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FICTION WRAPPED IN FICTION: CAUSALITY IN BORGES AND IN THE *NOUVEAU ROMAN*

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Borges, over thirty years ago, enumerated four procedures found in fantastic literature from the earliest times.¹ These procedures, which permit the writer effectively to destroy reality, are: 1) the literary work within the literary work; 2) the contamination of reality with dream; 3) the voyage in time; 4) the double. Carter Wheelock perceptively notes that the double «dissolves human personality and makes it subordinate to archetypal actions and forms,» while the voyage in time «breaks the relationship between cause and effect,» the contamination of reality with dream produces a situation in which «the dreamer creates the world of which he himself is a part,» and the work within the work confuses the levels of reality as well as the reader with the fictional character.² Borges' own fiction not only includes numerous examples of these four devices; it leans heavily on them. Because the first procedure enumerated by Borges is one that is employed to a great extent by the French practitioners of the *nouveau roman* as well as by Borges himself, it is tempting to compare the ways in which Borges and the French writers handle this device.

Reduced models of the work contained within itself, internal duplication, is sometimes referred to by modern French critics as *mise en abyme*. Originally referring to the emblem repeated in miniature within heraldic design, the term is also employed to describe a picture in which a figure holds an image of itself in miniature which, in turn, holds a still smaller model of itself, theoretically *ad infinitum*. The term can also refer to the infinitely decreasing and more distant figures reflected in two facing mirrors. The *mise en abyme* as a literary device was first described by Andre Gide,³ yet the device itself certainly is nothing new. It has been used in one way or another for centuries; however, its purpose has varied considerably. More anciently, the *mise en abyme* was employed as a

device for reflecting the larger work in which it was contained or of allowing the characters belonging to the larger work to somehow understand their own actions and motivation (e.g. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: «The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.») In other cases, e.g. Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*, internal duplication has been used merely to create a surprise twist. In modern times, especially with reference to the French *nouveau roman*, the literary work within the literary work often serves the purpose of cutting the ties between the text and the external world, of having the text fold in on itself, so to speak. In this way, a work becomes an entirely self-sufficient world in itself. Bruce Morrissette comments:

Passing to its most recent stage [in the novels and the theory of Jean Ricardou], the '*mise en abyme*' does not seem to function either to reflect the work as though in a little mirror, or to give the characters in a novel a means on their own level of watching themselves act, of judging themselves, of understanding themselves . . . but rather of permitting the text itself to attain new modalities, of distorting the novelistic space by folding it in on itself, while cutting all the bonds between the novel and the work-a-day world. In this way the novel becomes more self-sufficient.⁴

Jean Ricardou's own comments on the role of internal duplication in the *nouveau roman* are revealing:

I believe that most books belonging to the *nouveau roman* contain, in one way or another, a *mise en abyme*, or several, or even a continual series of *mises en abyme*. This miniaturizing of the whole, this image of the book within the book . . . has then, I believe . . . the singular function of underlining the fact that the novel has no greater connection with anything other than itself. Instead of attracting our attention to the everyday world in which we live, it seems as though it is there as an extremely concentrated will to attract our attention toward the secret center of the book.⁵

The novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet contain abundant examples of internal duplication.⁶ In *Jealousy* (1957), both the novel-within-the-novel concerning

European settlers in a tropical setting (the "African novel") and the picture calendar are firmly woven into the fabric of the novel. This «African novel» parallels the setting of *Jealousy* itself, since it too deals with European planters in a tropical region. Beyond this fact, and more importantly, it is a topic of interest and conversation for A (the wife) and Franck, while it excludes the narrator-husband from the conversation because he has not read it. Consequently, this novel-within-the-novel, while it may seem to reflect the larger work to some extent, is not included for that purpose; this *mise en abyme* directly triggers many of the suspicions and fantasies of the narrator. The very similarity of the situation in the *mise en abyme* with that in the larger novel is what provokes the husband-narrator, as he listens to snatches of conversation between his wife and Franck, into fantasizing about his wife's possible adultery with their neighbor. It is these fantasies which form a substantial part of the «action» of *Jealousy*, so that the details from the «African novel» constitute an integral part of the structure of *Jealousy* and act as a motivating force, as cause for at least part of the effect.

The same thing can be said about the illustration on the calendar; because it depicts a tropical port similar to the one the narrator's wife is visiting with Franck, it sparks fantasies concerning them when the narrator-husband looks at it. These two forms of internal duplication in *Jealousy*, then, are important to the universe of this particular novel. It does, as Wheelock suggests, place the reader on the same level of reality as the characters in the novel; it is also a device by which the larger work refers to itself. One critic even sees the mysterious tune of the «second driver,» a melody which wavers up and down and seems to stop in mid song only to start again, as a form of internal duplication in *Jealousy*.¹

An example of internal duplication in Borges, out of so many possibilities, is the story, «The Secret Miracle,»(1943) in which there are no less than three *mises en abyme* within those few pages. The very first sentence of the story refers to the dream of the protagonist, Jaromir Hladik, concerning a chess game:

The adversaries were not two individuals, but two illustrious families. The contest had begun many centuries before. No one could any longer describe the forgotten prize, but it was rumored that it was enormous and perhaps infinite. The pieces and the chessboard were set up in a secret tower. Jaromir (in his dream) was the first-born of one of the contending families. The hour for

the next move, which could not be postponed, struck on all the clocks. The dreamer ran across the sands of a rainy desert - and he could not remember the chessmen or the rules of chess. At this point he awoke.

«The Secret Miracle,» the story which contains the dream, concerns Jaromir Hladik, the Czech-Jewish writer who is about to be executed by the Germans in World War II. Briefly stated, Hladik, awaiting execution, prays for God to grant him one year in which to complete his play *The Enemies*. This miracle is granted; when the command to fire is given the executioners, the physical world seems to come to a halt. Hladik finally realizes that a year is going to pass in his mind during the brief interval between the command to fire and its execution. In this way, he is able mentally to finish the play.

The opening dream, which is covered in one short paragraph, contains many elements which could be analyzed, but, for the purpose at hand, suffice it to say that the dreamer's race against time for his move in the chess game is premonitory in that it foreshadows Hladik's need to finish the play before the sands of time run out for him in life. The reference to the «forgotten prize» which is described as «enormous and perhaps infinite» could refer to Hladik's conviction that the plot of his play embodied «the possibility of redeeming (symbolically) the fundamental meaning of his life.» This, certainly, is no mean prize. He tells God: «In order to bring this drama, which may serve to justify me, to justify You, to a conclusion, I need one more year.» The desert through which the dreamer runs is indicative of the sterility of his efforts thus far to complete the drama.

Borges' second device of fantastic literature, the contamination of reality with dream, should not be understood as being synonymous with the mere use of dreams in fiction. It specifically refers to an effect produced on the real world - whether the true real world or the «real world» of the fictional characters - by the images of a dream. Coleridge's conjecture, elucidated in Borges' «La flor de Coleridge,» on the results of a man's having dreamed he had been in Paradise and subsequent awakening with the flower presented to him in the dream still clutched in his hand, is an example of what Borges was referring to. The first dream in «The Secret Miracle» does not alter reality in any concrete manner; it is, however, a *mise en abyme*, an internal duplication of the larger work in which it is contained, and symbolically foreshadows that work. Time is the subject matter of the chess dream as it is of the entire story.

The second *mise en abyme* in «The Secret Miracle» is Hladik's play, *The Enemies*, which is summarized by Borges in one paragraph. At the end of the summary we are informed that «The drama has never taken place: it is the circular delirium which Kubin unendingly lives and relives.» It is significant that the clock strikes seven as the sun sets and while a Hungarian tune is played during the first scene of the first act of the play, and that these same elements are present during the last scene of the last act. This indicates that a contrast is being made between the subjective time of the play's mad protagonist, corresponding to the time it would take to perform the play, and objective time. The entire drama represents one brief moment of the protagonist's delirium, the moment the clock strikes seven. The play deals with time and is premonitory of the subjective year Hladik will live within the split second of objective time between the command to the firing squad and the execution of the command. This deformation of time, so frequent in Robbe-Grillet's novels and films, and which has been termed «human time» by French critics,⁸ foreshadows the process which will permit Borges' fictional playwright to «live» one year during the lapse of a fraction of a second.

The third *mise en abyme* is, as was the first, a dream. The dream concerns Hladik's search for God in the Library of Clementinum and his final success. In the context of his prayer for another year of life, this would imply that his wish had been granted. This is confirmed when, in the dream, he is explicitly informed: «The time for your work has been granted.» In the following sentence, the narrator states that Hladik remembered that the dreams of men belong to God, and that Maimonides wrote that the words of a dream are divine when they are all separate and clear and are spoken by someone invisible. In addition to being merely premonitory, this dream, this *mise en abyme*, serves, as Morrissette said with reference to Jean Ricardou's novels, to cut the bonds between the work of fiction and the work-a-day world, making the work more self-sufficient. Or, as Jean Ricardou said of the *nouveau roman* in general, it serves to draw our attention toward the «secret center» of the work.

In both Borges and Robbe-Grillet, the work of art within the work of art serves to foreshadow the events in the larger work, to provide a clue to the larger work's significance, or even to behave as the catalyst for the action in it. At the same time it insulates the work of fiction against the reality of the outside world and draws the reader into the special world, with its own self-sufficient laws, of the work of fiction. This technique is found throughout Robbe-Grillet's work. Referring specifically to *La Maison de rendez-vous*

(1965), in a statement which could apply equally well to most of Robbe-Grillet's production, Morrisette states:

The nonrealism, or even the impossibility of the novel's content permits an emotionalized reading which is not, however, projected upon outside reality, fictional or otherwise. The criteria of the novel derive from this main principle: the work forms a functional universe in which time, space, causality, and all other coordinates obey internal rules entirely unrelated to classic plausibility («Could this happen in real life?»).⁹

The critic describes a fictional world which not only refuses to imitate the real world but which flaunts its independence of the outside reality and which seeks to draw the reader into a unique and private universe. Robbe-Grillet himself has stated:

In this new realism, therefore, there is no longer the slightest question of *verisimilitude*. The little detail that 'makes you think it's true' is no longer of any interest to the novelist . . . The thing that strikes him - and which reappears, after several incarnations, in what he writes - is more likely, on the contrary, to be the little detail that strikes a *false note*.¹⁰

The notion that the work of fiction owes no allegiance to facts or laws external to its own constitution is not something invented by the French New Novelists, of course. This concept is basically that expressed as long ago as 1932 by Borges in his essay, «El arte narrativo y la magia» («Narrative Art and Magic»). The final paragraph encapsulates the essay:

I shall attempt to summarize the foregoing. I have distinguished two causal processes: the natural one, which is the incessant result of uncontrollable and infinite operations; the magic one, lucid and limited, in which details prophesy. In the novel, I think the only possible honesty is in the second process. Let the first one be left for psychological simulation.¹¹

Within the body of the essay, Borges explains that just one of the varieties of the genre of the novel, the time-consuming novel of character, «feigns or arranges a concatenation of motives which supposedly do not differ

from those of the real world.»¹² He goes on to say, however, that this procedure is not the usual one. Borges states that this concatenation of causes is not suitable for the action novel, for the short story or motion picture (which he characterizes as «the infinite spectacular novel composed by Hollywood»). These genres, he explains, are governed by magic, and magic, he tells us, is governed by sympathy, in that a link is established between entities which are distant from one another either because they had been close at one time (contagious magic) or because they appear similar in some way. As examples of this second, imitative, brand of magic, Borges speaks of the members of the Indian tribe who used to dance for days and nights wrapped in buffalo skins, buffalo horns affixed to their heads, in order to assure the arrival of the buffalo herd. He also brings in the Australian aborigines who would cut their forearms, allowing them to bleed, so that the sky would «bleed» rain in imitation of their behavior (pp. 88-89). Borges developed his discussion of magic by stating that this «dangerous harmony,» this «frantic and precise causality» (magic) operates in the novel as well. He explains that although the fear that some dreadful act may be brought into being merely by mentioning its name is inoperative in the real world of modern Western civilization, this is not the case in a novel. Every single episode, in a carefully constructed plot, produces reverberations (pp. 89-90).

While Borges does not specifically apply this reasoning to internal duplication, there is no reason to believe that he would make an exception of this type of episode. In this light, the *mise en abyme* would not only place the reader on the same level of reality with the fictional characters, thereby effectively plunging the reader into the self-contained fictional world of a particular piece, but in addition can serve as a magical cause for other events within this fictional world. Certainly, this is what occurs in Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* as well as in his novels in general; this is what takes place in Borges' «The Secret Miracle.» Just as the buffalo dance brings the buffalo, as the bleeding «causes» the rain, the juxtaposition of objective and subjective time that is present in *The Enemies*, the play within the story «The Secret Miracle,» sympathetically «causes» the identical opposition in the surrounding work of fiction. The delirious imaginings of the protagonist of *The Enemies* «cause» the author of this play, who is also the protagonist of «The Secret Miracle,» to imagine deliriously that he is living an extra year in a fraction of a second. Or is it the other way around? Does the type of mind that is subject to delirium write a play like *The Enemies*? But this would not be magic; it would correspond to situations in the real world and, as Borges has said, would be best left to «psychological simulation.» The «African novel» and the picture

calendar in Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* are the magical causes, in part, of the fantasies in the protagonist's mind.

It is clear that the internal duplication practiced by French New Novelists had been effectively employed earlier by Jorge Luis Borges. It is equally clear that the reasons for employing this device, as presented in theoretical treatises by French novelists and critics, reasons having to do with making the work of art independent of the outside world and with bringing the reader into the closed world of the work of fiction, have been operating in the works of Borges for a very long time. Furthermore, it appears that another motive for utilizing the *mise en abyme* is present in Borges as well as in the French *nouveau roman*; that of producing magic. Yet magic, as Borges describes it, is really what the New Novelists are talking about when they speak of a ((functional universe in which time, space, causality, and all other coordinates obey internal rules entirely unrelated to classic plausibility.))

NOTES

1 These devices were discussed by Borges during his lecture of September 2, 1949 and are applied to Borges' own work by Emir Rodriguez Monegal in «Jorge Luis Borges y la literatura fantástica,» *Número*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (November-December 1949), 448-455. A synopsis of the lecture was provided by Carlos Alberto Passos in *El país* (Montevideo), September 3, 1949.

2 «Spanish-American Fantasy and the 'Believable, Autonomous World',» *International Fiction Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1974), 5.

3 Bruce Morrissette reports that Gide, in his *Journal* of 1893, describes the procedure as «une 'mise en abime' [sic] ou mise en place au centre d'une oeuvre d'une autre version du sujet 'a l'echelle des personnages.'» *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*, Preface de Roland Barthes, nouvelle edition augmentee (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1963), note 4, p. 117. (The French edition is here cited rather than the revised and expanded English translation because the details included in the above quote are not included in the English version.) See also Morrissette, «Un Heritage de'Andre Gide: La Duplication interieur,» *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (June 1971), 125-42.

The translation of the French into English of this quotation is mine as will be all subsequent translations from Spanish or French except the quotations provided by Morrissette himself in *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet* (see note 8).

4 «Un Heritage d'Andre Gide: La Duplication interieur,» *Comparative Literature Studies*, 7, 2 (June 1971), 130.

5 Quoted by Morrissette in «Un Heritage . . .,» 137-38.

6 Cf. «The preference of Robbe-Grillet for reduced imitations of the work written into the work itself, such as the 'legend of the island' which summarizes the story of Mathias in *The Voyeur*, or the tableau of a cafe scene which illustrates the soldier's situation in *In the Labyrinth* . . .»(My translation from the French edition, which

is used here again because details there included are excluded from the English version.)

7 Morrissette, «Un Heritage . . .»,» 130. For an article partly concerning the significance of the «native song,» see Leo Bersani, «Toward an Esthetic of Disappearance? Narrative Murder,» in *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 272-299.

8 Morrissette, *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet*, translated from the French, revised, updated, and expanded by the author, with a Foreword by Roland Barthes (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 52.

9 Ibid., p. 241.

10 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1963), pp. 177-78.

11 *Discusion* (Buenos Aires: Emece Editores, 1964), p. 91.

12 Ibid., p. 88.