

GENARO V. PÉREZ : "The Circular Ruins"

Reference Guide to

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# SHORT FICTION

EDITOR  
NOELLE WATSON

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motion: the husband and father, Milo, leaves the house in Connecticut to live in New York City; the nine-year old daughter Louise travels, most weekends, to visit her father in New York City. But just when the pattern or routine is established for the daughter, her father decides to move out to the west coast. Although the other two characters seem to move about less than Milo and Louise, psychologically they have adjusted to quantum leaps—Milo's ex-wife to his leaving her for a man, Bradley, and Bradley to Milo's lackadaisical commitment in their relationship. It is significant that the child Louise is trying to root a plant for Bradley; she carries the ivy with her as she goes from her mother's home to her father's. She typifies the Beattie character stranded in spaces too vast to navigate. The characters in "The Cinderella Waltz" are adrift in space, but it is a peculiar American space, as the characters are American characters. One finds them portrayed throughout American fiction, not only by Beattie, but also by such writers as Raymond Carver, Joan Didion, Joyce Carol Oates, Saul Bellow, and John Irving.

In "The Cinderella Waltz" the focus of the relationships centers on the child, Louise. Children and their relations to adults often figure in Beattie's fiction. In an interview with Beattie, conducted by Steven R. Centola, in *Contemporary Literature* (1990), she says that "the nuclear family has broken down, so there's a different set of realities. I think adults often make the mistake of thinking they understand children. I think children are always watching and understanding but may not be quite as comprehensible to the parents as they think." In "The Cinderella Waltz" the child is watching and understanding, but nevertheless unable to control the direction of the events that overtake her, and it is her dilemma that adds poignancy to a story told with restraint and without sentimentality.

In "The Cinderella Waltz" Beattie articulates this complexity through her use of objects and through her sense of what it means to live in American spaces, and to live in a state of constant mobility, balancing the precarious relationships we so devoutly seek and need.

—Alice Swensen

#### THE CIRCULAR RUINS (Las ruinas circulares) by Jorge Luis Borges, 1944

In the story "Las ruinas circulares" ("The Circular Ruins") Jorge Luis Borges offers a fascinating perspective on the ontological question of *causa sui*. Can someone or something be its own cause? Some critics have seen the story, collected in *Ficciones* (1944), as a metaphor for the creative process, and others as a parable concerning the fallibility of a less than omnipotent God. The tale's simplicity conflicts with the profound statement(s) and paradox(es) it proposes. The epigraph ("And if he left off dreaming about you. . .") from Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* sets the tone for the arrival of the "gray man" from an imprecise South where "lepers are rare." Such an onset catapults the reader into strange and exotic surroundings where the baroque style and the erudite vocabulary submerge him in an alien world, while suggesting a timeless, Eastern setting. Reality is suspended and the reader is ready for the uncanny. The gray man establishes

camp near ancient circular ruins and begins his toil, which is to dream a man. This task, resembling a mystic quest, requires that he dream for long periods of time, searching for the perfect pupil. Among many "dream students he selects one who seems promising and begins an arduous pedagogical undertaking. Unfortunately, the gray man suffers prolonged, acute insomnia, rendering him unable to continue dreaming. He decides to follow another method as the shaping of dreams is among the hardest things that anyone can attempt. Before resuming his labors, he awaits the full moon, cleanses himself in the waters of the river, worships the gods, ultimately falling asleep. These mystic, ritual actions draw upon various religions, ancient and modern, Oriental and Occidental. He dreams about a beating heart. From this heart the rest of the body slowly develops in successive dreams until finally the heart becomes a whole man, sleeping within the dreamer's dream. Eventually, the dreamed young man awoke and thereafter the magician spent two years instructing him into the mysteries of the universe and the worship of fire. When this apprenticeship was complete and the time had come for the spiritual son to be born, the creator-magician kissed him and ordered the young man to proceed to a distant temple. So he might never know he was just a dream, the sorcerer erased all memory of the apprenticeship years. Curiously, during the extended pedagogical process, the gray man had been haunted by the impression that all this had already happened. After several "half-decades" he heard of a magic man in a northern temple who walked on fire without being burned. Believing him his offspring, he worried that his son would discover his origins and be humiliated at the realization he was merely someone's dream. The cessation of his trepidations arrived one day in the form of encircling sheets of flame that devoured everything around him. As a result of the conflagration, he discovered to his humiliation that the fire did not affect his flesh and drew the logical conclusion that he too was the product of someone's dream.

Some critical studies have suggested the parallel between the magician and the magical process of creating or dreaming a son with the situation of the writer and process of creating a text. As the author struggles to "procreate" or "give birth" to the characters, some are discarded and others developed, and eventually the finished product appears. The result, in some instances, is a reflection of the author who in turn has a similar parallel relationship with his God (who, Borges implies, might in turn have his own God, and so on ad infinitum). The notion of a sleeping deity dreaming creation is drawn from the idealist philosophy of Berkeley and was echoed for Spanish readers by Miguel Unamuno with his prayer, "Dream us, Oh God." Although Borges was certainly familiar with Unamuno's works and Berkeley's speculations, his approach lacks the anguished personal involvement of the former and is more accessible than the intellectual abstractness of the latter. Indeed, it approaches the ludicrous.

Borges declared once that he took up the same idea in a pair of sonnets about chess. The chessmen do not know they are guided by the players; the players do not know they are guided by God; and God, in turn, is not aware of being directed by other gods, and so on. Just as the closed circle is infinite because it has no end, the implied regression (dream within a dream or game within a game within yet another more encompassing one) is susceptible of infinite repetition. Similarly, if one imagines ever-decreasing concentric circles, the number which will fit inside a given circular configuration extends to the infinitely small. The

central conceit of the masterful Borges tale alludes by analogy to the concept of infinite concentric circles.

Furthermore, the title of the story with its reference to the circle evokes ramifications of the geometric figure considered the most perfect by philosophers and also held sacred by many religions. The circle as a mystical figure carries within it a myriad of connotations and denotations. Significantly, as a sphere, the circle suggests the Pythagorean and Eastern concepts of time, and thus by implication, extends the analogy beyond the spatial to the temporal plane.

Calderón, the 17th-century Spanish playwright whose play entitled *Life Is a Dream* fascinated Unamuno and was incorporated into the latter's concept of dreaming life, is also an inescapable intertext for Borges. Unlike Borges, however, Calderón does not suggest any control over dreams. In "The Circular Ruins" Borges attempts to validate his theme of controlled dreaming and regulated hallucinations. Such oxymorons imbue the magician's attempts to create a being as he must not only "manage" his dreams and also rationally control the irrational and produce a result—a product—that can transcend the dreamworld and the dream, carry over into the waking world, and, by implication, outlive the dreamer.

—Genaro J. Pérez

#### CIVIL PEACE

by Chinua Achebe, 1972

In the preface to his collection *Girls at War* (1972), Chinua Achebe has argued that his short stories have provided only "a pretty lean harvest" and that he cannot lay any great claim to the literary form—but this is only the protest of a naturally modest writer. Running through all his short fiction is the same economy of language and sharpness of observation that informs his early novels.

Above all, though, his best short stories have a distinct focus: the disastrous and tragic civil war which raged in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970 and which cost over one million lives. Much ink has been spilt over this conflict which followed the secession of Biafra from the newly independent republic, and it inspired a number of west African writers to come to terms with it, not just from the standpoint that it was a human tragedy but also because it was a war in which sides had to be taken.

One response is Achebe's short story "Civil Peace," which is set in the first days of the uneasy peace settlement of 1970. Its title is deeply ironic. At first reading it signifies a state of normality but "civil" is normally applied to war: as the main protagonists discover, for all the hopeful signs, the conflict is not yet over for them. On that level it is a classic rendering of the old saying that a bad peace is worse than war itself.

The mood is set in the opening paragraph when Jonathan Iwegbu, the central character, gladly associates himself with the greeting that has gained a sudden currency in the first days of peace: "Happy survival!" In fact, Jonathan has good reason to be pleased. His wife and three out of their four children have managed to weather the fighting and have come through the experience unscathed. So too has his beloved bicycle, which at one point had almost been commandeered by a bogus army officer.

A bigger miracle awaits them when they return to their home base in the mining town of Enugu to find their small house still standing. Soon the family is back in its stride and flourishing. The children are sent to pick mangoes and sell them to soldiers' wives, his wife cooks meals for the villagers, and Jonathan opens a small bar selling palm-wine. Their good fortune is in stark contrast to the fate of his fellow coalminers who have been made destitute by the war and who face a troubled future. To cap it all, he is able to change his Biafran money back into 20 pounds of Treasury currency—a considerable sum which he is careful to hide in the safety of his house.

Throughout these short opening scenes Achebe invokes the Iwegbu family's good fortune and their ensuing domesticity in language that is redolent of the scriptures (the house is a "blessing"; his "overjoyed" family carry five heads on their shoulders). This is reinforced by Jonathan's constant exclamations that "nothing puzzles God," and by the comparisons between their happy lot and the misfortunes which have engulfed the rest of the country. At this point, with Jonathan closing his fist over the notes—nicknamed "egg rashers" because no one can pronounce their official name—Achebe makes it clear that for the Iwegbu family at least, the war is over.

Significantly, the change of mood is presaged by the onset of night when the friendly neighbourhood noises die down one after another to leave the world in darkness. The stillness is interrupted by a thunderous knocking on Jonathan's door: thieves have come to rob the Iwegbu family who are powerless to save themselves. Passionate pleas to their neighbours go unanswered—Achebe does not make clear the reasons for their refusal but they do not intervene—and the "tief-men" demand that Jonathan hands over his money. This order they back up with a short burst of automatic fire.

Frightful though the scene undoubtedly is, the real horror lies in the thieves' apparently reasonable statements that they mean no harm because the war is over and that they are acting under the constraints of "civil peace." Having survived the war, Jonathan stands in great danger of losing everything once more. The tension is increased further by Achebe's device of keeping the thieves unseen: only their menacing voices are heard by the hapless Iwegbu.

Inevitably, Jonathan is forced to hand over the money to the raiders and he is left with nothing, a poor reward for having survived the war. In the light of day his neighbours arrive to commiserate with the family but Jonathan puts a brave face on his misfortune. What are the "egg rashers," he asks, compared to the fact that he and his family are safe and well? Like everything else he has experienced, the loss of the money seems to be part of a larger plan.

Although Achebe's message is bleak, that the war has transformed Nigeria utterly and that nothing can be the same again, there is a strong sense of hope in the creation of Jonathan Iwegbu. Like other great survivors of warfare—Hasek's Schweik comes to mind—Jonathan gets by because he refuses to take life too seriously.

All around him his country is in ruins and he himself has been robbed but these disasters count for nothing provided that life goes on as before. With optimism like Jonathan's, Achebe seems to be saying, nothing is so terrible that humans cannot overcome it.

—Trevor Royle