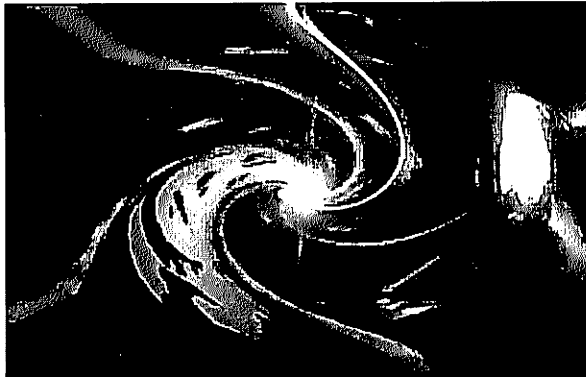


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The Circular Ruins

By Barbara Joan Schaffer

Georgie Borgie:

I first read Borges in Ibiza in 1970 when he was still more a cult phenomenon than an academic discipline. My friends and I thought it was a great joke to give the greatest guttural, velar fricative to the g's in his name; more familiarly he was our Georgie Borgie (pudding and pie). We also read Gurdjieff's *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and a great deal of science fiction.

A Fortuitous Insight:

For the past few years, I have been introducing my Spanish students to Borges by having them read "El brujo postergado" (the Postponed Sorcerer). The story, set in medieval Toledo, has a magician test the devotion of a would-be apprentice by having him experience a lifetime of travel and choices in the course of a few hours. It is found in the anthology *El cuento hispánico* (Mullen & Garganigo), which is a standard text. According to the editors, the story reflects both "Borges's interests in early Spanish culture" and in "universal human problems." Mullen and Garganigo sure had me fooled, until I read *El libro del Conde Lucanor* by the Infante Don Juan Manuel (1282-1349?), a collection of moral tales which includes the "Postponed Sorcerer". In fact, Juan Manuel is not the originator of the story; it derives from various Arabic sources. Was Borges a plagiarist? Not at all. His *Complete Works* only credits Borges as the author of a modern Spanish translation of the 14th century text.

Was Don Juan Manuel writing Borgesian stories in the 14th century? If Edward Mullen (U. of Missouri) and John Garganigo (Washington U.) can't tell the difference between them, one must wonder if Borges is as original a writer as we have been given to believe. In fact, Juan Manuel's tale -- for all its fantastical elements and psychological truths -- has

something rarely found in Borges: internal logic. The story is ironic, but there is no irony in the telling of it; no red herrings, no tweaking of the reader's sense of suspended disbelief. It is, finally, a moral tale. In other words, it only looks like a Borges story to the uninitiated reader.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan:

The fumes of coal fires mingling with Indian opium, which are the scent of Victorian translations or pseudo translations (*Thousand and One Nights*, Kipling's *Just So Stories*), impose an aura of authorial certainty on Borgesian stories that begin "It is related by men worthy of faith (but Allah knows best.)" ("Two Kings and Two Labyrinths") or "I owe to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia the discovery of Uqbar." ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"). There are, of course, other influences, and the reader whose imagination has previously been colonized by Poe and Lovecraft will be even more susceptible to the authorial voice that says, "The purpose that guided him was not impossible, although it was supernatural." ("The Circular Ruins").

Borges nearly always begins his stories in very concrete settings; however, the more words he devotes to creating these settings the less concrete they become. For instance, in the *Two Kings...*, he says, "There was a king in the islands of Babilonia." Islands in Babilonia? Sea-front property in Arizona? Not to mention the anachronism of a Babylonian king meeting his Arabian counterpart.

The Circular Ruins:

"The Circular Ruins" begins with a man disembarking from a "canoa de bambú." Canoa (canoe) is a word derived from the language of the Arawak Indians of the Antilles, while bambú (bamboo) is from the Malay. It is with this geographic contradiction and physical unlikelihood that Borges tweaks the reader's suspension of disbelief even as he draws him into a chilling horror story. Then, to further confuse us with even more detail, he tells us that the man comes from one of the "infinite villages that are upstream, on the violent flank of the mountain, where the Zend language is not contaminated by Greek and leprosy is infrequent." On that evidence we can rule out both the East Indies and the West Indies (i.e. the Americas), as the native languages of these lands are not contaminated by Greek, even if we understand Greek to imply the ideas of Aristotle or the theology of Thomas Aquinas.

The total effect of such disparate imagery is, however, far from comical. Words like "infinite villages" and "Greek" and "leprosy" are so symbolically freighted that juxtaposed they create a surreal landscape reminiscent of a Dalí painting where the lines of perspective themselves are disassociated with the size of the ruined and distorted objects.

The stranger wanders around in the wilderness, sleeps, dreams, wakes up, and makes himself a son. This is a lot less complicated than sex -- and, it appears, not that unusual. The fire god makes the magician's creation come alive in such a way that all creatures, except the fire god and the magician, will take him for a man of flesh and bones. The young man is sent on his way, ignorant of his origins. The story ends with a

conflagration which the older man cannot escape. Reconciled to his death, he discovers that the flames do not consume him. "With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he also was a likeness, that someone else was dreaming him."

If there is a "universal truth" here, it is that we are condemned to be our parents, all the way back to Adam. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny; each individual is doomed to experience for the first time that which all his ancestors have gone through and all his progeny will go through: birth and death; love and loneliness; the quest for knowledge and disappointment; the circular ruin.

Please send comments to Barbara Joan Schaffer

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