: es un títere simbólico que obedece ciegamente – o lúcidamente, es lo mismo – a una ley matemática" (24). The setting in which the story unfolds also strikes Sabato as utterly unreal. He argues that "La muerte y la brújula" fails to evoke the real city of Buenos Aires, what he calls "esta Buenos Aires real y concreta, sucia y turbulenta, aborrecible y querida en que Borges y yo vivimos y sufrimos" ("Sobre los dos Borges" 62). In sum, nothing about this story – one of Borges's most famous – is convincing:

La ciudad en que Red Scharlach comete sus crímenes es irreal, los nombres de sus calles son fantásticos, los apellidos de sus habitantes son increíbles, la frialdad de sus movimientos es inhumana. Pues no es la psicología del sistema sino su geometría lo que interesa al autor ("En torno de Borges" 137).

III.

Although *El túnel* as a whole can be regarded as Sabato's way of distancing himself from Borges, there is one scene in particular where the challenge to Borges's poetics is presented most clearly and incisively. The scene takes place after Juan Pablo Castel, a successful painter, as well as the narrator and protagonist of the novel, travels to an *estancia* south of Buenos Aires to visit María Iribarne, the married woman with whom he has fallen obsessively in love. At the *estancia* Castel meets Luis Hunter, María's cousin, and the owner of the *estancia*, as well as a woman named Mimí Allende. While he waits for María to come down from her room, Castel is drawn by Mimí into a conversation about art.⁴

From the start it is clear that the conversation will be an uncomfortable one for Castel. When he tells Mimí that his favorite painters are van Gogh and El Greco, she is appalled. She states emphatically that she detests "la gente demasiado grande". In a revealing subordination of aesthetic to social criteria, she calls artistic greatness "mala educación". In the same vein, she condemns Dostoyevsky as one of the "*nouveaux-riches* de la conciencia" (90). From the fact that Dostoyevsky was one of the writers Sabato most admired, we can deduce that Mimí would probably not approve of the novel in which she

⁴ See Abella for a detailed reading of this scene, which differs in certain key respects from my own.

herself is a character.⁵ Yet we do not need to go outside of the text to establish that Mimi is not a spokeswoman for Sabato's views on art. Mimi is discredited by her pretentiousness and affectation: she speaks with a French accent and peppers her conversation with exclamations such as *Tiens!* and *Quelle horreur!* Furthermore, her near-sightedness appears to signal some kind of moral blindness on her part.

After establishing some of the basic aesthetic and social positions in this scene, Sabato shifts the conversation to the subject of mystery and detective novels. Mimi declares that mysteries are the only novels she reads. Her celebration of what Sabato wants us to see as a frivolous genre is in keeping with her earlier disparagement of artistic greatness. What she loves most about mysteries, Mimi explains, are the "detectives tan maravillosos que saben de todo: arte de la época de Ming, grafología, baseball, arqueología, quiromancia, economía política, estadísticas de la cría de conejos en la India" (92). This madly eclectic list may well remind the reader of the out-of-the-way erudition that often characterizes Borges's writing. Lest the link with Borges be insufficiently clear, Mimi goes on to reprimand Hunter for his disparagement of the detective story, and threatens to report him to "Georgie" (93). Georgie, of course, is Borges. Sabato's first move, then, in the subtle polemic he stages against Borges in this scene, is to associate his rival with the thoroughly obnoxious Mimi.⁶

Sabato's orchestration of the dialogue on art in this scene does not, however, follow a straight path. Even though Mimi defines Hunter as Borges's antagonist, Hunter also speaks in a thoroughly Borgesian mode. Hunter proposes that the detective story represents in our age what the romance of chivalry represented in the era of Cervantes. The implication is that the genre of the detective story awaits its Cervantes, somebody who will parody its conventions in the same way as Cervantes in *Don Quijote* parodied the conventions of the romance of chivalry. Hunter knows exactly how it is to be done. He describes his "linda idea" for a "*Don Quijote* de nuestra época": a story about a man whose mother, wife, and young son are murdered one after the other. The police fail to solve the crime, so the man decides to take matters in his own hands. Availing himself of what

⁵ In *El escritor y sus fantasmas*, Sabato refers disdainfully to a "viejecito profesor francés de la Sorbonne" who describes Dostoyevsky's characters in the exact same way as Mimi: as "nuevos ricos de la conciencia" (13).

⁶ Abella points out that in the first edition of *El túnel*, Mimi refers to "Martincito" rather than "Georgie". It is not until 1966 that the name becomes Georgie (Abella 51). It seems likely that Sabato had Borges in mind when he first wrote *El túnel*, but that he did not feel free to refer to him in such an open manner until there had been a clear rupture between them.

Hunter describes as "los habituales métodos inductivos, deductivos, analíticos, sintéticos, etcétera de esos genios de la novela policial", he reaches the conclusion that "el asesino deberá cometer un cuarto asesinato, el tal día, a la hora tal, en el lugar tal". He goes to the appointed place at the appointed hour, but the murderer fails to show up. He reviews his calculations, and determines that he did not make a mistake. Only one conclusion is possible: "el asesino debe estar ya en el lugar. En otras palabras: *el asesino es él mismo*". The story ends in very elegant fashion with the suicide of the protagonist (94-95).

This is a distinctively Borgesian narration. In the first place, Hunter follows Borges's practice of offering the idea for a story, rather than the story itself. Mimi, now the upholder of an aesthetic standard that associates quality with effort, notes disapprovingly that "una cosa es contarla así y otra es escribir la novela" (95), a criticism that could well be leveled at Borges. In the second place, Hunter's story evokes two of Borges's best-known narratives, "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*" and "La muerte y la brújula".

When Hunter speaks of writing a "*Don Quijote* de nuestra época" he is proposing to do the very thing Pierre Menard sets out to do in Borges's story, though Menard is more literal-minded about it. But rewriting *Don Quijote* is something Borges not only described one of his characters as doing. It is also an enterprise he himself undertook. This is brought home by the fact that Hunter's version of *Don Quijote*, the detective story that parodies the conventions of the genre to which it belongs, has a plot that parodies the plot of Borges's "La muerte y la brújula". In this story, a detective, Erik Lönnrot, who thinks he can solve a series of murders as if he were interpreting a text, goes to a location where he has concluded that a fourth murder will take place, only to find that he himself is the fourth victim. Lönnrot is a modern version of Don Quijote, and the story in which he is a character is Borges's modern-day version of Cervantes's great work. Lönnrot's view of the world, like that of Don Quijote, is wholly shaped by his reading. In introducing his contemporary *Don Quijote*, Hunter asks us to imagine "un individuo que se ha pasado la vida leyendo novelas policiales y que ha llegado a la locura de creer que el mundo funciona como una novela de Nicholas Blake o de Ellery Queen" (93). This same confusion of life and literature is the premise of both Cervantes's *Don Quijote* and Borges's "La muerte y la brújula".

Sabato uses Hunter in order to mock Borges's way of looking at literature. But what is it exactly that Sabato dislikes about Borges's aesthetics? A clue is provided by Mimi's complaint that Hunter's story is "demasiado original" (95) for her taste. Ironically enough,

Mimí, who was first presented to the reader as a figure of fun, now voices a criticism that can be taken as Sabato's own. The word "original" suggests something far-fetched and out of touch with reality. As was the case in his essays, Sabato appears to be taking Borges to task in *El túnel* for failing to engage with the real world. The reflections on artistic genius with which the conversation at Hunter's *estancia* had opened suggest, furthermore, that Sabato regards Borges as a minor artist, as the creator of playful but inconsequential fictions.

Hunter's idea for a detective story can be read as a parody of "La muerte y la brújula". It is also, however, a *mise en abyme* of *El túnel*. After all, we can regard Hunter's narrative not only as a rewriting of the conventional detective story, but also as a story about the problem of a divided consciousness. The hero of the story discovers that he is in fact two different people: he is both the perpetrator and the investigator of the crime, both murderer and detective. Castel's torment in *El túnel* is similarly the torment of a man who discovers the instability of personal identity, and the consequent impossibility of ever fully knowing another person, or oneself. In his obsessive pursuit of María, what haunts Castel above all is the fear that she may not be the person he thinks she is. But just as María constantly threatens to slip away from him, so Castel himself in the course of the novel becomes increasingly a stranger to himself. Even Castel's end is in a way just a different version of the end of the man in Hunter's story. For in killing María, Castel is also in a sense killing himself. This is clear from the fact that right before he murders María, Castel destroys his own paintings. The narrative draws attention to the fact that Castel deliberately destroys the painting that had brought María and him together in the first place, the painting, also, that he had always regarded as his most profound and intimate act of self-revelation.⁷

The connections between *El túnel* and Hunter's story go even further than this. For *El túnel* itself may be read as a detective story, with Castel playing the role of investigator and María that of suspect. But if Sabato's novel is a detective story, it is one with a twist, just like Hunter's little narrative. For in *El túnel*, as in Hunter's story, the investigator ends up committing the crime. What I want to propose, however, is that Sabato's novel shares with the detective story not only a particular plot structure, but also what Walter Benjamin, in his seminal discussion of the detective story, calls the genre's "social content".

Benjamin draws attention to the fact that the detective story as a literary genre emerges at the same time as mass society. He con-

⁷ Sabato in fact wrote a different version of the ending of *El túnel*, one in which Castel does not kill María, but instead commits suicide.

cludes from this that the detective story was a way of responding to and coming to terms with the conditions of life in large cities. Benjamin observes that from the start the masses appear as "the asylum that shields an asocial person from his persecutors", adding that "of all the menacing aspects of the masses, this one became apparent first" (40). This "obliteration of the individual's traces in the big-city crowd" is "the original social content of the detective story" (43). For Benjamin sees the plight of the detective as a version of the plight of every individual who finds himself in a diffuse, anonymous space, surrounded by strangers. In such surroundings, each one of these strangers is potentially an enemy, a criminal. The detective story mines the fear that is built into such a situation. Ricardo Piglia, in a commentary on Benjamin, observes that the need to master this fear results in the kind of interpretive frenzy embodied in the detective story: chance must be eliminated, everything must be given an explanation (4-5). Piglia's observations help us understand the protagonist of *El túnel*. Castel, too, feels threatened by a world he cannot comprehend. In order to cope with this feeling, he develops a hyper-rational way of thinking that soon tilts over into a full-fledged case of paranoia.

The relevance of Benjamin's theory of the detective story to *El túnel* is further confirmed by the way in which Sabato draws attention to the urban setting in which his novel unfolds. Consider, for example, the scene in which Castel sees María for the first time. The scene takes place at the opening reception of an exhibition of his paintings, and María appears to Castel as the only person who responds in a genuine fashion to his work. But before he has a chance to speak to her, María has disappeared, swallowed up, as Castel indicates, by the urban crowd: "me sentí irritado, infeliz, pensando que podría no verla más perdida entre los millones de habitantes anónimos de Buenos Aires" (16-17). The masses appear to shelter María in the same way in which, according to Benjamin, they harbor criminals. The crowd, then, is one of the crucial elements in the drama that unfolds in Sabato's novel. The crowd turns everybody into a stranger. And, to restate Benjamin's thesis once again, it is precisely the threat that emanates from this situation which the figure of the detective is designed to master. But if *El túnel* is a detective story, it is one that belongs, like "La muerte y la brújula", to a different stage of the history of the genre from the one analyzed by Benjamin. For what Sabato's novel and Borges's story have in common is that they both turn the detective into a victim, and thus cease to imagine him as somebody who can master the unruly reality of modernity.

IV.

Sabato's polemic with Borges was rife with misunderstandings. Sabato thought Borges was not serious enough as a writer, and he saw Borges's fondness for the detective story as an example of this lack of seriousness. The detective story, after all, is a mass cultural genre, and Sabato viewed mass culture as destructive of the values embodied in great art. Yet, at the same time, as I have tried to show, Sabato himself was writing a kind of detective story in *El túnel*. Furthermore, what Sabato does not appear to have registered is the fact that a story such as "La muerte y la brújula" is itself already a parody of the detective story. Borges may have been fascinated by mass culture. But this fascination most surely did not lead him simply to copy the formulas of mass cultural genres. On the contrary, he parodied these formulas. When Sabato has Hunter create a parody of the Borgesian detective story, he is in effect producing a parody of a parody.

An exchange on newspapers in Barone's book reveals that on the subject of mass culture there was in fact considerable consensus between the two men. Newspapers are, of course, a mass cultural artefact. The two men appear to agree heartily in their dismissal of this artefact. Sabato draws attention to the transience, and hence insignificance, of the newspaper: "La noticia cotidiana, en general, se la lleva el viento. Lo más nuevo que hay es el diario, y lo más viejo, al día siguiente". Borges assents: "Claro. Nadie piensa que debe recordarse lo que está escrito en un diario. Un diario, digo, se escribe para el olvido, deliberadamente para el olvido". Sabato then poses the following rhetorical question: "¿Cómo puede haber hechos trascendentes cada día?" Borges agrees that a newspaper is a distraction from more important matters. He points out that in any case one never knows in advance which events will have a transcendental significance: "La crucifixión de Cristo fue importante después, no cuando ocurrió. Por eso yo jamás he leído un diario, siguiendo el consejo de Emerson" (Barone 12). The exchange reveals that Sabato and Borges were in agreement on the need to distinguish their own work from mass culture. Yet it is also clear that mass culture elicited very different kinds of reflections from the two men.

In his criticism of mass culture, Sabato resorts to the notion of value. Newspapers, according to Sabato, have no value because they do not address matters of enduring importance. The implication is that genuine art has value precisely because it does deal with permanent, transcendental concerns. Borges explicitly indicates his agreement with Sabato on the question of the worthlessness of the newspaper. But he does not approach the topic from the same angle. In the first

place, Borges's concern is with the newspaper as an artefact that exemplifies a particular writing strategy, one that deliberately aims for oblivion. It may well be that underlying this comment there is the notion of a hierarchy of text-types, with literature, as a writing that aims to last for eternity, at the top. But it is not the question of value that Borges places in the forefront. His interest is in modes of writing, and writing for oblivion can constitute as interesting an intellectual exercise as writing for any other purpose. In the second place, Borges is more interested in the problem of knowledge than in that of value. Borges does not automatically dismiss the newspaper because of its tie to the quotidian. Rather, he sees the newspaper as raising a larger epistemological issue: from the perspective of the present one simply cannot know which events will prove to be of lasting significance. Borges's reservations vis-a-vis the newspaper are folded into a broader philosophical skepticism. In other words, Borges may have seconded Sabato in his dismissal of mass culture, but he was also interested in seeing mass culture as the source of compelling literary and philosophical questions.

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TEXTO Y TEORÍA: ESTUDIOS CULTURALES

33

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Amsterdam – New York, NY 2004

Diseño e ilustración de portada: Wim van der Meer

The paper on which this book is printed meets the requirements of "ISO 9706:1994, Information and documentation - Paper for documents - Requirements for permanence".

ISBN: 90-420-0829-6

©Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam - New York, NY 2004

Printed in The Netherlands

Marilene Nagle
Verdade ou vereda tropical? Memória do Tropicalismo
em Caetano Veloso 127

Iumna Maria Simon
Mundos emprestados e rigor de construção. Notas sobre
a poesia brasileira atual 137

Jorge Luis Borges y la cultura popular

Luz Rodríguez Carranza
Introducción 151

Djelal Kadir
Totalization, Totalitarianism, and Tlön:
Borges' Cautionary Tale..... 155

Raúl Antelo
El entredicho. Borges y la monstruosidad textual 167

Sonia Mattalia
Borges: historias de amor y de odio..... 177

Beatriz Sarlo
Borges y la literatura de crímenes. Una estrofa de Borges
y nueve noticias policiales 193

Rosa Pellicer
Borges y el viaje al sur..... 207

Luz Rodríguez Carranza
Escorias de la década infame 229

Iván Almeida
La orquestación de la vox populi en "La fiesta del Monstruo"
de H. Bustos Domecq..... 245

Cristina Parodi
Borges, Bioy y el arte de hacer literatura con leche cuajada 259

Maarten van Delden
Ernesto Sabato, Author of "Death and the Compass" 273

Evelyn Fishburn

A Footnote to Borges Studies: A Study of the Footnotes 285

Postfacio

Iris Zavala

Memoria, olvido, y el carnaval del mundo 305