

The Island of Anamorphoses

Jean-Philippe Toussaint's version

It must have been his love of the truth or of the appallingly concrete that inspired Alfred Bruyas – the complete namesake of Alfred Bruyas (although not in any way related to him) – to confess to me that the island of anamorphoses did not take its name from any visual metaphor, but from the abnormal degeneration of the plants growing there. It was as I was consulting Alfred Bruyas' *Borges and the Three Infinities* (Fata Morgana, 1979) one day in June 1999 in Paris, in that delightful, hushed library, the Bibliothèque Forney, on rue du Figuier, that I first came across a reference to Borges' short story *The Island of Anamorphoses*. The title of the story intrigued me, but I gave it no further thought for nearly a decade until it came back to my mind in the summer of 2007 as I was pondering questions of narrative perspective while finishing work on *The Truth About Marie*. Twice in the book, the narrator gives detailed descriptions of scenes he hasn't actually witnessed. The story continues in his absence, as if the events we read about exist only in his imagination. This matter of the narrator's physical absence from the scenes he describes raises the theoretical question of the third person in literature. I was reminded of the Borges story mentioned by Alfred Bruyas, and wanted to read it to see if it resonated with the book I was writing. But to my great surprise, I could find no trace of Alfred Bruyas' book *Borges and the Three Infinities* (Fata Morgana, 1979). It would of course have been understandable if the book had been difficult to get hold of, or out of print, but my failure to find it went beyond any such simple explanation; it was as if the book had never existed – as if the only known source to mention Borges' story *The Island of Anamorphoses* was itself apocryphal.

I wanted to put my mind at rest on the subject, and tried to get to meet Alfred Bruyas. I knew of his connections to my publishing house *Éditions de Minuit*, but all attempts to get in

touch with him that way came to nothing. So I sent him a message via his website, and about ten days later I received a reply which only perplexed me even more. Alfred Bruyas informed me that he no longer lived in Paris, but would be happy to see me on Corsica, in his house in Sasuelo, where he had retired some years previously. The name Sasuelo was not unfamiliar to me; I had mentioned it myself in one of my novels and even thought I had invented it as a substitute name for the village of Barcaggio (where it so happened – and this is the part that disconcerted me – that I had written *The Truth About Marie*). I accepted the invitation, and a few days later I took the plane to Corsica to pay him a visit. I can still see myself in the taxi on the way to Sasuelo. It was only a little before four in the afternoon, but the light was so grey, it felt as if night had fallen. The taxi driver must have switched on the sidelights and set the windscreen wipers going; the wipers scraped the glass with a faint rubbery squeak. About halfway there, the view cleared as we rounded a bend, and down below, beneath the mist, less than three miles away as the crow flies, Sasuelo hove into sight, beside the uniformly grey sea. The little island across from the village was visible too; its long contours and slightly raised rocky outcrops stood out against the water of the bay. I looked out of the taxi window at the island in the mist, and at that moment I knew with certainty that it was the island of anamorphoses.

Alfred Bruyas was unwell the day we met. He received me at the back of the house in the large room where he worked, looking out over a small garden. He was over eighty, with frail legs, thin arms and emaciated wrists. He looked at me attentively, intensely – something intimidating emanated from his misty grey-blue eyes. He radiated a strong sense of unreality, as if the fictional character he had the potential to be – which we all have the potential to be – was gradually stealing a march on the writer he had once been. He was on his guard, did not willingly reply to my questions, and was sometimes confused – and these failings seemed to me metaphors for fiction's rampant colonisation of his person, as if real life was retreating

from him in waves, or in fits and starts, leaving nothing but a bloodless fictional character sitting opposite me, reticent and weakened at the same time. He offered me a seat in one of the turquoise armchairs in the large room in his house in Sasuelo and listened as I told him the object of my visit. When I had come to the end of my explanations, he reflected intently for a moment, leaning forward, motionless, his two hands joined at his chin in an attitude which reminded me fleetingly of my father, and said that in his opinion, all *he's* in literature are in fact *I's* in disguise, just as all *I's* are potential *he's*. You could even say, paradoxically, that the deeper down inside themselves narrators look and the more subjective and genuinely personal they strive to be, the greater their claim to be universal. That is one of the great paradoxes of literature – that universality is more common in the particular than in the general. You'll agree with me that in dreams there is no third person – not ever; there's never anyone but oneself. Is there? he asked, suddenly giving me a hard stare, and I nodded my head in silence, not knowing what to say, because I had the feeling that everything he'd just said had come out of my own mouth – indeed the last sentence he'd spoken was the exact quotation of a sentence from my novel *The Truth About Marie*. Looking me in the eyes, he then quoted the famous words from Rimbaud: 'I is another', slowly articulating every word, and then continuing to quote from memory, with a glimmer of sardonic complicity: 'That is obvious to me: I am there at the birth of my thought; I watch it, I listen to it'.

When I questioned Alfred Bruyas more closely on *The Island of Anamorphoses*, he denied being the author; he even denied the possibility that he was in any way the instigator, and reminded me that I had been the first to mention the story in my novel *The Truth About Marie*. But I've got something for you here, he said, and with some difficulty he got up to fetch from the table a literary journal which he had taken out of his bookcase for me (*French Forum*, Volume 36, Number 1, Winter 2011). There's a very detailed article on *The Truth About Marie* in here, he said, as he handed me the journal. The author of the article, Professor

Ernstpeter Ruhe, had access to the rough drafts of your book and noticed that in an early version of the manuscript dating from July 2007, you didn't write that it was Borges himself who was the author of the short story; you put it much more vaguely: '*The Island of Anamorphoses*, the short story in which a *Borgesian writer*' – my emphasis, he said – 'invents the third person in literature'. A Borgesian writer, he repeated. I suppose, he said to me with an amused glint in his eye, that that Borgesian writer might have been called Alfred Bruyas. I shan't pursue my account of our meeting; I promised Alfred Bruyas that I would be as discreet as possible on the subject of the literary paternity of *The Island of Anamorphoses*. I shall simply add that as we were saying goodbye, Alfred Bruyas imparted to me this final enigmatic confidence: 'You do know that it's not because I seem more real than fictitious – like most of the people we come across in life, for that matter – that I can't lie to you or even attempt to lead you astray.'

The interview had lasted less than an hour. I had asked the taxi driver to wait for me on the village square, and as I got back in the car to return to the airport, I could see the island of Sasuelo far off in the mist. When I left Alfred Bruyas that day, there were three facts I was sure of, concerning *The Island of Anamorphoses*, and each of them opened up an infinity of autonomous possibilities and conjectures.

1) The author of the short story, whoever he was – whether Borges himself, as legend had it, or Alfred Bruyas, as I strongly suspected, or indeed I myself, as Alfred Bruyas seemed to suggest – had been inspired by the island of Sasuelo for the story's title. In reality, the island of Sasuelo is a rocky, almost barren little island of less than ten million hectares in the Ligurian Sea, about one nautical mile from the village of Sasuelo.

2) The anamorphosis of the title is misleading. The author of the short story is in fact alluding to a botanical anamorphosis. It is well known that sea water has an unfavourable effect on plants. Storms and strong waves uproot young plants and erode the substratum by propelling the salt water to a great height. In this way, the rocks along the coast are laid bare, worn away, and eventually turned to desert. According to Alfred Bruyas, and I can't of course contradict him on this point, any pictorial explanation, invoking, for example, Holbein's *Ambassadors* or the proliferation of points of view, was doomed to failure and could only lead down dead ends.

3) The expression or phrase 'the writer who invents the third person in literature' is no more than a tribute to Borges. The phrase does not correspond to any historical reality: there is no such thing in literary history as the invention of third-person writing – that makes no sense. It is simply a poetic turn of phrase – a metaphor in the tradition of the witticisms and literary wizardry of the Borgesian fictions with their apocryphal encyclopaedic references, counterfeits and trompe-l'oeil, erudite geography and make-believe botany.

On top of these three facts, there is the intuition – more unsettling, more vertiginous, more precipitous, perhaps, than the facts – that I myself am Alfred Bruyas. He's not strictly speaking my double; if anything, he's my substitute – a kind of literary creation I insinuated into my text to represent myself. There is indeed a great deal of evidence to suggest this: the reference to Éditions de Minuit, the presence of the village of Sasuelo, the many indirect and subliminal echoes of *Reticence*, and the house in Barcaggio where I supposedly met Alfred Bruyas – a house I actually lived in once, and the very same where I wrote a large part of *The Truth About Marie*. Alfred Bruyas is without doubt a projection of myself, even if we seem to move in different times. Whereas we are now in 2014, Alfred Bruyas – by some alarming chronological spinning-top effect – or numerical anagram – was already in 2041 the day I

visited him in Sasuelo. The day we met, I was fifty-six years old and he was eighty-three (the sum is an easy one, because to make up for not being the same age, we were both born in 1957). But if it was possible to achieve the remarkable feat of getting two presents far removed from one another in time to coincide like this in order to bring us together in Sasuelo that day, it was not some miracle as yet unrecorded by science that was able to work such a wonder – it was literature. Because there is no doubt that it was I, and I alone, who dreamt up that apocryphal Borges story *The Island of Anamorphoses* as I was writing *The Truth About Marie* in the summer of 2007 in the house in Barcaggio – a story which has the unusual, and to my knowledge, unique, literary status of having been rewritten several times without ever having been written in the first place.