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For Daniel 13 April 2010  
With every good wish for a happy  
stay in Ireland. Best wishes  
James

## An 'Irish' story of Jorge Luis Borges: *Tema del traidor y del héroe*

by J. Whiston

Borges' early work contains some descriptions of streets and places, especially of his home city of Buenos Aires, and in his earliest short story (*El hombre de la esquina rosada*) he attempted to imitate the natural speech of his *gaucho* fellow-countrymen. In the 1930's, however, he began to develop a new kind of imaginative writing which was speculative and analytical and often nearer to the form of the essay than that of the short story. He describes the change as follows: 'pasé de las mitologías del arrabal a los juegos con el tiempo y con lo infinito.' ('I moved on from suburban mythologies to games with time and the infinite.')

<sup>1</sup> Following his temperament which led him to 'games with time and the infinite' meant that he quickly lost interest in using the normal techniques or concerns of realism in his work. There is very little in his stories of the 40's and 50's that concentrates directly on physical landscape or creates atmosphere through physical description.

*Tema del traidor y del héroe* which tells of the background to an Irish rebellion in the 1820's is a typical illustration of Borges' intellectual interests, one may call them metaphysical interests, which work to the exclusion of realistic settings in his stories. In it Borges strips aside all the trappings of realistic fiction. In the first paragraph he names the general literary sources of inspiration under whose influence 'he imaginado este argumento' ('I have imagined this story').<sup>2</sup> The precise time of the action is unimportant, he says. It can take place 'al promediar o al empezar el siglo XIX' ('in the middle or the beginning of the nineteenth century') (p. 137). Neither is precision of place important, except that it should be an oppressed country: 'Digamos (para comodidad narrativa) Irlanda; digamos 1824.' ('Let us say (for narrative convenience) Ireland; let us say 1824') (ibid). And the title itself of the collection

of stories in which *Tema del traidor y del héroe* appears—*Ficciones*—is always an ironic reminder to the reader that he is reading ‘fictions’ not ‘facts’.

Another cause of the lack of realistic and detailed landscaping of the early nineteenth-century Irish scene emerges from Borges’ ironic attitude to the work of historians in trying to resurrect the past. Several of his short stories, none more so than the one under discussion, imply a question such as: how can we know the ‘facts’ of an event at any given moment? In another of the *Ficciones* short stories the fictitious author Pierre Menard puts his finger on the problem when he writes, ‘La verdad histórica [. . .] no es lo que sucedió; es lo que juzgamos que sucedió’. (‘Historical truth is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened.’) (p. 55). Borges suggests that to do justice to truth an infinitely greater sensitivity is required than a mere recounting of facts can achieve. In his essay on Beckford’s *Vathek* he writes, ‘Tan compleja es la realidad, tan fragmentaria y tan simplificada la historia, que un observador omnisciente podría redactar un número indefinido, y casi infinito, de biografías de un hombre, que destacaran hechos independientes y de las que tendríamos que leer muchas veces antes de comprender que el protagonista es el mismo.’ (‘Reality is so complex, history is so fragmentary and simplified, that an omniscient observer could write an indefinite and almost infinite number of biographies of a man, which would emphasise different facts and which we would have to read many times before realizing that the protagonist is the same person.’)<sup>3</sup> But even for the most sensitive observer, the task of resurrecting the past must seem hopeless, because what were once real men are now reduced to words on a page: ‘Alexander is a series of words and Attila is another.’<sup>4</sup>

If history is inadequate to restore the past with words, it is not also impossible to suppose that certain events have been organised with future history in mind in order to deceive the historians. How can we be certain that when we read history we are not reading some manipulation of it designed to obscure the ‘historical’ facts? *Tema del traidor y del héroe* deals with such a manipulation.

The story, then, does not aim to be a realistic account of an early nineteenth century Irish rebellion. What interests Borges are not the personalities and society of the time, but the possibilities for intellectual speculation that such a situation affords him. To this extent *Tema del traidor del héroe* reveals some of the recurring central preoccupations of Borge’s literary production: the hidden

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complexities of any given situation, the vulnerability of historians as they try to unravel the complexities of the past; but there also emerge the positive themes of the beneficent relationship between life and art and between life and an individual's attitude to death.

The story traces the causes of a fictitious rebellion against the British authorities in 1824. Borges has supposedly taken the story from an account written by a great-grandson of the leader of the rebellious movement, whose name was Fergus Kilpatrick. Kilpatrick, a charismatic and popular figure is mysteriously assassinated in very dramatic circumstances on the eve of the rebellion: 'Kilpatrick, fue asesinado en un teatro; la policia britanica no dio jamás con el matador; los historiadores declaran que ese fracaso no empaña su buen crédito, ya que tal vez lo hizo matar la misma policia.' ('Kilpatrick was assassinated in a theatre; the British police never caught the killer; the historians declare that that failure does not decry their powers of detection since perhaps the police themselves were responsible for the killing.') (p. 138). But the historians are wrong. For some time past there had been a traitor in the ranks of the conspirators. Kilpatrick appoints one of their number, James Nolan, to discover who it is. Shortly before the planned uprising Nolan reports that he has found the traitor and that it is Kilpatrick himself. The leader acknowledges his guilt but begs that his death may atone for his treachery. Nolan is a Celtic scholar who has translated Shakespeare into Gaelic and had written on the European folk pageants, where nearly all the village takes part in re-enacting an event from their history. He conceives a vast drama, with borrowings from *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* in order to maintain and improve upon Kilpatrick's heroic image before his execution and to put the blame for it on the British, thus aiding the uprising. Some days and hundreds of people are devoted to consolidating this heroic image, according to a script written by Nolan; Kilpatrick's every word and gesture of those days are prefixed by Nolan, and the historians faithfully note them: 'Las cosas que dijeron e hicieron perduran en los libros históricos.' ('The things they said and did still remain in the history books.') (p. 141).

Kilpatrick's twentieth century biographer, Ryan, who is also his great-grandson, discovers Nolan's manipulation of the facts. But he also observes that the borrowings from Shakespeare are too obviously dramatic. Did Nolan deliberately include these weak links so that *his* work would be recognised at some future date for

the masterpiece that it was? If this is so then Ryan's discovery is also playing a part foreseen by Nolan in his play. Ryan cannot be sure and publishes the orthodox account, which perhaps was Nolan's true intention . . . perhaps . . . Ryan becomes aware of the complexities of the situation (his own relationship to Kilpatrick would be another complexity), coming to realise perhaps, like the inhabitants of the planet Tlön in another of Borges' short stories that 'un libro que no encierra su contralibro es [. . .] incompleto'. ('A book that does not include its counterbook is [. . .] incomplete.') (p. 27).

In the story the historians are wrong in hinting at police responsibility for Kilpatrick's death and although they come to the right conclusions about his heroism they use wrong premises. Ryan, in order to maintain his identity as an individual and not lose it as a possible character in 'la obra de Nolan' (p. 141), performing a congratulatory epilogue to the work, decides to suppress what he feels might be a more truthful account of the episode. Of course he is unsure whether even this suppression might not have been foreseen by Nolan, and provided for.

The story suggests a beneficent relationship between art and life in its treatment of the redemptive power of art. Kilpatrick's treachery is redeemed in Nolan's vast drama. His apparent heroism and charisma which disguised the treachery beneath, becomes heroism again in his fidelity to the death that Nolan scripts for him. It is when Nolan in apparent haste plagiarises a fellow artist, Shakespeare, rather than write from life that his 'populoso drama' is weakest and therefore nearest to being discovered for the manipulation that it is. Kilpatrick in fact helps the writer to improve the script: 'Kilpatrick [. . .] más de una vez enriqueció con actos y palabras improvisadas el texto de su juez.' ('Kilpatrick [. . .] more than once enriched, with improvised acts and words, the text of his judge') (ibid). So the hero not only fulfils the letter of the script but more than enters into the spirit of it: the play is indeed the thing that proves that his earlier heroic reputation was the true one. The saving transition from traitor to hero is crowned in Nolan's work of art.

Kilpatrick spends the last four days of his life acutely aware of his impending death: as the leader of the revolutionary council he signs the warrant for his own execution. During the last days every movement of his is designed to gain the best results from his

death. That Borges his presence of death, his s

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death. That Borges himself is intensely aware of the threatening presence of death, his small poem *Límites* brings out to the full:

Hay una línea de Verlaine que no volveré a recordar,  
hay una calle próxima que está vedada a mis pasos,  
hay un espejo que me ha visto por última vez,  
hay una puerta que he cerrado hasta el fin del mundo.  
Entre los libros de mi biblioteca (estoy viéndolos)  
hay alguno que ya nunca abriré.  
Este verano cumpliré cincuenta años;  
la muerte me desgasta, incesante.

There is a line of Verlaine that I will not remember again,  
there is a street nearby that is closed to me,  
there is a mirror that has seen me for the last time,  
there is a door that I have closed until the end of the world.  
Among the books in my library (I am looking at them)  
there is some one that I will now never open.  
This summer I will be fifty years of age;  
death wastes me, incessantly. (*El hacedor*, p. 148).

Even things which seem near and are a comfortable part of his life ('a street nearby', 'the books in my library') are a *memento mori* for the poet. The first six lines might well describe Kilpatrick's thoughts, since he knows, from Nolan's script, which particular act will not be repeated. Death, indeed, pervades the stories of Borges. But a common link unites the ways in which most of his characters die: a calm fulfilled stoicism in the face of death. Kilpatrick is no exception. His acceptance of death is a model of fidelity and generosity and redeems his treason. When Nolan suggests the vast plan, 'Kilpatrick juró colaborar en ese proyecto, que le daba ocasión de redimirse y que rubricaría su muerte'. ('Kilpatrick swore he would collaborate in that project, which gave him the chance to redeem himself and which his death would seal.') (p. 140). He is described as 'arreatado por ese minucioso destino que lo redimía y que lo perdía' ('fired by that minute destiny which redeemed him and destroyed him') (p. 141), the fatal shot is 'anhelado' ('longed for') and he remains faithful, even as the shot is fired: 'apenas pudo articular entre dos efusiones de brusca sangre, algunas palabras previstas.' ('He could hardly articulate between two sudden gushes of blood some prearranged words.') (ibid).

Much has been written of the scepticism and even nihilism<sup>5</sup> of Borges. *Tema del traidor y del héroe*, while sceptical of the possibility of saying anything adequate about the past, expresses some

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of the writer's positive ideas with regard to the role of art in people's lives and the redeeming quality of a stoical acceptance of death.\*

\* I am grateful to Professor Nigel Glendinning who read an early draft of this paper and made valuable suggestions.

*Notes*

1. 'Borges y yo', *El hacedor* (Buenos Aires/Barcelona, 1967), p. 72. (The translations throughout are my own.)
2. *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires, 1967), p. 137 (referred to below by the page number).
3. *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires, 1966), p. 187.
4. Quoted by A. M. Barrenechea in *Borges: the labyrinth maker* (N.Y.U.P., 1965), p. 59.
5. See, for example, Miss Barrenechea's book.