
Prefiguration, Narrative Transgression and Eternal Return in Borges' "La forma de la espada"

DONALD MCGRADY

In his widely acclaimed *Discours du récit*,¹ Gérard Genette refines some of the concepts which for many years have been employed to describe the structure of narrative. Perhaps the most useful feature of Genette's book is that it brings to light a number of narrational techniques which had previously escaped the notice of students of fiction. Genette uses *À la recherche du temps perdu* to illustrate these formerly unknown fictional devices, and one of his principal concerns is to show that Proust often violates his own narrative premises. Thus, for example, Genette is at pains to demonstrate that Proust's narrator, Marcel, often reports facts which he could not in fact have known, or he speaks from a perspective other than his own. Genette, disturbed by these shifts of narrative viewpoint, rather picturesquely refers to them as "transgressions," thereby suggesting that an author who departs from his own narrative rules – i.e., the point of view which he adopts at the beginning of his story – fails to live up to an implicit agreement between himself and the reader.

Undoubtedly, creative writers sometimes do commit mistakes, confusing one viewpoint with another, as Genette contends is the case with Proust. However, I believe that the critic should always exercise caution before finally labeling as mistakes those shifts in narrative perspective: we should first consider the possibility that the apparent slip was actually intentional, and we should try to fathom what purpose may be served by the seeming miscue. A case in point is provided by Borges' story "La forma de la espada," which Genette himself cites as a "spectacular example" of the violation of another type of narrative agreement, that existing between the narrator and other characters in his story.²

It will be remembered that "La forma de la espada" employs the technique of the story-within-the-story. Borges – the explicitly named narrative *persona* – must stay one night at the home of a mysterious and much-feared foreigner known only as *el Inglés*, a vividly scarred man who had immigrated to Uruguay from Brazil many years earlier. To ingratiate himself with his host, Borges praises England, only to be informed that *el Inglés*³ is actually an Irishman from Dungarvan. After drinking heavily, Borges alludes inquisitively to the scar across his

companion's forehead, and the latter then relates its origin: in 1922 he was serving bravely with the Irish Republicans fighting the English for their independence. One day he was joined by a comrade from Munster, one John Vincent Moon, a dogmatic Communist who was "flaco y fofo a la vez: daba la incómoda impresión de ser invertebrado" (131).⁴ Moon immediately proved to be a coward: he froze from fear when challenged by a British sentry, and afterwards had "trémula y reseca la boca" (132). Moon avoided fighting alongside his Irish brothers, but seemed to enjoy analysing their plans and strategy.

Returning home earlier than usual one day, Borges' host discovered that Moon was betraying him to the English. Pursuing the traitor through the labyrinthine house where they were living, he succeeded in marking his face with a scimitar, leaving a "media luna de sangre" (135). Shortly thereafter the British Black and Tans arrived to lead the hero off. At this point Borges' drinking partner halts, his hands trembling; prodded by his guest, he reveals that after betraying his companion-in-arms, Moon had emigrated to Brazil. Seeing that *el Inglés* has again stopped his narrative, Borges once more begs him to continue; the wretched man then points to his scar and cries: "¿Usted no me cree? ... ¿No ve que llevo escrita en la cara la marca de mi infamia? ... yo soy Vincent Moon" (135).

Doubtless the great majority of readers of "La forma de la espada" are surprised by the ending: it is not obvious during the story-within-a-story that John Vincent Moon has switched places with the man he betrayed some twenty years earlier (this is the "spectacular ... violation" of the narrator/character relationship alluded to by Genette). But once the reader – at least, the diligent reader – has finished the piece, he sees that a whole series of clues could have suggested the finale to him during the course of his reading. This strategy, typical of the detective story and inherent in the structure of "La forma de la espada,"⁵ condemns the reader to being surprised by the author, unless he somehow suspects beforehand that the piece he is perusing belongs to the detective genre, in which case he can avoid seeing the ending until he has tried to solve the mystery for himself. Lacking the foreknowledge that the story is of the detective variety, the great majority of readers – if not all – will unwittingly devour the entire piece in a sitting, and therefore be condemned to the lesser pleasure of going back and picking out the clues which provide the solution to the puzzle. In this kind of story, then, one of the author's primary purposes is to assert his superiority over the reader – an advantage he could easily renounce simply by appending a subtitle like "A Detective Story" to his work, and separating the ending from the rest of the tale. However, the detective story has traditionally

followed the usual format of the narrative, presenting a unified whole in which the final resolution is carefully spelled out.

Let us now go back and enumerate those details in "La forma de la espada" which provide the key to the solution of its implicit mystery. Perhaps the first particular that strikes our attention, because of the emphasis accorded it by the narrator, occurs when *el Inglés* discloses that he is not English, but "irlandés, de Dungarvan. *Dicho esto se detuvo, como si hubiera revelado un secreto*" (130; italics added). The reader thus stands forewarned of the mysterious nature of the text in general, and specifically that toponyms are to play an important role in its understanding. Slightly over a page later, this will become significant, because it turns out – although no emphasis is given to it here – that John Vincent Moon was from Munster (131). As so often in the detective story, an important circumstance is cleverly hidden: Munster is a name given to an area which covers five provinces of Ireland, and Dungarvan – the home town of *el Inglés* – is located in this region. In other words, Moon and *el Inglés* are from the same small area of the country – a circumstance which, if appreciated, might very well awaken our suspicions. In the concluding lines of the story appears another place-name whose importance to the plot is less recondite: when Borges asks what happened to Moon, *el Inglés* answers "Cobró los dineros de Judas y huyó al Brasil" (135). One recalls that the narrative's first lines had established that *el Inglés* came to Uruguay from Brazil, and that his Spanish was "abrasilerado" (129; cf. also 130, where Borges' host mixes his Spanish with Portuguese).

The description which *el Inglés* gives of Moon on introducing him plainly prefigures his subsequent cowardice and treachery: "Era flaco y fofo a la vez ... invertebrado" (131). An understanding of the full implications of the adjective *invertebrado* depends on a knowledge of English, for the word in Spanish is wholly scientific, referring only to "los animales que no tienen columna vertebral" (Real Academia, *Diccionario*), whereas *spineless* in English denotes weakness of character as well. The contradictory condition of being at the same time "flaco y fofo" suggests not a neutral Janus-like duality of temperament, but – because of the negative connotations of the two adjectives – devious duplicity. It should also be noted that *el Inglés* is described as possessing an "enérgica flacura" (129) which coincides with that of the villain. After Moon's cowardliness becomes evident, through his use of the pretext of a slight flesh wound to avoid combat (132), Borges slyly emphasizes the point by registering Moon's statement that "El arma que prefiero es la artillería" (134) – artillery soldiers serve far from the close personal engagement demanded by guerrilla warfare.

The central theme of "La forma de la espada" constitutes one of the most fundamental preoccupations in Borges' stories: "Lo que hace un hombre es como si lo hicieran todos los hombres ... yo soy los otros, cualquier hombre es todos los hombres ... (133). This thesis forms a constituent part of the most basic of Borges' ideas, that which underlies and unifies his entire *œuvre*: the notion of the circularity of time, which, in stating that there is nothing new under the sun, implies that our apparently unique characters and actions simply repeat other lives. Borges' host voices this concept as he confesses his repugnance for Moon: "me abochornaba ese hombre con miedo, como si yo fuera el cobarde, no Vincent Moon" (133 – note the syntactic ambiguity in this phrase, which makes possible the reading "as if I were the coward, [and] not Vincent Moon"). And of course the exposition of this concept prefigures once again the end of *el Inglés*' account: if all men are all other men, then Borges' host must be, among others, John Vincent Moon.

A necessary consequence of the circularity of human existence is that we must reject all types of vanity, including pretensions to originality, since nothing that we do is unique, but rather a mere duplication of earlier acts. Even our names can become expressions of hubris, since we tend to regard them as an important extension of our personality, an expression of our ego and our claim to uniqueness. For this reason, Borges declares in the second sentence of our tale, referring to *el Inglés*, "su nombre verdadero no importa." To illustrate the point further, the protagonist's name is thrice registered as John Vincent Moon (131, 132, 133), and twice as just Vincent Moon (133, 135).

Yet another corollary of the eternal return, which inexorably obliterates names, personalities and events, states that true time does not exist, since all lives and deeds are simply repetitions of earlier lives and deeds. This principle also finds expression in our story; when Moon has just joined the hero and they proceed together to the latter's home, *el Inglés* says: "Antes o después, orillamos el ciego paredón de una fábrica o de un cuartel" (131–32). Whether the action occurs sooner or later has no importance, for time is but a circle and we are nothing more than specks lost upon it. Note also that the building was *either* a factory *or* a barracks: it matters not which, for it undoubtedly has been both, and has been and will be all other structures as well. Later, "esos nueve días, en mi recuerdo, forman un solo día ..." (133): again, time is negated, for it has no true meaning or value.

Other repetitions abound in our story, illustrating the infinite forms which the eternal return can assume. For instance, after stating that "lo que hace un hombre es como si lo hicieran todos los hombres," *el Inglés* adds: "Por eso no es injusto que una desobediencia en un jardín

contamine al género humano ..." (133). The Biblical allusion is double, referring in the first instance to Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden, and in the second to Judas' betrayal of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. This primal motif of betrayal in a garden is mirrored on the next page, when Moon indicates to the English that they should capture the heroic freedom fighter precisely when he "atravesara el jardín." Moon's telephone call to the English makes him but another incarnation of Judas contacting the Pharisees. This New Testament comparison is emphasized once more when *el Inglés* reveals that Moon subsequently "cobró los dineros de Judas y huyó al Brasil" (135). Earlier references to circularity and reincarnation appear in *el Inglés*' declaration that "Irlanda ... era las torres circulares y ... las enormes epopeyas que cantan el robo de toros que en otra encarnación fueron héroes y en otras peces y montañas ..." (131; italics added).

The most obvious repetition of all in our story is that of the shape of the sword: the "arco ... casi perfecto" of *el Inglés*' scar, in the initial sentence, obviously corresponds to the "media luna de sangre" engraved on Moon's face by the hero toward the end (135). We should not overlook, however, another allusion to this same arc in the middle of the tale; in the house occupied by Moon and the hero, there are Indian scimitars brought back by the owner, General Berkeley:⁶ "cimitarras de Nishapur, en cuyos detenidos arcos de círculo parecían pedurar el viento y la violencia de la batalla" (132; italics added). Great irony resides in this "shape of the sword:" the half-moon is the symbol of Islam – an appropriate stigma to attach to an Irish Catholic who betrayed his cause. And the name of Moon of course echoes the emblem of infamy etched – much like a scarlet letter – upon his forehead; little wonder that *el Inglés* had always concealed his surname in Latin America. In fact, we can reasonably wonder if Moon was indeed his real family name – if so, he seems to have been predestined to treachery – or whether he adopted it as a form of self-castigation for his dastardly act.

Perhaps the most significant repetitions of all in "La forma de la espada" concern a "mannikin" used by the British for target practice:

... en una esquina vi tirado un cadáver, menos tenaz en mi recuerdo que un maniquí en el cual los soldados interminablemente ejercitaban la puntería, en mitad de la plaza ... (134).

... Esa tarde, en la plaza, [Moon] vio fusilar un maniquí por unos borrachos (135).

It would seem that this *maniquí* is

... otro [republicano irlandés], el que más valía, [que] murió en el patio de un cuartel, en el alba, fusilado por hombres llenos de sueño ... (130–31).

If this dummy had been only that, there would have been no reason for *el Inglés* to have remained so obsessed – during twenty years – by the memory of soldiers shooting at it. Furthermore, soldiers simply do not practice their marksmanship on mannikins at close range. *El Inglés* cannot forget this scene because the English not only executed (at dawn) his courageous friend, but they continued to pump lead into his body during much of the day.

These numerous repetitions, then, not only reiterate Borges' favourite theme of the eternal return, but also serve to prefigure or to insinuate the surprise ending, in which *el Inglés* turns out to be the traitor Moon, rather than the unnamed (of course!) Irish hero. But Borges uses yet another device to suggest to the observant reader that the clues to the surprise ending were in the text all along. We have already seen (in the plot summary in the second paragraph above) that when Moon enters General Berkeley's house with the hero, after being terrified by the English sentry's challenge, he "[tenía] trémula y reseca la boca" (132). On reflection, it will be apparent that *el Inglés* could not possibly have known whether his alleged companion's mouth was dry or not, for this is something that we can know only about ourselves, not about others. If *el Inglés* knew that Moon's mouth was parched, then he had to be Moon. (For this reason I observed earlier that the "narrative transgressions" in *À la recherche du temps perdu* should be carefully reexamined to see if Proust introduced them with a purpose.) This technique of switching grammatical persons, with the "I" suddenly moving to "he," or vice versa, was not invented by Borges (*nihil sub sole novum!*), but can be documented at least three and a half centuries earlier, in a sonnet by a poet greatly admired by him, Luis de Góngora.⁷

In view of the many examples of the eternal return introduced by Borges to presage his surprise ending, and particularly in view of the narrative transgression of Moon's parched mouth, one could argue that the finale is not really a surprise at all. Yet if we are sincere with ourselves, each of us will probably be forced to admit that the ending of "La forma de la espada" did indeed come as a surprise the first time we read the story. It is only upon reflection that we detect the numerous clues which Borges planted throughout his narrative. Still, it remains true that by specifying the solution to the central mystery of his tale, Borges deprives the careful reader of the pleasure of unraveling that

problem for himself.

But by so doing, Borges merely adheres to prior literary tradition: the usual practice in detective stories, as in the narrative generally, is for the author to spell out the solution. In this traditional format, the reader must resign himself to playing second fiddle to the author, and his satisfaction will consist in the appreciation of those clues which, had he been an omniscient reader, would have led him to the correct answer during his first reading. The important thing in detective stories such as "La forma de la espada" is that the reader appreciate that it is indeed a tale of suspense, and that he then go back and discover those details which pointed all along to the finale. It is from an appreciation of this subtext that the attentive reader will derive his satisfaction as amateur detective.

In this respect "La forma de la espada" – like the majority of Borges' stories – differs radically from tales such as those of Sherlock Holmes, for example. Arthur Conan Doyle has his protagonist enumerate at the end those clues which led him to the resolution of each mystery, but Borges states the solution and then expects us to find the clues which make the ending inevitable. Such is the usual structure of a certain kind of detective story, an intellectual narrative that affords the clever reader infinitely more pleasure in participation with the author than the kind of tale cultivated by Doyle, wherein the reader's active collaboration with the creator is altogether eliminated. At the same time, the Borgesian tale does not go to the lengths of such experimental detective stories as Bill Adler and Thomas Chastain's *Who Killed the Robins Family?*, in which the solution is withheld and a \$10,000 prize offered for solving the crime, or García Márquez's *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, which hints broadly at a mystery and subtly at a solution (which can be arrived at by an appreciation of literary allusions and symbols, much in the manner of Borges).

In his very useful critical guide to *Ficciones*, Donald Shaw has concluded that "La forma de la espada" is an "ingenious, but slight, tale."⁸ I hope that the preceding reflections have demonstrated the contrary, that it is – albeit an early piece – a story elaborated with the same care and ingenuity that characterize the later Borges: the themes of the eternal return and its corollaries not only appear overtly, but are suggested by numerous other means throughout the development of the story. Together with the "narrative transgression" of Moon's parched mouth, the infinitely repeated notion of the eternal return serves the structural function of prefiguring the surprise ending. The sensitivities of Shaw and other leading students of Borges have perhaps been misled by the author himself, who in an interview affirmed that "La forma de

la espada" is "a trick story after all ... when I wrote that story I was quite young and then I believed in cleverness, and now I think that cleverness is a hindrance."⁹ Surely the penchant of authors generally, and of Borges in particular, for misleading their interviewers is a well-known fact of literary history.

Not the least of the beauties of this profound detective story consists in Borges' use of that peculiar combination of suggestion and silence that distinguishes the masterworks of the Spanish Middle Ages. As in the *Poema de mio Cid*, the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, the *Libro de buen amor* or *El Conde Lucanor*, there are in "La forma de la espada" certain passages which allude to undeveloped but nonetheless very provocative points. For instance, did John Vincent Moon join the Irish Republicans intending all the while to become a spy and informer for the English, or was he an initially loyal partisan who then turned upon the hero because he felt envious and humiliated by the latter's bravery? This problem appears to be insolvable, for Borges refuses to provide any indication one way or the other (if all men are all other men, perhaps it ultimately makes no difference).

What seems clear, however, is that John Vincent Moon (or Vincent Moon?) was so revolted by his own cowardice and base treachery that he reacted positively after the deed, creating a he-man image for himself in his new country: it is said that he became a smuggler, and that he wrested his piece of land from the unwilling former owner by disclosing to him the secret of his scar (129). Could this really have happened? His story as we – along with Borges – have heard it does not make this appear likely. On the other hand, however, the unceasing gyrations of the eternal return oblige us to be reluctant to rule out that possibility, since "acaso Schopenhauer tiene razón: yo soy los otros, cualquier hombre es todos los hombres, Shakespeare es de algún modo el miserable John Vincent Moon" (133). In America, Moon may perhaps have become a reincarnation of the unnamed Republican hero whom he had betrayed in Ireland.

University of Virginia

NOTES

- 1 In *Figures, essais*, III (Paris, 1972); translated as *Narrative Discourse, An Essay in Method*, tr. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, 1980). Quotations will be from this English rendering.
- 2 *Narrative Discourse*, 246.
- 3 I use the epithet of *el Inglés* to differentiate the narrator's fictional *persona* from his real identity as John Vincent Moon. At the end of this paper we

shall see that the man known as *el Inglés* differs markedly from what he was 20 years earlier.

- 4 Page references are to the edition in *Ficciones (Obras completas, V* [Buenos Aires, 1963]).
- 5 Both because its object is to discover who committed a certain crime, and because clues for the solution of the mystery are purposefully included.
- 6 This General Berkeley does not figure in Irish biography. My friend James E. Holloway, Jr., who kindly read this study in manuscript and made numerous suggestions for its improvement, notes that the name of Berkeley alludes to the British idealist philosopher on whom Borges relies to refute the notion of time as a succession; see especially "Nueva refutación del tiempo" (*Otras inquisiciones*).
- 7 One of Góngora's better known sonnets, that which begins "Descaminando, enfermo, peregrino," describes a *caminante's* amorous adventures from the "he" point of view from lines 1 through 13, only to switch to "I" in the last line. In other words, the "peregrino de amor" initially described from the third-person viewpoint suddenly becomes "yo" in line 14. Borges' enthusiasm for Góngora's poetry found early expression in an essay entitled "Examen de un soneto de Góngora," in *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (Buenos Aires, 1926), 123-30 (an impressionistic study of the poem beginning "Raya, dorado sol, orna y colora").
- 8 Shaw, *Ficciones* (London, 1976), 50.
- 9 In Richard Burgin, ed. *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York, 1969), 131-32 (partially cited by Shaw, 49).

Arcángeles vencidos: amor o destrucción en la narrativa de Luis Cernuda

CARLOS SAINZ DE LA MAZA

a R. Morales y E. Miró

"Me extraña que a nadie se le ocurriera comentar mis libros en prosa...." Aún hoy, las palabras de Luis Cernuda (1902-1963), dirigidas a José Luis Cano hace casi treinta años para comentar el vacío crítico que rodeaba a su prosa literaria,¹ resultan casi buenas. Y, dentro de ese desinterés general, la palma se la llevan sus cinco relatos cortos,² de importancia sin duda muy relativa, sobre todo en sus aspectos técnicos y de expresión. Sin embargo, su interés aumenta si se advierte que constituyen la única incursión de su autor en el terreno narrativo y que, dentro del conjunto de su prosa artística, iluminan ángulos fundamentales de su visión del mundo.

Los relatos de Cernuda abarcan un período (1927-42) que va desde los años de sus primeras prosas líricas hasta la época de composición de *Como quien espera el alba*.³ Por lo tanto, el poeta abandona el género nada más iniciarse su madurez lírica. La fecha de aparición de los textos los hace, sin embargo, algo más tardíos: *Tres narraciones* es de 1948.⁴ El desfase entre las fechas de escritura y de edición es una constante de los relatos del autor, con la única excepción de *En la costa de Santiniebla* (1937). De los otros textos, *Sombras en el salón* (1927) se publica once años más tarde, quizá como una muestra de circunstancias del compromiso literario de Cernuda con la República; *El indolente*, *El viento en la colina* y *El sarao* aparecen, respectivamente, con diecinueve, diez, y seis años de retraso.⁵

La narrativa parece así haber merecido una atención muy secundaria por parte del poeta, dado su carácter esporádico y la relativa falta de interés de aquél por la publicación de sus relatos. De hecho, Cernuda nunca pasaría a la historia de nuestra literatura como narrador; *El sarao*, que pudo haber significado su verdadera iniciación en el género, supuso por el contrario su adiós al mismo. Sus aportaciones siguen una tónica finisecular que cubre, en sus referencias, un amplio campo estilístico que abarca desde el realismo de Valera a la novela sensorial de Gabriel Miró, con recuerdos de los románticos alemanes, Bécquer, los modernistas y el 98. Cernuda, sin embargo, no acaba de fundir en un estilo propio tantas y tan ricas posibilidades, cuyo único común denominador podría quizá