

Like the victims of a Gothic tale of terror, the inhabitants of The Nun's House are all objects of erotic male desire, honorable or otherwise. But Gothicism is but part of Cloisterham's and its Cathedral's total past. This past, fully coded into a complex ambiguous setting for the violent action of the story, becomes thereby an equally complex ambiguous comment on Victorian England's religious and, in the largest sense, cultural origins and on the influence of those origins on its contemporary ethos. To take just one example of such complex codings, why should the sacrificial victim, Edwin Drood, who was going out "to wake up Egypt," have as his first name that of an early Northumbrian king converted to Christianity but later overthrown and killed by the still pagan Mercians and as his last name one that combines Druid, a pre-Christian priesthood, with Rood, the Anglo-Saxon Cross?

One last mystery: to what sources, sacred or profane, good or evil, do we attribute the power of music in *Edwin Drood* at once to reveal and to conceal? It is the strength of Leon Garfield's completion that it invites us to go on thinking about Charles Dickens's uncompleted *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in ways like these.

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Situating Borges: A Review of Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Borges and His Fiction: A Guide to His Mind and Art*

Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands last April quelled domestic unrest and united the people through a powerful appeal to nationalist feelings. This appeal has been a frequent one throughout Argentina's history, especially since the 1940's when Juan Domingo Perón exploited the Argentine need for self-definition and built a mass movement upon pronationalist, anti-imperialist sentiments. Lacking an indigenous population, Argentina was settled mainly by immigrants. Its citizens have often struggled to resolve problematical questions of national identity, vacillating between different, even contradictory definitions. For some Argentines, national identity entails, indeed is based upon, the anti-British, anti-European views put forth by Perón and encouraged by the present military junta. For others, to be Argentine is to be closely connected with Europe, to cultivate a cosmopolitan rather than a nationalist perspective on the world. The conflict between these opposing definitions of nationhood goes much deeper than the recent territorial dispute between Argentina and Great Britain. It has shaped Argentina's cultural as well as its political life. Traces of it can even be found in the works of Argentina's most illustrious author, Jorge Luis Borges.

One of the major contributions of Gene H. Bell-Villada's new book, *Borges and His Fiction: A Guide to His Mind and Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1981), is that it corrects the widely-diffused but essentially inaccurate image of Borges as an apolitical, ahistorical artist solely concerned with meta-physical questions and fictional games. Bell-Villada presents Borges as a writer grounded in Latin America in general and Argentina in particular. In the process, he calls into question Borges's oft-quoted assertion that "life and death have been lacking in my life" and shows how personal and collective experiences shaped

him as a man and as an author.¹ Underlying Bell-Villada's enterprise is the assumption that "literature has to do with . . . cultural values and human emotions, that works of fiction and poetry have some connection, however oblique, with social life and the sense of history."² Throughout the book, he elucidates those connections in a lively, polemical jargon-free style that will appeal to students, to general readers, and even to Borges scholars who will find much that is new in the analysis of Borges's major works.

In the first section of the book, ("Borges's Worlds") Bell-Villada delineates the objective realities that shaped Borges, first of all within the context of Argentine history and cultural traditions. Like a number of Argentines, Borges is bilingual and bicultural. His paternal grandmother was English and his great grandfather was a hero of the War of Independence against Spain. His life and work have been marked by a cosmopolitan spirit that is both universal and quintessentially Argentine. As Bell-Villada notes, Borges's familiarity with English culture was not only a result of his particular family background but also a reflection of the centrality of England in Argentine life during the closing years of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries, when English companies industrialized and settled vast areas of the country, building railroads and bringing in people whose customs, traditions, and language were eagerly appropriated by the native upper classes. Later on in the 1920's, when immigrants from southern and eastern Europe began to pour into Argentina, they brought wholly different customs and traditions that became identified with the lower classes.³ Thus Borges's cultural affiliations are related to and reflective of his class affiliations. Both influenced his development as a writer, as did his almost lifelong residence in Buenos Aires, where the mixture of new immigrants, criollos, and Anglo-Argentines gave a distinctively non-Hispanic European drift to *porteño* life.⁴

Borges's cosmopolitanism is also a function of Latin-American intellectual life in general. As Bell-Villada writes: "The intimate history of that continent presents numerous figures who, by dint of reading all the books, manage to absorb more of European culture than most Europeans could ever imagine" (p. 9). Traditionally, this strategy has allowed intellectuals living in the underdeveloped world to overcome their personal and cultural isolation. By assimilating European culture, third-world intellectuals have tried to shed their marginality and to participate in the shaping of Western thought. But because their perceptions are formed by living on the periphery, prompted by a need to overcome their nation's cultural inferiority, they are likely to read the established canon of Western authors from vantage points that emphasize the differences between their own experiences and those of intellectuals living in the developed world. This is certainly true of Borges, whose literary tastes have always favored "materials excluded from the mainstream orthodoxies of taste," materials that are slightly "odd, marginal, archaic" (p. 13). Borges's "idiosyncratic and lopsided"

¹Jorge Luis Borges, *Discusión* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1966), p. 10. My translation.

²Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Borges and His Fiction: A Guide to His Mind and Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), p. xi. In all subsequent quotations from this book, the page numbers are included directly in the text.

³On this point, see Pedro Cuperman, "The Argentine Question and the Jew," *Point of Contact*, 11, No. 3/4, (Winter, 80/81), 71: "The poet Lugones saw 'confusion' in those uncertain years in which intruders swarmed probingly through a society which they themselves helped to define. The foreign workers were the new proletariat, a category unknown until then."

⁴The cosmopolitanism of Buenos Aires is dramatized in Borges's story "The Aleph," where objects and visions from all over the world converge on Carlos Argentino's house.

learning, his preference for minor Edwardians and obscure heresies reflect more general patterns of Latin-American intellectual life.⁵ He is neither an omnipotent genius nor an omnivorous reader who has "read everything."

Throughout the first section of his book, Bell-Villada offers a number of fresh interpretations of the by-now-familiar facts of Borges's life. His description of Borges in geographical, historical, social, and cultural terms prepares us for Part II ("Borges's Fictions"), a story-by-story guide to Borges's tales up to and including *The Aleph*. It is in this section that Bell-Villada discusses the stories he considers to be Borges's greatest (dealing with the rest of Borges's production in considerably less detail in Part III), stories that were all written during a period of approximately fifteen years, from the late 1930's to the mid-1950's.⁶ As he notes, this period of high artistic achievement coincided with a time of turmoil and upheaval on the world scene and in Borges's personal life. In addition to the death of his father and his own near-fatal accident during the late 1930's, setbacks in the family's finances forced Borges to take a job, for the first time in his life, as a cataloger in a municipal library. At the same time, political movements on the right and on the left were gaining influence around the world. In Argentina, this situation culminated in the right-wing regime of Perón, whose demagoguery, populist programs and hostility towards the Anglophile, Argentine upper classes aroused Borges's unflagging enmity.

During the Perón years, Borges himself was a target of persecution and harassment by the government. As Emir Rodríguez Monegal has written, "Borges had . . . become and would remain for the next decade a symbol of Argentina's resistance to totalitarianism."⁷ In this context, Borges's notion that "any life . . . is made up of a single moment—the moment when a man finds out once and for all who he is," takes on special significance.⁸ In taking a stand against Perón and all that he represented, Borges experienced a special moment of self-discovery and choice that transformed his fiction and "enriched his artistry, endowing his emerging skills with new anguish and intensity, imparting to his stories a seriousness transcending the purely literary pre-occupations and mental pleasures that characterized his earlier work" (p. 71). For Bell-Villada the stories that Borges wrote during the first *Peronata* present a "classic instance of literature thriving in an adversary role, nourished by the struggle against untoward personal and political conditions" (p. 264).

Although other critics have also mentioned the connections between Borges's development as a writer and the Peronist period,⁹ Bell-Villada carries this idea further by exploring the political and ideological levels on which his stories may be read. This is not to suggest that he reduces the fictions to political tracts, but that he consistently makes the connections between certain "Borgesian" themes, subjects, and character types and the political and social phenomena to which

⁵As Bell-Villada suggests (p. 42), Borges seems to have liked authors such as Chesterton or Stevenson who went against the then-predominant trends of realism and psychologism in literature, because these forms had little relation to the conditions of life in Latin America.

⁶Several other critics agree with Bell-Villada on this point. See for example, J. M. Cohen, *Jorge Luis Borges* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), p. 2; Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), p. 403.

⁷Rodríguez Monegal, p. 393.

⁸Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. 56.

⁹See for example Martin Stabb, *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1970) p. 23; Rodríguez Monegal, p. 397.

they allude.¹⁰ For example, in "The Babylon Lottery" Bell-Villada credits Borges with perfecting a specifically twentieth-century narrative genre, the "dystopia," which describes "the control exerted by a single institution that is ubiquitous as well as elusive, the systematic and officially sanctioned lying, the covert use of informers and agents (which the Company disclaims responsibility for), the violent shifts in public and private fortune, the institutionalized insecurity and fear."¹¹

In other stories as well, Bell-Villada finds oblique references to then current events, occasional allusions to political and social conditions. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is not only an account of the invention of a new planet by a secret society (the familiar Borgesian theme of fantasy intruding upon reality), but also a critique of those who are susceptible to the "lure of self-contained ideas" (p. 133), which Borges defines in specifically political terms: "Ten years ago any symmetry with a semblance of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism—were sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet?"¹²

Implicit in this story is a critique of the discourses of power.¹³ But Borges's narrator does not offer any alternatives. Nor does he search for the sources of these mysterious, anonymous, and ultimately interchangeable systems. Like a number of other protagonists—those scholars, Jewish intellectuals, taciturn Englishmen, immigrants, and mystics—he seeks refuge in books, rejecting action in favor of withdrawal and noninvolvement. He is resigned to being powerless and only hopes to endure.¹⁴

Bell-Villada suggests that the strategies of withdrawal and resignation proounded in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and in a number of other stories were Borges's personal tactics for survival that enabled him to reach into himself, touching untapped resources and achieving a level of artistry that would otherwise have eluded him. He believes that Borges's "leap to greatness [was] catalyzed by a freak situation" (p. 267), and points to the fact that by the mid-1950's when Perón was deposed and Borges began to attain fame and recognition both in Argentina and abroad, "his work began losing its textual and philosophical richness" (p. 267). This is a most provocative idea but one that is impossible to prove. For while most readers of Borges would probably agree that the later collections, including *Dr. Brodie's Report* and *The Book of Sand*, are on the whole less satisfying as collections than *Ficciones* or even *Dreamtigers*,¹⁵ other factors aside from the fall of Perón might account for a decline in the artistic level of Borges's

¹⁰For Bell-Villada the recurrence of stories dealing with the theme of the pursuer and the pursued expresses Borges's feelings of being besieged and hunted during the Perón years. The numerous tales concerned with physical violence attest to his awareness of hostile menacing forces in his environment. And the many knife stories "assume a character of subtle protest . . ." p. 264.

¹¹In his description of the workings of the Compañía (which is abbreviated CIA in Spanish), Bell-Villada sees "unintended foreshadowings of the Central Intelligence Agency" (p. 109), an idea that seems rather unlikely, given Borges's pro-American views.

¹²Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, ed. James Irby and Donald Yates (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 17.

¹³In other stories Borges makes more overt and direct political commentaries which Bell-Villada criticizes when they seem to him to be inaccurate or false. Thus, in "The Shape of the Sword," he objects to Borges's "peevisish, heavy-handed political judgements" (p. 73) and his debunking of Communists whom he portrays as cowards. In "Deutsche Requiem," he reproaches Borges with political naiveté, because of his tendency to reduce political phenomena (in this case Nazism) to a metaphysical problem.

¹⁴In his discussion of *El Aleph*, Bell-Villada notes that more than half of the stories deal with mystical experiences, which he relates to Borges's concrete situation.

¹⁵Bell-Villada dates *Dreamtigers* from roughly the same period (see p. 242).

work. By then he was totally blind, forced to work with collaborators and to depend upon others both for his reading and for his writing. Although Bell-Villada mentions his blindness, he does not give it sufficient importance as a factor influencing Borges.¹⁶ He also fails to mention the possibility that Borges' writing was affected by the fact that Borges was getting old, and as he moved from middle to old age, there was some loss in his creative powers.

In the final chapter of his book, Bell-Villada explores the multiple dimensions of Borges's literary reputation and the permutations that it has undergone over the years. He notes that Latin-American readers and critics apply different standards and criteria in their judgments of Borges than do their North-American counterparts, placing more stress on the political dimensions of the stories and of the author. Thus after serving as a symbol of Argentine resistance under Perón, in the 1950's Borges was severely criticized by "los enojados," a group of young committed Argentine writers who reproached him for elitist tendencies and a lack of social commitment. Similar criticisms have also been made by younger Hispanic authors such as García Márquez, Cortázar, and Fuentes, who, while acknowledging the importance of Borges's style and its revolutionary impact upon the development of Latin-American prose, have deplored his conservative politics. These factors have been largely ignored in North-American studies of Borges. As Bell-Villada writes: ". . . the peculiar shape and nature of Borges's public fame in the U.S. shows nuances that differ from his reputation in Latin America—his standing in these parts is much higher, both in relative and in absolute terms" (p. 271).

Just as Bell-Villada questions the idea that writers working in the privacy of their rooms are immune to cultural influences or to political and social pressures, so does he refute the notion that readers approach a book without preconceived ideas and/or ideological biases. In the final pages of his book, Bell-Villada suggests the ways in which extraliterary factors determined how and when Borges was introduced in the United States, and how he has been read and interpreted. For American writers of fiction such as Coover, Barthelme, Pynchon, Barth and others, Borges was of principal importance because he revealed "the possibilities of farfetched fancy, of formal exploration, of parody, intellectuality, and wit" (p. 268). But Borges's diffusion in academic circles, the inclusion of his books in literature courses taught in English as well as in Spanish departments in universities across America rests not only upon the intrinsic and undeniable merits of his work, and his urbane cosmopolitanism, but also upon the political and social climate of the early 1960's, when Borges was officially discovered and acclaimed. It was not at all coincidental that Borges's discovery came at a time when "the U.S. [was] torn by social conflict . . . [and] Borges's artifices provided a defense for those American academics who were . . . confused by the whole spectacle . . . sharing a vague inarticulate opposition to the war in Indochina . . . combined with an inability to sympathize with (indeed a marked hostility towards) the highly-vocal antiwar left" (p. 273). For those readers who were perplexed by the political and social upheavals of the day, Borges's stories offered the promise of consolation through books, justified noninvolvement and affirmed such values as "urbane aloofness, middle-way quietism, a studied, even-handed occasionally snobbish indifference to right and left" (p. 273). He was then and remains the preferred author for those who like to lose themselves in abstract mental games, for those who sever literature from life and from questions of historical specificity.¹⁷

¹⁶As Bell-Villada notes, because of his blindness, the "craftsman's procedure was denied to him when creating the stories found in *Dr. Brodie's Report* and *The Book of Sand*" (p. 241).

¹⁷In a recent article Jean Franco presents a similar line of argument; see "The Utopia of a Tired Man," *Social Text*, No. 4 (Fall 1981), p. 78.

While this does not diminish his greatness, it suggests that even in the case of superior authors, the production and consumption of their ideas and books are shaped by specific historical forces. The art of every author has its social origins and functions. In themes and in subject matter it reflects the period in which it was created, as well as the subsequent periods in which it was read, with each successive generation interpreting its own version of the story. The author of *Borges and His Fiction* is to be commended for reminding the reader of these truths and for returning the erstwhile private experience of reading Borges to the public domain.

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Dos Passos, Politics, and Art

John Dos Passos has undergone something of a critical renaissance in recent years: a prophet of social conflict during the Jazz Age and the Depression who declined to right-wing tendentiousness in his later years, he is now being forgiven some of his sins and is being recognized as a major writer who, in his best work, produced representations of American life possessing passion, depth, and considerable artistic power. Townsend Ludington's publication of Dos Passos's letters and diaries (*The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 1973) and of a meticulous authorized biography (*John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, 1980) guarantees that copious materials are now available to scholars interested in investigating the relationship between Dos Passos's life and art. Robert C. Rosen's *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981) has made excellent use of this information: it is the first critical study that brings to bear upon Dos Passos's work a detailed survey of the novelist's changing beliefs. Moreover, Rosen recognizes the full significance of his biographical materials and places the question of politics at the center of his textual readings. *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer* is, quite simply, the single best critical study of Dos Passos that we have.

Rosen's main argument is that an appreciation of the complexities of Dos Passos's political views is essential to an appreciation of his art: Dos Passos was a consciously political being, and his works, while varying greatly in ideological orientation as well as in literary quality, consistently aimed to contextualize social experience in the framework of concretely historical analysis. Such a view of Dos Passos as *zoon politikon*, while perhaps self-evident to the many readers of his fiction, is by no means widely accepted by the majority of his critics. Rosen summarizes the difference between his own approach and the dominant tendencies in Dos Passos criticism:

Many critics simply ignore or deny the essential political dimension of Dos Passos's work and life. Formalists focus rather narrowly on the subtle qualities of a "text" that seems to them to exist outside of history and biography. Some critics take due note of the charged political surface of Dos Passos's fiction, but see beneath that surface a politics that is "clearly non-political," or "essentially apolitical"—in other words, just a distraction,