POINTS SOUTH: AMBROSE BIERCE, JORGE LUIS BORGES, AND THE FANTASTIC*

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In *The Literature of Exhaustion,* a study of the works of Borges, Nabokov, and Barth,[1] John Stark attempts to show how these writers are characterized by a common attitude toward the stagnant or exhausted perspective of modern literary creation. To an extent, twentieth-century literature is at an impasse, Stark claims. In order for literature to be truly creative, it must double back upon itself, and create a new literature from itself. Such a contention comes as no surprise to readers of Spanish American literature. Contemporary writers of all genres demonstrate a thoroughgoing consciousness of literature in the creation of their works. To illustrate his principle of "the literature of exhaustion," Stark selects examples from works by Borges:

> Borges makes literature from literature by frequently modeling one work on another work. He considers acceptable this strategy and the use of allusions because they repeat earlier literature, whereas he considers memory harmful to writers because it repeats reality. (p. 22.)

Stark then labels Borges's stories "The End" and "The Waiting" reflections of *Martín Fierro* and Hemingway's "The Killers." But Stark's most suggestive comparison is reserved for "The Secret Miracle" which "harks back to Ambrose Bierce's 'Incident [sic] at

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Owl Creek Bridge.' The apparent cessation of time in each is too similar to be coincidental" (p. 22).

Stark selects the treatment of time in each work as an indication of affinity between the two authors. And, indeed, their experimentation with time is in consonance with what Juan Loveluck calls "los rasgos esenciales de la *alta novela* en el siglo xx." [2] That is to say, their use of time conforms to what Loveluck calls "tiempo psicológico, profundo, medido por su actuar sobre una conciencia . . . " (p. 106).

Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1892) depicts the last thoughts of Peyton Farquhar, an American Southerner, as he is hanged for treason by Federal troops during the Civil War. As Peyton closes his eyes before the moment of execution, he conjures up the image of his family, and yearns to return home to his plantation just behind enemy lines. The moment of execution arrives, and Peyton plunges to his doom but instead of the ultimate jolt of the noose, he experiences free fall into the water below. He swims to shore and races through the forest to his home where his wife awaits him. But, just as they embrace, he senses the sharp pain of the noose and he is overcome by death. [3]

In many ways, Borges's "The Secret Miracle," published almost a half-century later, recapitulates motifs and themes of Bierce's short story. In Borges's version of the execution, Jaromir Hladik, a Czech playwright, awaits execution by a Nazi firing squad. As the fatal shot nears Hladik, God offers him a year's respite from death in order to complete his life's work, a drama entitled "The Enemies." Once Hladik perfects the play and exhausts his gift of time, the firing squad's blast rips through him, and the execution is successfully carried out.

The similarity in the treatment of time indicates that Bierce's work indeed prefigures that of Borges, in accord with John Stark's observation. Both writers use similar structural devices such as the *in medias res* narrative, insertion of expository material within the development of the story, and a confrontation between the protagonists and their inevitable destiny: violent death. A temporal miracle takes place in both works as the flow of time apparently ceases. Borges and Bierce open a cosmic parenthesis in time into which Peyton Farquhar and Jaromir Hladik channel the fulfilment of their desire.

On a structural level, the stories conform to the "closed structure" that Sharon Spencer describes in her book, *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel.*[4] As Spencer discusses this term, she demonstrates how characters are "ruthlessly subordinated to theme . . . [and] . . . may amount to litle more than a forceful gesture, an appetite, a life stance of an incredible or perverse nature" (p. 30). The concept of verisimilitude, in the closed structure, is, she claims, "beside the point" (p. 30). Spencer's discussion of structural peculiarities of the modern novel has significance for the comparison of the fantastic elements in the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges and Ambrose Bierce. Both stories employ a single perspective, that is the point of view of the protagonist who approaches his death with a combination of agony and creativity. Spencer touches upon the phenomenon of just such a treatment of point of view:

> Authors who have chosen to work with an exclusive single perspective and to close off their novels from surrounding contexts do not wish to explore their subjects. They wish to enthrall, to capture and to enchant the readers by insistence, by intensity and by prolonged exposure, so as to make him experience the reality of the ostensibly unreal. The "ideal," the "fantastic," the "surreal," the "imaginative," or the "nonrealistic": each is but a term designating some aspect of life whose veracity is either belied or neglected by the empiricist . . . What is required (in the closed structure) is intense focus upon a single perspective of a reality that has generally been seen from some other much common perspective. To see something absolutely, one must necessarily concentrate upon those facets that he has never before allowed to come within his field of vision. In this sense the novel with a closed structure may be regarded as a corrective to realism. It offers not a rival but a complementary vision of life. (p. 47.)

The result of the single perspective is to reinforce the reader in his hesitation to believe or not believe the apparently supernatural events. Thus, the fantastic element in Borges's and Bierce's suspension of chronological time is an outgrowth of their treatment of point of view.

On a thematic level, "The Secret Miracle" demonstrates a profound affinity with "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Bierce

and Borges elucidate the nightmarish fate of two victims of man's inhumanity. Peyton Farquhar, although he is hanged as a traitor for plotting to destroy the bridge, is himself betrayed by a Federal soldier who, disguised as a Rebel, suggests that he burn down the bridge for the Southern Cause. Borges employs the Nazi Holocaust as the twentieth-century equivalent of Bierce's Civil War theme. After the Nazis condemn Hladik, they mock his humanity by delaying his execution, "owing to the desire on the authorities' part to proceed impersonally and slowly, after the manner of vegetables and plants." [5]

But, of course, the most significant similarity between Bierce's and Borges's working of miracles in time is a common thread of fantasy. On the basis of Tzvetan Todorov's structural approach to the fantastic, [6] "The Secret Miracle" and "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" qualify as fantastic tales, although the function of the fantastic differs in the two stories as we shall soon see. For Todorov, the fantastic, as a literary genre, lays claim to a fragile existence, one which depends entirely on the reader's willful suspension of disbelief. The reader must, for the duration of a bizarre literary event, integrate himself into the life of fiction to such an extent that an event which seems impossible in the light of experience is at the very least tolerated as possible. Such is the delicate balance of this suspension of disbelief that the narrator maintains the fantastic atmosphere of fiction by never justifying the bizarre event. Once the narrator reconciles the supernatural with the empirically believable world, the fantastic element disappears. According to Todorov, if the reader decides that the laws of reality remain intact by virtue of the narrator's justification, fantasy then merges with the genre of the "uncanny," that is the literary form which describes bizarre but logically justified phenomena. On the other hand, if the reader determines that new laws of nature must be created to account for the apparently impossible event, he similarly leaves the universe of fantasy for the genre of the "marvelous." In short, as Todorov observes, the fantastic is "located at the frontier of two other genres" (p. 41), but does not occupy the category of a neatly defined critical genre. On the one side is the supernatural uncannily explained away; on the other is the supernatural marvelously accepted.

When we examine Borges's and Bierce's short stories using Todorov's criteria for the fantastic as a basis for comparison, several

conclusions emerge. Most significant is the fact that these stories differ more with respect to the fantastic than John Stark had assumed when he labeled Borges's tale an avatar of Bierce's. To be sure, both stories display the wonders of fantasy in their bizarre manipulation of time. But the ultimate effect of fantasy makes "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" an exercise in the uncanny, while "The Secret Miracle" is an excursion into the marvelous.

The world of the uncanny envelops "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Within the story, no truly supernatural event occurs, but rather a rational explanation resolves the apparent cessation of time. Peyton Farquhar's terror explains away the leap in time during his fantastic journey home. In psychological terms, the protagonist condenses a fantasy of wish-fulfilment into the last instants of his life. His impressions of rapid-fire descent into the water, race to the shore, and escape home are a release from his cruel fate. His apparent escape also serves as a relief for the reader as well. Bierce uses Peyton's frenetic activity and impulse to survive as a sharp contrast to the description of the static execution scene.

> Excepting the group of four at the center of the bridge, not a man moved. The company faced the bridge, staring stonily, motionless. The sentinels, facing the banks of the stream, might have been statues to adorn the bridge. The captain stood with folded arms, silent, observing the work of his subordinates, but making no sign. Death is a dignitary who when he comes announced is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him. In the code of military etiquette, silence and fixity are forms of deference. (p. 10.)

So genuine is Peyton's will to escape the stagnation of time and his inevitable doom that he punctuates his fantasy with details which create the illusion of time's passing. His first impressions upon dropping to the water are pains which flash through his mind with "inconceivably rapid periodicity" (p. 13). He is "conscious of motion" (p. 13). As he swims to safety, he thinks "with the rapidity of lightning" (p. 16) as he eludes the guard's bullets. Bierce shows that Peyton is creating an alternative reality which depends upon his genuine, pitiable existence. The victim all along is a prisoner on a bridge and his only stimulus of motion is the movement of the water below:

> His face had not been covered nor his eyes bandaged. He looked a moment at his "unsteadfast footing," then let his gaze wander to the swirling water of the stream racing madly beneath his feet. A piece of dancing driftwood caught his attention and his eyes followed it down the current. How slowly it appeared to move! What a sluggish stream! (p. 11).

Bierce intensifies the illusion of motion by noting the day's progress into night as Peyton makes good his escape. Finally, the narrator uses the present tense to describe Peyton's homecoming. Such a shift in tense accomplishes several tasks. Peyton's visual fantasy, which begins as he hit the water and emerges to observe the magical quality of everyday existence, is brought into focus.[7] The returning hero approaches his brightly painted home, white walk, fresh, cool and sweet wife who steps down from the veranda to meet him. Nonetheless, the present tense has an ironic function which goes beyond the vivid depiction of Peyton's wish-fulfilment. Just as the protagonist and reader are convinced of his escape, heroic triumph reverts to tragedy. Time itself, the inevitable and eternal present, snatches him from the illusion and delivers him to Owl Creek Bridge. As death strikes, the narrator resumes the past-tense narrative for the anticlimactic final sentence of the story: "Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge" (p. 18).

The uncanny extension of psychological time which Bierce achieves in "An Occurrence . . . " transforms the apparently fantastic event into a "shocking, incredible and disturbing" experience, to paraphrase Todorov's criteria applied to the uncanny. In any case, the disturbing phenomena are justified by the laws of psychology.[8]

Borges's handling of the escape motif differs significantly from Bierce's. Gone is the psychological justification of chronological discontinuity which Bierce had contrived so well. Instead, Borges denies the continuity of time, much in the same manner as in his essay, "New Refutation of Time."[9] In the essay, Borges speculates on the illusory nature of succession in time, especially from the point of view of Berkeley's Idealism. In Borges's paraphrase of the tenets of idealism, he conjures up a vision of "A world of evanescent impressions; a world without matter or spirit, neither objec-

tive nor subjective; a world without the ideal architecture of space; a world made of time, of the absolute uniform time of the *Principia;* an indefatigable labyrinth, a chaos, a dream — the almost complete disintegration to which David Hume came" (p. 184). In this evanescent world, Borges the idealist denies "the existence of one time, in which all events are linked together" (p. 185). Borges argues for the autonomy of each instant of life so that events which are not contemporaneous in the chronological scheme of things are, nonetheless, simultaneous in universal time. Thus, Borges's concept of simultaneousness underlies other experiments in fiction such as "The Circular Ruins," "The Library of Babel," and even "Funes the Memorious." In these stories, as well as in "The Secret Miracle," Borges magically endows finite reality, in its temporal and spatial dimensions, with infinite extensions. In this way, Borges creates the metaphor of the human mind: limited by nature but limitless in its ability to produce paradoxes which expand the horizons of reason.

At the end of "The Secret Miracle" Borges convinces the reader that time has indeed stopped for Jaromir Hladik in a metaphysical sense which rational explanations cannot justify. As a result, Borges maintains the delicate quality of "hesitation" which Todorov deems essential to the operations of the fantastic. Borges's awesome treatment of he marvelous is a good example of John Stark's concept of the literature of exhaustion because he constructs an infinite metaphor of endless time by means of literature doubling over upon itself. That is to say, the secret of Borges's miraculous victory over chronological time is to be found in Hladik's play, his *raison d'être,* "The Enemies," which he composes during the instantaneous year's reprieve from death.

The narrator of the story vaguely outlines the action of Hladik's drama. By means of this thumbnail sketch of the play, Borges anticipates the fantastic atmosphere surrounding the end of the story. For example: the drama observes "the unities of time, place, and action" (p. 91) in a way never conceived of in Aristotelian aesthetics. The element of time is unified by the concept of stagnation — time stops, night never falls, and the clock continues to chime seven. Paradoxically, the sense of motionlessness achieved by the chiming clock is counterbalanced by the life-giving force within stopped time itself. For in this story, and others of Borges, the number seven reflects the Caballistic concept of animistic crea-

tion.[10] The entire action of the play, as the narrator claims, is a "circular delerium" of the play's protagonist, forever condemned by his own madness to perfom the play endlessly.

It is this repetitious quality of Hladik's drama, like the unending journey of ants and lizards in the etchings of Escher, or the continuity of the Möbius Strip, that rescues Hladik from the void of death. The playwright discovers how the structure of infinity, specifically the reiterative dimensions of language, is generated from finite elements within his control. In "The Secret Miracle," the linguistic code as formulated in the play "The Enemies" gives rise to the life code in Hladik's miraculous escape from time.

While it must be noted that Borges is more the magus than Bierce in his treatment of time, both writers explore the very human obsession man has to create literature as a means of understanding life. Jaromir Hladik and Peyton Farquhar become authors in their dying moments. They create fictions of lives that parallel their own struggle to prevail over their mortal circumstances. In Peyton's epic journey home, the noose inevitably tightens to choke off the flow of time. He remains suspended in time and space while time and the river flow below him. Jaromir, run through by time's bullet, manages to make a magical leap to the inner world of continuity. For Borges, the recurrent drama preserves life on another plane, while the physical is no more.

A comparison of these two masterpieces of short fiction justifies conclusions which go beyond a mere statement of literary influences. While it is true that the allusive qualities of Borges's work recall thematic and technical aspects of Bierce, nonetheless the way in which Borges articulates the mysteries of temporal suspension indicates that the American Hispanophile is a precursor of the Argentine Anglophile only in a limited sense. Borges enlarges Bierce's model of wish-fulfilment as a means of escaping from mortality. He transforms Bierce's realistic dénouement into a surrealistic dream reminiscent of Escher's etchings of artist's hands drawing other hands which come alive as they make the transition from two to three dimensions. In agreement with Todorov, Borges creates a new fantastic universe which transcends chronology. "The Secret Miracle," Borges's own Wellsian "Time Machine," elucidates that special quality human beings possess — the ability to utilize the ephemeral elements of linguistic discourse to create and populate literary worlds which mirror our own as they come to life.

NOTES

[1] Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1974.

[2] "Intención y forma en *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*," *Nueva narrativa hispanoamericana*, I (1971), pp. 105-16.

[3] *The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce*, with an introduction by Clifton Fadiman (New York: Citadel Press, 1960), p. 18. All citations from Bierce refer to this edition.

[4] New York: New York University Press, 1971, especially pp. 26-47.

[5] *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, tr. Harriet de Onís (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 89. All citations from Borges refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

[6] *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, tr. Richard Howard (Cleveland and London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973). (Original title, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* [1970].) Citations from Todorov refer to this edition.

[7] Bierce captures the joy of living in Peyton's fantasy in the description of visual and sensory perceptions of nature during the escape: "He was now in full possession of his physical senses. They were, indeed, preternaturally keen and alert. Something in the awful disturbance of his organic system had so exalted and refined them that they made record of things never before perceived. He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf — saw the very insects upon them: the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the gray spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass. The humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of the stream, the beating of the dragon-flies' wings, the strokes of the water-spiders' legs, like oars which had lifted their boat — all these made audible music. A fish slid along beneath his eyes and he heard the rush of its body parting the water" (p. 14).

[8] On the basis of the discussion presented above, Todorov's claim that Bierce's work is characterized by the uncanny is well-founded: "The literature of horror in its pure state belongs to the uncanny — many examples from the stories of Ambrose Bierce could serve as an example" (p. 47).

[9] *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*, tr. Ruth L. C. Sims, intro. James E. Irby (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), pp. 180-198.

[10] Jaime Alazraki, in "Borges and the Kabbalah," *Triquarterly (Prose for Borges)*, XXV (Fall, 1972), pp. 240-67, discusses the significance of Kabbalistic numerology in several of Borges's short stories.