

THE MARK OF THE KNIFE: SCARS AS SIGNS IN BORGES

... ese paciente laberinto de líneas traza la imagen de su cara.

(Borges)¹

... if one wants to call this inscription in naked flesh 'writing', then it must be said that speech in fact presupposes writing, and that it is this cruel system of inscribed signs that renders man capable of language, and gives him a memory of the spoken word.

(Deleuze and Guattari)²

At the close of a long conversation with Borges about his favourite Victorian and Edwardian writers — Stevenson, Kipling, Chesterton, Wells, and others — the doorbell rang and the next visitor, a young Paraguayan writer, was shown in. Borges, hearing the nationality of the newcomer, asked me: 'Do you remember the dictator of Paraguay?' Not sure which one he was referring to, I ventured: 'Stroessner? Doctor Francia?' 'No, no', said Borges; 'the one with the scar'. Obviously he was not speaking of a historical figure, but was still discussing literature. The Paraguayan dictator he was referring to was John Vandeleur in Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights*, an Englishman who is described in *The Rajah's Diamond* as 'the biggest adventurer, the best judge of precious stones, and one of the most acute diplomatists in Europe', known for his 'exploits and atrocities when he was Dictator of Paraguay'. Stevenson describes him thus:

Old John Vandeleur was of remarkable force of body. . . . His features were bold and aquiline; his expression arrogant and predatory; his whole appearance that of a swift, violent, unscrupulous man of action; and his copious white hair and the deep sabre-cut that traversed his nose and temple added a note of savagery to a head already remarkable and menacing in itself.³

This description corroborates another character's assertion in Stevenson's novella that Vandeleur has prodigious claims to both fame and infamy.⁴

Borges had been blind for many years at the time of this conversation and lived in a world of books he remembered with eerie precision. His question about the Paraguayan dictator was disconcerting because he failed to make clear that he was thinking of a fictional rather than a historical dictator. It reveals how fascinated Borges, perhaps the most bookish writer who ever lived, felt by the world of arms and violence. In retrospect, however, the most revealing aspect of the question is the detail that Borges found so striking and so unmistakable about this particular dictator of Paraguay: the scar that crossed his nose and temple. Stevenson never tells

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires, 1974), p. 854. Except where otherwise noted, all parenthetical references to Borges in the text are to this edition (hereafter *OC*).

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizoanalysis*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis, 1983), p. 145.

³ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Works*, edited by Charles Curtis Bigelow and Temple Scott, 10 vols (New York, 1906), 1, 115.

⁴ Stevenson, 1, 114.

the story of Vandeleur's scar, but it is the ultimate proof of his violent and adventurous past, and serves to caution both characters and readers to be suspicious of the former dictator. It is not surprising that Borges, blind reader and rereader of a world of literature that lived in his memory, should have had a special place for Vandeleur in his gallery of scoundrels.

Vandeleur's scar is both repulsive and fascinating, as scars often are in literature and the visual arts (and, for that matter, in real life). As a visual image, his aquiline face, marked by a long lateral sabre cut, is striking; as the initial image of a character in a story, the description is notable for its economy, since the scar acts for the reader as sign of past and future violence. The scar is also, at least initially, an ambiguous sign: it suggests violence but does not clarify whether Vandeleur acquired it when acting in a heroic or in a treacherous manner: whether, in a word, it needs to be read as a sign of fame or infamy. Indeed, since Stevenson never tells its story, it can be considered a sort of floating signifier throughout the novella.

Vandeleur's scar, then, is a sign of unpredictable violence which constantly threatens to erupt again, to envelop the whole of the story. The scar-sign derives further power in the story from its alliance with a linguistic sign which — for Stevenson's original readers as for us — cannot but signify violent conflict: Paraguay. The former dictator, the missing link in a history which runs from Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia to Alfredo Stroessner, though once the authoritative user of a language of power, is now consigned by the instability of that power to the oblivion of history. His scar is a sign of his passage through history, indeed the only sign of that passage. Instead of putting his mark on the history of Paraguay, he has been marked by it. The permanence and emblematic character of that mark, though, do not serve to clarify the meaning of Vandeleur's past: the scar's unspecified origin suggests the ambiguous and unstable nature of his participation in a more public story.

Scars have a rich and far-reaching iconographic history, from ancient times through Dante and Hawthorne to Stevenson, Borges, and beyond. Even though a complete catalogue of scars in literature is impossible, it is important to note that facial scars (significant because they are visible) have functioned as signs with various meanings. In addition to the physical scar indicative of past heroism or villainy, scars have also been imposed by divine mandate, as in the mark of Cain, which protects him from the violence of others at the same time as it serves to remind them of his crime, or, symbolically, in the seven *Ps* on Dante's brow in the *Purgatorio*, signifying the seven deadly sins. Societies have marked or mutilated transgressors as a punishment and as a means to assure their identity. Cervantes refers to this practice of branding the faces of slaves in one of his exemplary novels.⁵ Scars (especially those on the body, usually hidden from view) are important as literary devices in dramatic texts as guarantors of identity, particularly in cases where a character comes back after a long time, transformed in other external respects, such as the case of Oedipus discussed by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. But scars may have a further virtue in narrative fiction: they evoke an enigma in the character's past

⁵ See Miguel de Cervantes, *Novelas ejemplares*, edited by Francisco Rodríguez Marín, 2 vols (Madrid, 1917), 1:98. In a long note, Rodríguez Marín clarifies that it was Spanish custom to brand the faces of slaves — and refers even to the example of rebus writing on the face of a slave who had an *S* written on one cheek and a picture of a nail ('clavo') on the other, spelling out the word which described his condition, 'esclavo'.

which can be resolved only by the telling of a story, usually a violent one, in which the scar constitutes the inscription of that story on the character's body and on the body of the text.

A key to Borges's use of the scar as literary image is found in one of his essays on description in narrative. In this essay he ridicules those writers who catalogue the assorted parts of a body and articles of clothing and expect their readers to be able to construct a unified whole from these diverse parts. He says that the patching of lips of a particular kind to cheeks and nose is an impossible operation for the mind to perform.⁶ It is better, he suggests, to introduce only such elements as are necessary for the reader to visualize the character in action, or details which by their anomalous nature force the reader to invent circumstances to justify their presence.

Borges's ideas on narrative description are closely related to Stevenson's theory of narrative.⁷ In an early essay on verisimilitude, 'La postulación de la realidad' (1929), Borges gives interesting examples of what he calls 'circumstantial details', termed 'circumstantial' because they evoke images not only of themselves but of contexts extraneous to the images themselves. He gives several examples of such details which suggest stories not told in the text. For instance, in an Argentine historical novel, Enrique Larreta's *La gloria de don Ramiro*, Borges points to an image of covers for soup pots secured with locks (*OC*, p. 220). The locks that protect the soup from the hungry servants not only serve to describe the pots but also tell us a great deal about wealth and poverty in the society.

Borges labels the 'circumstantial details' as 'de larga proyección' (*OC*, p. 221), an idea derived from Stevenson's essay 'A Gossip on Romance', his most important discussion of the theory of narrative. Stevenson uses as an example a sea story in which the discovery of some coins comes to him as reader 'like a surprise I had expected; whole vistas of secondary stories, besides the one in hand, radiated forth from that discovery, as they radiate from a striking particular in life'.⁸ These 'secondary stories' are, of course, imagined by the reader, being only subtly implied in the text, but the invention of them is part of an open, playful reading, one which fixes especially on the stories not told in the one that is. For Stevenson, then, the coins in the sea story were 'of long projection', as they sent his imagination travelling off after the implied stories, just as the 'circumstantial details' of the soup pots for Borges suggested stories of hunger and need.⁹

⁶ 'Sobre la descripción literaria', *Sur*, 97 (1942), 100–02 (p. 101).

⁷ On the relation between Borges and Stevenson, see Sylvia Molloy, *Las letras de Borges* (Buenos Aires, 1979), pp. 120–25, and my *El precursor velado: R. L. Stevenson en la obra de Borges* (Buenos Aires, 1985).

⁸ Stevenson, vi, 128. For a further discussion, see Balderston, pp. 31–35.

⁹ An example of the use of a scar as a circumstantial detail occurs in the opening description of Billy Bones in Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, one of Borges's favourite books: 'the brown old seaman, with the sabre cut', 'a tall, strong, heavy, nut-brown man; his tarry pigtail falling over the shoulder of his soiled blue coat; his hands ragged and scarred, with black broken nails; and the sabre cut across one cheek, a dirty, livid white' (ii, 1). The power of this description derives not only from its vividness but also from its ability to spur our imagination to invent a world of violence and adventure in which to insert him, very different from the tranquil domain of squires and doctors and innkeepers. The entire description is included in the parenthesis of the double reference to the sabre cut: an external mark which is significant because it allows the reader to infer a great deal about the past history and character of the man. As with Vandeleur's scar in *The Rajah's Diamond*, the story of Billy Bones's scar is never told; Stevenson feels that some 'circumstantial details' are more powerful if left unexplained. The scar as attribute of Billy Bones is the first in a series of details which mark all the pirates in the story, and evoke the violent world of the buccaneer: Black Dog has two fingers missing, Pew is blind, and Long John Silver has lost his left leg.

The first of Borges's stories to hinge on a scar¹⁰ is 'El incivil Maestro de Ceremonias Kotsuké no Suké', in *Historia universal de la infamia*, a series of biographies of scoundrels retold from various sources, published in book form in 1935. The story of Kotsuké no Suké and the forty-seven Ronins is retold from A. B. F. Mitford's *Tales of Old Japan*. In Mitford's version Kotsuké no Suké insulted his visitor, Takumi no Kami, who became so enraged that he drew his short sword and 'aimed a blow at his head; but [since] Kotsuké no Suké [was] protected by the Court cap which he wore, the wound was but a scratch, so he ran away'.¹¹ For this breach of courtly rules Takumi no Kami is arrested and obliged to commit hara-kiri. Years later, his forty-seven retainers discover Kotsuké no Suké in the palace and pursue him until they find him cowering in a closet: 'Oishoi Kuranosuké, bringing a lantern, scanned the old man's features, and it was indeed Kotsuké no Suké; and if further proof were wanting, he still bore a scar on his forehead where their master, Asano Takumi no Kami, had wounded him during the affray in the castle' (Mitford, p. 16). When their prisoner refuses to commit hara-kiri they kill him, then kill themselves for having committed murder.

Borges's version subtly stresses the scar, making the story hinge on this mark of Kotsuké no Suké's cowardice and treachery. Takumi no Kami, the Lord of the Tower of Ako, wounds Kotsuké no Suké on the forehead: 'El otro huyó, apenas rubricada la frente por un hilo tenue de sangre' (OC, p. 321). The word *rubricado* — signed or initialled with someone's rubric or signature — is highly charged here as elsewhere in Borges's work, since it serves to link the realms of arms and letters, making clear the relation Borges perceived between the knife and the pen.¹² In the recognition scene, separately entitled 'La cicatriz', Kotsuké no Suké is found hiding not in a closet but behind a bronze mirror: 'Una espada temblorosa estaba en su diestra. Cuando bajaron, el hombre se entregó sin pelear. Le rayaba la frente una cicatriz: viejo dibujo del acero de Takumi no Kami' (OC, p. 322).

In the conclusion of the story Borges projects the meaning of the scar onto future generations and onto his readers. Mitford's tale ends with a bloody sequel: in 1868 an indigent warrior committed hara-kiri on the grave of the forty-seven Ronins, 'at about two hundred yards from my house, and when I saw the spot an hour or two later, the ground was all bespattered with blood, and disturbed by the death-struggles of the man' (p. 24). Borges ends the story with the idea that the sequel is the retelling of the story itself: 'Este es el final de la historia de los cuarenta y siete hombres leales — salvo que no tiene final, porque los otros hombres, que no somos leales tal vez, pero que nunca perderemos de todo la esperanza de serlo, seguiremos honrándolos con palabras' (OC, p. 323). Borges's open-ended conclusion, which consists of the telling and retelling of a story of infamy, derives its power in large measure from our recognition that we share in the events told: that we too are marked by the story much as Kotsuké no Suké was.

¹⁰ Scars function as central motifs in the two stories discussed here, 'El incivil Maestro de Ceremonias' and 'La forma de la espada'. A scar is also important in the portrait of Richard Burton in an essay on the translators of the *Arabian Nights*, which opens with the sentence: 'En Trieste, en 1872, en un palacio con estatuas húmedas y obras de salubridad deficientes, un caballero con la cara historiada por una cicatriz africana — el capitán Richard Francis Burton, cónsul inglés — emprendió una famosa traducción...' (OC, p. 397).

¹¹ A. B. F. Mitford, *Tales of Old Japan* (London, 1906), p. 8.

¹² For further comments on the use of *rubricar*, see Molloy, *Las letras de Borges*, p. 70.

In a story central to the present argument, 'La forma de la espada' (1942), the scar provides the title, the first sentence, the leitmotiv, and the enigma of the story, and is essential for the final recognition and reversal. In this story, the so-called 'Inglés de La Colorada', whom the narrator (named Borges in the story) visits at his ranch in Uruguay, has a grisly scar reaching from his temple to his mouth in a half-moon shape, as we are informed in the first sentence: 'Le cruzaba la cara una cicatriz rencorosa: un arco ceniciento y casi perfecto que de un lado ajaba la sien y del otro el pómulo' (OC, p. 491). The story the scarred man tells of his youth in Ireland revolves around a traitor to the Irish cause, John Vincent Moon, and the events in a house full of scimitars shaped like half-moons. The so-called Englishman's story ends as he takes one of the scimitars and wounds the traitor on the cheek (with Borges again employing the verb *rubricar*): 'Con esa media luna de acero le rubiqué en la cara, para siempre, una media luna de sangre' (pp. 494–95). A moment later he reveals what the reader already suspects: that he is himself the traitor John Vincent Moon, as shown by the 'cicatriz que me afrenta' (p. 494), a neat play on words which refers both to the locus of the scar, the 'frente' or forehead, and to the scar as sign of his infamy. The story ends with Moon's words: '¿No ve que llevo escrita en la cara la marca de mi infamia? Le he narrado la historia de este modo para que usted la oyera hasta el fin. Yo he denunciado al hombre que me amparó: yo soy Vincent Moon. Ahora desprécieme' (p. 495).

Mary Louise Pratt has studied this story as an example of a narrative that violates one of the basic conventions of discourse: that narrators are truthful about their identities. She states that the Irishman, in order to tell his story, feels he must place it in jeopardy by misleading the listener. . . . Both the violation and the flouting [of the convention that the narrator does not lie] are perceptible only because we have the contextual information that the Irishman has a scar, and we get this information only because we get the story secondhand. On its own, the Irishman's story is a perfectly felicitous narrative of personal experience and bears no sign of the lie.¹³

The story of the scar is told as a story of heroism and treachery by one who assumes the position of the hero, but is set within a story, narrated by Borges as narrator, in which the treachery changes sign, and in which the scar, the 'mark of my infamy', serves not only to prove Moon's identity but also to reverse the identity he assumed when telling his story. The scar is overdetermined in the whole of the story: it is the shape of a half-moon, which is also the shape of the sword that carved it in the face of a character who is named Moon. Even so, it remains ambiguous. The most we can say as we read is that the scar is a sign of past violence, but the specifics of that act of violence become clear only as the story comes to its close.

Moon says at the end that he had to tell the story from the hero's point of view for it to be heard. The story is audible or legible only when told by one who can be assumed to tell the truth, which a traitor cannot be. Yet the reader may not be persuaded of the complete reversal, since there is a greater ambiguity than is immediately apparent. Such an ambiguity is found in the Borges story 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', in which Kilpatrick, to purge his treachery and serve the Irish cause, is condemned to die a hero's death. Paradoxically, then, he is both hero and traitor. Similarly, the end of another story, 'Los teólogos', reveals that 'para la insondable divinidad, [Aureliano] y Juan de Panonia (el ortodoxo y el hereje, el

¹³ *Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1977), p. 193.

abofecedor y el aborrecido, el acusador y la víctima) formaban una sola persona' (OC, p. 556).

For Borges, to tell a story is to assume a persona: thus, when Zaid impersonates his cousin Abenjacán he *was* Abenjacán (OC, p. 606), and Pierre Menard finds it easier (and therefore less interesting) to rewrite *Don Quixote* by becoming Cervantes than it is when he remains himself (OC, p. 447). Along the same lines, the John Vincent Moon who impersonates the friend he betrayed when he tells his story is that heroic figure for the duration of the story, and the final reversal cannot be complete. Moon closes his tale by telling Borges that he betrayed his friend and protector, and asks to be repudiated by his listener. Yet most readers are likely to feel admiration for Moon's ingenuity in telling the story as well perhaps as embarrassment for having been taken in. Moon has earlier committed an act of moral chicanery, telling the story of his scar to persuade the original owner of 'La Colorada' to sell the ranch to him (OC, p. 491).¹⁴ Stories of heroism and treachery are sobering precisely because of the moral ambiguity they reveal not only in the characters but in us as readers.¹⁵

'La forma de la espada' is made up of a very few elements: two characters, a weapon, two countries, friendship and treachery. In the frame tale, Borges (an Argentine) is forced by adverse weather to stop at the Irishman's house in Uruguay. His host's hospitality is compromised when the visitor asks to be told the story of the scar, which the Irishman will tell only on condition that he be allowed to tell it in a way that will leave its horror complete. In the frame tale, then, there is a conflict between hospitality and truthfulness. Friendliness is possible only when the relation between Borges and Moon is superficial, and when underlying enigmas are left undisturbed. Borges's demand for truthfulness, however, leads to the revelation of Moon's past treachery, and forces a new act of treachery: namely, Moon's lie about his own identity. Similarly, Moon's tale reveals that the superficial friendship between the two members of the Irish revolutionary group masked one of the most terrible of human crimes: betrayal of a friend and companion. The Irish story has left a mark on the narrator's face; in the frame tale the same mark becomes the sign of infamy and treachery, not only at the level of the events narrated but also at that of the narration itself.

The Irish story acquires a new meaning from the place and the circumstances in which it is retold. In British literature (I have instanced Stevenson) the scar is a literary device. In the culture of the River Plate countries, however, it is a cultural

¹⁴ Similarly, in 'Abenjacán el Bojari', Zaid buys Rector Allaby's silence by telling him his story (OC, p. 601).

¹⁵ John Sturrock, in *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fiction of Jorge Luis Borges* (Oxford, 1977), reads the story more as one of a disjunction between heroism and treachery. He writes: 'Moon, the provisional source of light, is ultimately exposed as a sham. He is also a man in a state of civil war, a man divided. He is both agent and patient. As agent he inflicts on his patient half the mark — a half-moon — which symbolizes his divided state. But that division lasts only as long as his narration lasts, it is a division forced on him by the necessary disjunction of narrative itself. Once the "solitary game" is over, Moon can revert to being a full moon again, instead of two warring halves' (p. 179). I think that the disjunction is nowhere near as absolute as Sturrock asserts. Moon's is perhaps a reflected glory, but we need not deny him his share of it. It would certainly not seem to be Borges's intention here — any more than in 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' or 'Deutsches Requiem' — to write a fiction which would be ultimately unambiguous. His fictive incursions into twentieth-century history are meant to be disquieting.

mark of great importance.¹⁶ In his appropriation of the Irish story, Borges endows it with a more specific and historically-grounded reading of Moon's scar.

In *Facundo*, the 1845 work which analyses Argentine society through the character of the gaucho, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento notes that when a gaucho challenges a rival to a knife-fight, he seeks not to kill but mark his opponent:

El gaucho, a la par de jinete, hace alarde de valiente, y el cuchillo brilla a cada momento, describiendo círculos en el aire, a la menor provocación, sin provocación alguna, sin otro interés que medirse con un desconocido, juega a las puñaladas como jugaría a los dados. . . . El hombre de la plebe de los demás países toma el cuchillo para matar, y mata; el gaucho argentino lo desenvaina para pelear, y hiere solamente. Es preciso que esté muy borracho, es preciso que tenga instintos verdaderamente malos o rencores muy profundos, para que atente contra la vida de su adversario. Su objeto es sólo *marcarlo*, darle una tajada en la cara, dejarle una señal indeleble. Así se ve a estos gauchos llenos de cicatrices, que rara vez son profundas.¹⁷

To kill is a misfortune ('desgracia'), to mark is a triumph. Sarmiento also declares: 'Si sucede alguna *desgracia*, las simpatías están por el que *se desgració*' (p. 69). The killer suffers the misfortune and is the tragic hero.

Thirty years later, in José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* (1872), the hero kills a black man early in the poem. Because of the fame of this incident, he becomes known as a knife fighter. In the poem's second part (1879), only with some difficulty does he avoid fighting the man's younger brother, who challenges him to a song contest and, implicitly, to a fight. Although he has never been wounded in a fight, Fierro (whose very name refers to the iron of the knife) is very much a marked man, marked, in effect, by the success of the poem itself.

Evaristo Carriego, a poet of the then modest Buenos Aires neighbourhood of Palermo in the early years of this century (who later became the subject of a book-length essay by Borges, published in 1930), has a poem about the figure of the neighbourhood thug, 'El guapo'. Carriego writes:

Le cruzan el rostro, de estigmas violentos,
hondas cicatrices, y quizás le halaga
llevar imborrables adornos sangrientos:
caprichos de hembra que tuvo la daga.

La esquina o el patio, de alegres reuniones,
le oye contar *hechos* que nadie le niega:
¡con una guitarra de altivas canciones
él es Juan Moreira, y él es Santos Vega!¹⁸

The scars are again a sign that the thug or *compadrito* has lived the violent life he tells of, but Carriego ironically keeps silent about whether the thug actually committed the deeds he relates.¹⁹ No one denies his stories to his face: to do so would be to provoke him to a fight, and perhaps be marked in turn.

¹⁶ On the importance of the knife fight in Borges, see R. K. Britton, 'History, Myth, and Archetype in Borges's View of Argentina', *MLR*, 74 (1979), 607-16 (pp. 613-15), and Eduardo Tizetas, 'La sugestión del arrabal porteño y el duelo malevo en Borges', *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 319 (1977), 143-47. On the motif of betrayal in Borges, see Jean Franco, 'The Utopia of a Tired Man: Jorge Luis Borges', *Social Text*, 4 (1982), 58-63, 72-75.

¹⁷ Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo* (Madrid, 1970), pp. 68-69.

¹⁸ Evaristo Carriego, *Poesías completas* (Buenos Aires, 1968), pp. 66-67.

¹⁹ The *compadrito*'s heroes are derived from an already literary past: Juan Moreira was the subject of a popular novel by Eduardo Gutiérrez (later adapted for the stage), and Santos Vega, an Argentine Faust-like figure, was the subject of several gauchesque poems and of numerous ballads.

Borges has written numerous poems about knife fights, poems which seem to summon up the violence of the vanished *compadritos* and *cuchilleros* who inhabited the Buenos Aires of his boyhood. In one poem about Juan Muraña, another well-known knife fighter from turn-of-the-century Palermo, Borges reduces the identity and memory of Muraña to that of his knife:

El cuchillo. La cara se ha borrado.
Y de aquel mercenario cuyo austero
Oficio era el coraje, no ha quedado
Más que una sombra y un fulgor de acero.
Que el tiempo, que los mármoles empaña,
Salve este firme nombre, Juan Muraña.

(OC, p. 827)²⁰

And the poem 'El tango' (1958), an evocation of the rough Buenos Aires underworld from which the dance emerged, ends:

... El tango crea un turbio
Pasado irreal que de algún modo es cierto,
El recuerdo imposible de haber muerto
Peleando, en una esquina de suburbio.

(OC, p. 889)

The ending of this poem recalls that of the story 'El Sur' (1953), in which the character Dahlmann dies in a knife fight or dreams on the operating table that he is dying in a knife fight, the death he in any case would have chosen:

Sintió, al atravesar el umbral, que morir en una pelea a cuchillo, a cielo abierto y acometiendo, hubiera sido una liberación para él, una felicidad y una fiesta, en la primera noche del sanatorio, cuando le clavarón la aguja. Sintió que si él, entonces, hubiera podido elegir o soñar su muerte, ésta es la muerte que hubiera elegido o soñado. (OC, p. 530)

In 'El Sur' the character prefers to die in a knife fight, and would even have the mark on his forehead (actually the mark of life in a modern city, since he wounded himself climbing a staircase) be remembered as the mark of the wad of paper thrown at him by the gaucho who provoked him to fight. Similarly, in 'El tango' Borges states that the music and violent lyrics of the tango create an imaginary past in which he, sedentary writer turned man of action, died as knife fighter. The violence of the Argentine past leaves its mark on his imagination and on his text. Writing himself and his readers into the place of the victim, he reverses the *topos* inherited from Sarmiento, for whom the killer is the tragic hero, assured of sympathy in his 'misfortune', a view also expressed in *Martín Fierro*. For Borges, on the other hand, to tell — or to hear — one of these violent tales is to be marked by it.

The scar on Moon's face demands to be explained, but those who succumb to impertinent curiosity are duly rewarded, as they too find themselves marked by his infamy. The previous owner of the ranch, 'La Colorada', sold it and fled the scene after hearing Moon's story.²¹ Borges cast himself as a character in his narrative to

suggest that each retelling will produce another fearful recognition. In their powerful brevity Borges's stories embody the paralysing violence which is so often their subject. Borges suggests in his essay 'Magias parciales del *Quijote*' that the technique of fictions within fictions, like the play within the play in *Hamlet*, owes its efficacy to the fact that we, too, as readers or spectators, are ensnared in the conflicts we intend to observe at a distance (OC, p. 669). In 'La forma de la espada' the fiction within the fiction is the thing that catches at our conscience, that makes us aware of our complicity.

Far from being an empty or conventional literary sign, facial scars in Borges (as well as in his admired Stevenson) take on an added meaning of treachery and intrigue. Starting from broad principles of the literary function of details, Borges comes to develop the meaning of the sign of the facial scar within the specific context of an Argentine literary tradition, in which being marked signifies loss or defeat. The scar, representing a fundamental ambiguity in fiction, becomes in Borges a mark on writer and reader of fantasized violence. Scars, the marks left by the past, are signs that constitute a coded language that evokes untold stories of violence and betrayal, and at the same time inscribes those stories within the ethos of the Argentine knife fighter.

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²⁰ Another poem about Juan Muraña is the 'Milonga de Juan Muraña' in *La Cifra* (Buenos Aires, 1974), pp. 55-56. Muraña is also the subject of a story in *El informe de Brodie* (OC, pp. 1044-47). I have discussed Muraña in 'Evocation and Provocation in the Poetry of Borges: The Figure of Juan Muraña', in *Borges the Poet*, edited by Carlos Cortinez (Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1986), pp. 325-32.

²¹ The name of the ranch, 'La Colorada', suggests the colour of blood; more specifically, since it is located in Uruguay, it evokes the long civil conflict between the two main parties in that country, the Blancos and the Colorados.