

Borges, Cortázar, and the Aesthetic of the Vacant Mind

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Fifty-two years ago Jorge Luis Borges wrote an essay, "Narrative Art and Magic,"¹ in which he described a common narrative device—that of prefiguration by innuendo—to show how it produces in fiction the effect that he called "magical causality." Such foreshadowing by suggestion replaces objective reality with an inner reality belonging to the text alone. By addressing the question of causality, and by reminding us that it is not necessarily rooted in everyday truth, Borges put his finger on the essence of an artistic credo that was destined to characterize the main line of Spanish-American fiction from 1940 onward. His essay, long familiar to critics, is attracting second looks nowadays and getting increased attention in relation to literature outside of Spanish America. Clark Zlotchew, in a recent article,² has linked it to later comments by Borges on the nature of unrealistic fiction to show a relationship to the French *nouveau roman*, in which he notes the frequent occurrence of the artifice called the *mise en abyme* or work within a work. Zlotchew quotes various critics to show their agreement that the *mise en abyme*, which has the effect of cutting the bonds that link the text to the real world, is there precisely for that purpose—to leave the work self-enclosed, without connection to anything but itself. He observes, citing words of novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet to this effect, that the question of verisimilitude (in the sense of likeness to reality) is of no interest to a writer of "new realism," whose affinity is for details that strike a false note.

Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) is second only to Borges in having set the tone and direction of the contemporary short story in Spanish America. I want to show how Borges's "magical causality" is produced in some of Cortázar's fiction by the procedure Borges describes, in order to get at the aesthetic concept underlying the self-encapsulating literature that has repudiated realism. The disconnection from everyday reality, I think we can agree, is more than that, being in its effect a disengagement from intellectual content of any kind, real or unreal. My purpose in trying to show a fundamental sameness in two writers generally considered quite different is to suggest the need of a different critical emphasis in regard to unrealistic fiction—an acknowledgment that its goal is to produce esthesia in the reader, not to avoid ordinary reality or to produce unreality for its own sake, and not to create some alternative metaphysical conception of the world. Neither can its distinction from what is called "the fantastic" be determined by the presence of some supposed insinuation of a social, political, philosophical, or other real-life value.

Before looking at Cortázar, I must go back to Borges's essay on literary prefiguration or what he calls "prophesying." It was published at a time when nineteenth-century realism was emitting the intense rays that turned out to be those of

¹ "El arte narrativo y la magia," *Discusión*, 1932; *Obras completas de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974), pp. 226-34. A good trans. is "Narrative Art and Magic," in *Borges a Reader: a Selection from the Writings of Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Alastair Reid (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), pp. 34-38.

² "Fiction Wrapped in Fiction: Causality in Borges and in the *Nouveau Roman*," *INTI: Revista de Literatura Hispánica*, No. 15 (Spring, 1982), pp. 25-32.

its sunset. The essay undermines those concepts which, by locating literary "reality" in the objective order, had distorted the meaning of "verisimilitude" and spawned a sub-class of "minor" fiction called fantastic. Pointing the way back to a tradition in which truth and nonsense mingled without loss of seriousness, Borges also gestured forward to the literature that we now typify as imaginative, magically real, or mythic, which recognizes the fantastic as a necessary ingredient of fiction, not as a genre or type.

The essay affirms, in effect, that a reader of fiction does not expect a literary work to hide its artifice, as in realism, or to mimic familiar truth. Verisimilitude consists, rather, in giving the reader something that completes his apprehension, no matter how distant from the laws of nature his mental contents may be. Borges does not imply that "prophesying" is the only means to this end, but he offers it as an example as if to say that it is the most fundamental. Before inserting the unreal into his narrative, the writer insinuates it casually as mere idea, through details that do not purport to be particularly significant. In this way he exposes the attributes of the thing to come, making it relevant as metaphor, so that when it materializes it comes as an appropriate, almost expected articulation. Its unreal character is no barrier to its acceptance on literary faith; the sudden literalization of what was conceived figuratively raises the whole textual environment above ordinary truth and imbues it with analogic significance. The prefiguration is essential, for only by such means can the unreal be given the aura of the appropriate; mere unintelligibility or textual "insanity" has no aesthetic power. Most writers of nineteenth-century fantastic fiction seem not to have recognized this fact, which accounts for the "minor" status of so much fiction of the type.

Borges compares this kind of foreshadowing, and the resulting literary credibility of the unreal, to the rituals of primitive man—for example, to sympathetic magic, in which the tribe imitates in word and gesture what it hopes to see in nature. He thus implies that there is no generic difference between such ceremony and the writing or reading of fiction. In ritual and in literature a configuration of mind constitutes the "possession" of what is not present in reality, and this is satisfying in itself. The savage enjoys his dance whether it rains or not.

In another article I have related the foregoing to some of Borges's fiction,³ attempting to show that prophesying or prefiguration results in "prophecy" as textual transcendence—the realization that the work does not finally impart or signify anything except that it comprises art, which is artifice having an aesthetic effect; the only reality offered is the literature itself, self-enclosed and distinct from anything else: *ars, ars est*. Borges's fiction is by no means devoid of familiar truth, but it is there only as building material. The same can be said of Cortázar, despite the fact that he is often assigned the role of "realist" in his supposed commitment to existentialist moralizing and leftist ideology. Leaving aside obvious differences of style, structure, and specific content, it would be difficult to show that Borges and Cortázar differ in their conception of what a reader is supposed to get from a short story. Just as art is art no matter what its outer trappings may be, an artist by definition is unfaithful to common reality and has that disloyalty as his basic motivation.

Before his death in 1984, Cortázar produced both short stories and novels but is identified primarily with the former, notwithstanding the great success of his novel *Rayuela* (1963). His prose is all of the "new" kind, and most of his stories are unrealistic to the point of being called fantastic, although Jaime Alazraki has more

³ "Borges and the 'Death' of the Text," publ. pending in *Hispanic Review*.

aply described them as “surrealist metaphor.”⁴ A typical story is “The Idol of the Cyclades,”⁵ which in its execution is very similar to Borges’s “El evangelio según Marcos” (“The Gospel According to Mark,” *El informe de Brodie*, 1970), though it is less complex. The action might well be called psychosomatic; two characters, reverting to a primitive mode of thought, make a mental association which they project into reality, and this leads to an irrational ritualistic murder. In the summary that follows, the words in italic are emphasized for their significance as prefiguration. In turning key words and phrases into English, I am faithful to the original Spanish.

On a Greek island two archaeologists, Morand and Somoza, unearth a marble statuette thousands of years old. It is the figure of a nude young woman, a relic of an ancient time when it was used in erotic bloodrites. Thérèse, Morand’s wife, comes running along the beach to see the discovery, forgetting that she is carrying the toppiece of her bikini in her *hand*, and she is standing barebreasted by the excavation when Somoza’s *hands* emerge holding the statue. Reproved by her husband, she covers her breasts with her *hands*. She resents the reproof, calling it a silly prejudice, and this causes a momentary alienation that has to be overcome later with an apology. That evening Morand and Thérèse are together in their tent while Somoza, alone in his, *caresses* the beautiful idol and strips off its “false clothes of time and oblivion.” Somoza has the “absurd hope” of being able, some day, to relate to the statue as its ancient worshippers did; he wants to come to it “by other means than *hands* and eyes and science.” Morand and Thérèse jokingly marvel, in private, at his *nonsensical* hope. Bribing an official, they take the statue out of the country, promising not to sell it for two years. Before leaving, Morand and Thérèse realize that Somoza has fallen in love with her, and this hurries their departure. Back in Paris, Somoza takes charge of the idol and keeps it in his apartment on a *pedestal*, where he continually *caresses* it and tries to duplicate it faithfully in plaster—finally with such success that Morand cannot tell the difference between the *original* and Somoza’s *copy*. During this time Morand sees Somoza now and then, but Thérèse never does. In the climactic scene, Morand is in Somoza’s apartment; for some reason he cannot explain to himself, he has asked Thérèse to meet him there later. Somoza tells Morand that he will never give him the statue although it belongs to both. He is acting very strangely and cannot explain his behavior; he says, “There are no words for it—at least, not our words,” and he adopts a tone of voice that goes with “those explanations that get lost beyond intelligibility.” *Caressing* the idol’s breasts and sex organ, Somoza speaks of making a sacrifice—of smearing it with blood to make its eyes and mouth appear; then he takes off his clothes and picks up a stone hatchet. Morand says to him that all this *nonsense* is really about Thérèse. Backing away, he steps on some dirty rags which symbolize, for Morand, all the things that he, Somoza, and Thérèse ought to have said to each other; he senses that he cannot retreat farther. As Somoza attacks, Morand seizes the hatchet and kills him. He then dips his *hands* in Somoza’s blood, takes off his clothes, and stands behind the door waiting, hatchet in *hand*, for Thérèse.

Most of the prefiguring elements in the narrative go almost unnoticed in the reading, seeming to be mere vocabulary or incidental detail. The actions done with

⁴ Jaime Alazraki, “The Fantastic of Surrealist Metaphors,” *DadalSurrealism*, 5 (1975), 28-33. Quoting Cortázar to the effect that his stories are called fantastic for lack of a better name, Alazraki adopts “neo-fantastic” to distinguish them from the nineteenth-century type. He notes, implying a somewhat different conception of it, what I am discussing: “. . . a gradual process of presenting the real, which finally yields to a fissure of unreality” (p. 30).

⁵ Julio Cortázar, *Final del juego*, 1956 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1970), pp. 73-74. For trans. see Julio Cortázar, *Blow-up and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Macmillan, 1968), “The Idol of the Cyclades,” pp. 25-34.

hands begin to establish the metaphorical identity of Thérèse and the idol, as well as the association between her sexual attractiveness and the idol's primeval power. Hands are symbolic, at first, of possession and touching; Somoza's holding and caressing of the statue occurs throughout the text in often-abrupt proximity to mentions of Thérèse. Later, hands are associated with the statue's deadly influence; they receive the sacrificial blood and hold the murderous hatchet. Other links between the woman and the idol are made by coincidence: the idol is uncovered at the moment Thérèse stands uncovered, and Somoza's hands hold it while Thérèse's hands hold her breasts. Somoza's imagination—his absurd fantasy—is that he may reach the idol (Thérèse) with more than hands, eyes, and the detached view of science; his desire as an archaeologist to enter into the "nonsensical" thought mode of primitive man and commune with the idol is confused by suggestion with his yearning to "commune" with Morand's wife. Somoza's inner motives and mental associations are by no means made clear in the narrative, but subtle insinuation makes them the primary "reality" of the text. In the end, Morand will follow Somoza into a primeval way of thinking in which there is no difference between what is thought and what exists in reality; he will kill Thérèse because she and the idol are one. Somoza has coveted, caressed, and possessed *her*. As Somoza says, this is not in our words; the explanation gets lost in unintelligibility.

It would be easy to dismiss the whole business as a depiction of the workings of the mythic mind, which lacks an "as if" and conceives everything as "is." To do this would be to miss the value and meaning of the story. It is not lacking in psychological reality, and it mingles that reality with mythic "nonsense" in a way that reveals to us how close we still are to primitive thinking. When something of ours is coveted by another, it is somehow diminished in our estimation because our secure possession of it is undermined; it is as if the thing itself were disloyal, wanting to belong to the other. This is especially true if the coveted object is a person capable of being seduced. This psychological fact is adumbrated in the story when Thérèse and her husband are alienated by her resentment of his reproof as she stands bare breasted before Somoza. Besides this element of realism, there are traditional associations to reinforce the magic: the likeness between a cold, beautiful goddess and an unreachable woman, and the affinity between the idol's mystical power and a woman's power to inspire love or lust.

All of these prophetic details (I have by no means exhausted the list) converge on the periphery of the reader's consciousness, setting a context which "expects" the strange event to come. The reader senses that in some way the murder of Thérèse is not incredible. In the moment of reading, before analysis sets in, we cannot articulate that congruence, but we almost understand it; it has the quality of Borges's "aesthetic fact"—"the imminence of a revelation that does not materialize."⁶ The writer's prophesying has led us to a posture of mind where we are on the threshold of an idea that is outside our rational categories, like a whole number between one and two. Our effort to intellectualize the text results in a poor exegetical paraphrase of what only the text can say, because it does not "say" anything; it simply is.

In this story we must also notice the suggestion, however slight, of "committedness," which is often equated with realistic intention. A good existentialist must observe that the problem of the characters would perhaps have been avoided if they had communicated frankly. Morand can retreat from Somoza only as far as the admission that they ought to have talked things out, then he has to defend

⁶ "La muralla y los libros," *Otras inquisiciones*, 1952; *Obras completas de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974), pp. 633-35. For trans. see J. L. Borges, *Other Inquisitions*, trans. Ruth L. C. Sims (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1964), "The Wall and the Books," pp. 3-5.

himself. This obeisance to moralism is by no means central to the meaning and value of the story and contributes little to the aesthetic effect.

Alazraki has pointed out that Cortázar's brand of unrealism cannot be measured by nineteenth-century norms, including the structuralist criteria of Todorov.⁷ He does not violate reality, nor juxtapose the incongruent for shock effect, nor cause the reader to vacillate between reason and unreason. Instead, he insinuates another way of apprehending. Contemporary fiction has been preoccupied, in varying degree, with asserting its difference from what precedes it, and we can often detect notes of self-commentary woven into a text (Borges, of course, is famous for this). When Morand is in Somoza's apartment and sees how strangely he is acting, he at first concludes that Somoza has lost his reason, but then he decides that such a conclusion is "too easy." In other words, the primeval (unreal) mode of thought to which Somoza has surrendered, being coherent in itself, cannot be called insanity because it has itself as its only criterion. That way of thinking is to be identified with the text itself, for it is the very thing prophesied by the text and is therefore *in* it, essentially comprising it. The text as a corpus of language cannot be measured by outside norms, certainly not by those which divide the true from the false on an objective basis. The story was published in 1956, when the break with theoretical realism had just begun to manifest itself with vigor.

We can look now at what is surely one of the century's cleverest stories, "Bestiario."⁸ Cortázar, as third-person narrator of the story, reverses the rules of normal fiction. Normally, a reader is not prepared to accept as reality, right from the start, what the characters believe in; here the reader accepts literally what the characters take only metaphorically—if they can be said to "take" it at all. Usually, the fantastic is insinuated in the midst of reality; here the fantastic is openly affirmed while reality is evoked only by innuendo. Normally, analysis enables us to make a clear separation between language pointing to reality and that which points to fantasy; here the narrator so mixes the two that it is impossible to separate them. The story demonstrates that clear apprehension is possible in spite of the violation of language and logic. Again we are dealing with prefiguration, magical causality, and the credibility of what we can hardly conceive or articulate.

Cortázar puts two situations side by side, one unbelievable and clearly told, the other quite natural and evoked by innuendo. The natural and credible circumstance is that Nene, the irascible brother of Luis, has an incestuous lust for Luis's wife Rema, and his unwelcome attentions cause her constant unhappiness. The Funes family never alludes to this situation openly or otherwise. Luis, a scholar buried in his books, is half oblivious to the matter and does nothing about it except to swear in private. Luis and Rema have a boy, Nino; his visiting cousin, Isabel, loves her aunt Rema and suffers for her as her childish understanding of the situation grows. Isabel's mother had hesitated to send the girl to visit the Funes family because of what she referred to as the tiger that roamed the house. Here begins the incredible part. The family's daily life is complicated by the necessity of avoiding the tiger; one must never enter a room, particularly the dining room, without looking to see if the tiger is there. The family groundskeeper, Don Roberto, is the one who is most trusted to keep the family informed of the tiger's whereabouts and to come

⁷ Alazraki, "The Fantastic of Surrealist Metaphors." Reference is to Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975). Orig. publ. in French: *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). Todorov thoroughly describes the "genre" called fantastic and concludes that it is essentially a nineteenth-century type of fiction.

⁸ Julio Cortázar, *Bestiario*, 1951 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1971), pp. 139-65. Translation included in *Blow-up and Other Stories* as "Bestiary," pp. 67-84.

running with the dogs if the tiger gets troublesome. The story has little plot but tells the random activities of the children, which turn out to be prophetic by suggestion. At the climax, the child Isabel remarks casually that the tiger is in Nene's study, causing him to go into another room where the tiger really is. In the last lines Nene is screaming, Luis is yelling and pounding on the door, and Don Roberto is coming with the dogs, but Isabel is only looking tearfully at her beloved Rema, with Rema's grateful hand resting on her shoulder.

Only with difficulty, in contemplative reconstruction, does the reader conclude that there is no real tiger; the narrator has given material substance to the metaphor of Isabel's mother. Nene's lust for Rema is only *like* a roaming beast; the family's dread of acknowledging the painful reality is like a fear of being in the same room with something terrible; and Don Roberto with his dogs is only a symbol of the family's reticent shame and constant effort to suppress the truth. But this is afterthought; the immediate effect is bafflement. The reader cannot tell *how* Nene's encounter with the tiger is the same thing as the family's open acknowledgment of his offense, brought about by Isabel, because the text presents the two things as if they cannot be the same. For example, all the family members carefully avoid mentioning the unsavory situation but speak openly of the tiger that metaphorizes it. The family supposes that Isabel is ignorant of Nene's lust for Rema, but she too talks of the tiger. The caution against going into the dining room in particular, without first looking to see if it is safe, can be taken to mean that it is especially important to keep the problem of Nene out of sight in the one place where the whole family gathers at one time; this clearly shows the tiger's metaphorical character. How, then, can Isabel use the tiger as a reality to destroy Nene figuratively? The text does not make sense, and yet we know that Isabel in some way has delivered Rema from Nene's abuse by bringing his offense into the open. We reach this conclusion in spite of the language, transcending it with an intuition to which logic is irrelevant.

That intuition is made possible by prefiguration—the "logic" of the self-enclosed text. Apart from the fact that "tiger" is a common literary metaphor for terrible or inescapable truth, there are many prophesying details. I will mention only a few.

As in "The Idol of the Cyclades," there is a symbolism of hands. It is Rema's soft, warm hands that inspire Isabel's affection. These loving hands are offended by Nene's when, as Rema is serving him coffee, he grasps her fingers instead of the cup, causing her to withdraw her hand. When Isabel is playing with an ant-farm, she sees Rema's hand reflected in the glass; it seems as if the crawling ants are on her fingers, and Isabel asks her to take away her hand. We sense that the ants are associated in the girl's mind with Nene's touch, for she decides the ant-farm is hideous and asks Rema to take it from the room—but Rema does not (we can interpret: she asks Rema to get rid of the problem with Nene, which she cannot do). The association of Nene with insects is carried further; he becomes, by suggestion, a praying mantis which Isabel promises to throw away because it disgusts Rema. Shortly after, Isabel "throws away" the disgusting Nene, and the last image in the story is that of Rema's hand on Isabel's shoulder.

The link between Nene and insects, the prominence of insects in the story (the children collect them), the title "Bestiary," the tiger, and the bestial character of Nene all contribute to a oneness of final conception. Isabel's act of exposure, which we might call an invasion of Nene's intimate self and private motives, is foreshadowed when Isabel hits a baseball that breaks through the window of Nene's private study. Nene reacts with anger and brutality. By parallel, we can conjecture that Nene's final scream is not one of terror but of anger, and that when Luis pounds on the door he is not trying to help Nene but to confront him. Don Roberto, the

reticence that usually keeps this confrontation from happening, is not yet on the scene.

The most pervasive prefiguration is the fact that in spite of the tiger's apparent reality, the family does not treat it as a real tiger. It is taken for granted, alluded to but not talked about or described even by the narrator; it is not feared or opposed but simply avoided, like something being ignored or suppressed. Anyone looking for Cortázar's commitment to existentialist moralizing can see here a statement about "authenticity"; the family's problem is one of timid withdrawal from the demand for communication.

A briefer look at a third story—one of many that would serve the purpose—will be enough to justify some general conclusions. In "Lejana,"⁹ Alina Reyes is an upper-class young woman whose life of pink champagne is too easy, shallow, and boring. She feels guilty because she does not suffer. She senses that she is in reality another woman—any suffering woman in any place, perhaps a beggar in Budapest who is despised and beaten and feels pain when the snow gets into her shoes. The text makes the other woman somehow real; Alina knows what is happening to her, speaking of her (in her diary) sometimes as "she," sometimes as "I." Alina marries and the couple goes to Budapest on its honeymoon. Walking to the middle of a bridge, she sees the beggar coming from the other end. They embrace each other. Then Alina Reyes sees Alina Reyes walking away, leaving her there to feel the pain of the snow in her shoes.

As readers we are left puzzling about whether the language gives us a fantastic fact—a change of bodies between two women—or whether we see a metaphor for psychological transformation. The meaning is essentially the same, foretold by allusion to the palindromes Alina makes when she has insomnia—those phrases that read the same forward or backward. The bridge, envisioned by Alina early in the story, is a common symbol of passage from one to another state. In short, the narrative leaves the reader standing above the language, hardly needing to clarify its literal or figurative character. The reader is much more conscious of his own act of apprehension than he is of what he apprehends or how. Any intellectual effort to examine and sort out the language is anticlimactic.

I have several conclusions that I believe are valid to the extent that these stories are typical of Cortázar and of "magical reality" or the "new realism," as I believe they are. In such fiction, the thing that is "disconnected from the real world" is simply the climactic event of the narrative—a result having no other cause than the one assigned by the text. That textually assigned cause is a prefiguring insinuation, not a statement that purports to replace one metaphysic with another. The cause can be discerned by analysis, but this is not necessary in order for the cause-and-effect relationship to comprise a coherence in the reader's mind. By being an autonomous text, the work implants in the reader's mind a sense of the mind's own autonomy; that is, it causes the reader to disengage himself from "commitment" to any of his mental contents, because they are all unreliable by any standard outside the mind itself. The text itself, as language and as intellectual content, is unworthy of "trust" and is transcended—by nothing. There is nothing for the mind to see or intuit except its own vacant posture; apart from this awareness of empty awareness, nothing is real.

This final result can perhaps be characterized as solipsism. "Solipsism" is a philosophical term defined most simply as the notion that the self can know nothing but its own modifications and states. This is not to say that in aesthetic apprehension

⁹ Included in J. Cortázar, *Bestiario*. English translation in *Blow-up and Other Stories* as "The Distances," pp. 15-24.

the mind has no content, but that its ideational content cannot constitute "truth"; but neither can it be dispensed with, since the mind cannot stare directly at itself but must posit figments that reflect its outline. The literature of the "new realism" may not do anything new—in fact, it must deny that it does—but it asks for a new terminology. Instead of producing aesthesia as a "heightened awareness of reality," by traditional, nineteenth-century definition, it produces a heightened awareness of *unreality*, disconnecting the reader's consciousness from its own necessary "furniture." It strives to give the reader a state of sentience that is independent of what produced it. Implicit in such literature is a fundamental doubt about the adequacy of thought and language—a doubt that the mind can know any reality beyond itself.

By freely displaying their artifices, contemporary writers are encouraging the maturity and sophistication of the reader, like medical doctors who explain the theory of the treatment to the intelligent patient. There is no question that they have turned us back to a traditional conception of art as pure aesthesia—pre-intellectual experience or apprehension. Behind the metaphor "magical causality" lies a perfectly intelligible concept of literature as "language of independent value." That concept cannot refer to the literature as a body of words on the page, for this would imply what is to be denied—an objective value or "truth" apart from the reader's experience. "Magical causality" refers to the aesthetic state of mind that the text may evoke, apart from which a text has no value or meaning. The structures, styles, and artifices that can evoke aesthetic apprehension are many, but unreality is a part of them all.