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JORGE LUIS BORGES

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Translated by James E. Irby

Two Stories

Preface

You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.

HUMBERT HUMBERT

The two pieces here translated, written in 1933, form part of Jorge Luis Borges' first collection of stories, *Historia universal de la infamia* which appeared in Buenos Aires in 1935. Like the other five pieces in the book's opening section, they are sharply schematic glosses on the lives of famous (infamous) scoundrels of history. At the time, he called them "exercises in narrative prose," and much later, when they were reprinted, "the irresponsible games of a timid man who did not dare to write stories and amused himself (at times to no esthetic advantage) by twisting and falsifying tales by others." How much of this tentative, second-hand manner was personal hesitation, how much was ironic method? We know very little about Borges' inner life, least of all about the intriguing period of the thirties during which his fiction emerged. In the preceding decade, when his main creative medium was free verse, he had been swept up in the youthful solidarity and optimism of avant-garde movements. Now he seemed isolated and troubled. "The man who executed this book was rather unhappy but entertained himself as he wrote. May some reflection of that pleasure reach the readers." He abandoned poetry and took up the problem of narrative. This he conceived as lucid illusion compactly organized out of life's disorderly partaking of both the heroic and the spurious.

As the bookish descendant of soldiers, Borges felt an impossible longing for heroic action, the most extreme, the "purest" form of which he found in the outlaw. His first and for several years only independent story, "Hombre de la esquina rosada" (Man from the Rose-Colored Corner), written along with the other pieces in *Historia universal de la infamia* and included in its second section, is a tale in stylized argot of the Buenos Aires underworld ca. 1900. Humiliated to see a local hero turn coward when challenged by an outsider

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to a knife duel, a young hoodlum kills the intruder himself, half-concealing his feat in a narrative of artful understatement. This immediate dramatization of criminal honor stands in inverse relation to the glosses of the kind offered before, in which, through many removes of résumé and commentary, Borges studies specimens of colossal and unmitigated rascality. Whatever his misgivings about realizing his concept of fiction, Borges certainly attained in these pieces his mature style, rich in ellipsis and double-edged diction. The most recurrent themes in *Historia universal de la infamia* are imposture and betrayal, to which his counterpoint of source, paraphrase and invention is perfectly attuned. "The Implausible Impostor Tom Castro" and "The Masked Doctor Hakim of Merv" mark extremes of his liberty with fact. His summary of the incredible Tichborne claimant, that now forgotten scandal of all England, is fairly reliable save in his perverse magnification of Bogle as another of the false divines and demiurgical puppet masters throughout the collection. On the other hand, as Roger Caillois shows in a note to his French translation, the story of Al-Mokanna is almost entirely apocryphal, learned references and all. (Invented erudition, so frequent in Borges' later fictions, appears here for the first time.)

As for artistic models, Borges said in 1935 that his exercises "perhaps" reflected the gangster films of Josef von Sternberg and the tales of Stevenson and Chesterton. (His titles certainly recall the latter's *Four Faultless Felons*.) Caillois suggests another model: Marcel Schwob, whose "Roi au masque d'or" features a leprous face beneath a jewelled mask much like the Veiled Prophet's, and whose miniature *Vies imaginaires* are prefaced by this remark: "The biographer's art is an art of selection. He need not worry about being truthful; he should create out of the chaos of human traits." For Borges, as for Schwob, the underlying subject is literature, whether it appear as fiction, essay or document, probing and stripping away layers of itself, there being nothing else. His magnificently shabby frauds, self-styled agents of an even more dubious Creator, are heightened images of anyone using words in this labyrinthine world.

JAMES E. IRBY.