

THE WORDS THAT ARE NOT THERE:
CHESTERTON IN BORGES'S
"THE THEME OF THE TRAITOR AND THE HERO"

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Although the narrator of Jorge Luis Borges's "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" begins by stating that he wrote the short story "[u]nder the notorious influence of Chesterton" (143),¹ such influence has been ignored or limited to abstract connections. The numerous texts about the relationship between Gilbert K. Chesterton and Borges have explored broader subjects, such as the influence that the former had in the latter's conception of the detective genre. In this case, however, the relationship is specific, as usually occurs with Borges. The story that he uses as a subtext is "The Sign of the Broken Sword," included in *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911), the first of the volumes about the priest detective. Only one of the articles about both authors mentions this story, although the critic's observations are rather general, such as: "These two stories share another characteristic frequently encountered in Borges and

1 In her analysis of the other source of this story, Leibniz, Silvia Dapia argues that his presence could be purposely misleading and in agreement with Ryan's initial and naïve hypothesis that history is repeating itself. She also says that Leibniz's theory of "preestablished harmony" leads the reader to what she finds a most satisfactory explanation: the presence in the story of what Fritz Mauthner called "word-superstition," something that will be addressed later.

Chesterston's short stories: what the majority sees, is not really what happens" (Gayton 314).

Chesterston's text not only provides significant elements that contribute to understanding "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," but it is fundamental to its analysis. This reading will try to explain one of the most enigmatic aspects of the story: Ryan's silence. Borges's rewriting of "The Sign of the Broken Sword" illuminates his conception of history, particularly the construction of the so-called major historical events, underneath which lie more mundane and even banal motives. This article will also explore Borges's concerns with the writing of history, a theme that is present in several of his short stories and essays.

"The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" tells of Ryan's investigation of his ancestor Fergus Kilpatrick, who was the leader of an Irish rebellion in 1824 and was assassinated on the eve of the insurrection. Ryan knows that there was a traitor among the conspirators and discovers that it was Kilpatrick himself. The latter had asked James Alexander Nolan, his second in command, to execute him in a way that the conspiracy would not be compromised. Nolan decided to create an elaborate play, in which most of the city was involved. Therefore, the acts, words, and the execution of Kilpatrick served not as an obstacle to the rebellion, but rather as a catalyst to its instigation. He is portrayed as a hero in all the history books, but in reality he was the opposite, or both. When Ryan discovers the truth about his ancestor's fate, he decides to keep it a secret.

One of the most intriguing elements is the reason for this action. The story concludes:

In Nolan's play the passages taken from Shakespeare are the *least* dramatic ones; Ryan suspected that the author interpolated them so that someone, in the future, would be able to stumble upon the truth. Ryan realized that he, too, was part of Nolan's plot... After long and stubborn deliberation, he decided to silence the discovery. He published a book dedicated to the hero's glory; that too, perhaps, had been foreseen. (*Collected* 146)

En la obra de Nolan, los pasajes imitados de Shakespeare son los *menos* dramáticos; Ryan sospecha que el autor los intercaló para que una persona, en el porvenir, diera con la verdad. Comprende que él también forma parte de la trama de Nolan... Al cabo de tenaces cavilaciones, resuelve silenciar el descubrimiento. Publica un libro dedicado a la gloria del héroe; también eso, tal vez, estaba previsto. (*OC* 1: 498)

It is never said what this “long and stubborn deliberation” entails, but it should be the key in interpreting this character’s decision and thus, the conclusion of the story. However, if we read Chesterton’s “The Sign of the Broken Sword,” we find Ryan’s thoughts in the words of Father Brown at the end of his investigation.

The story is simply a conversation that Father Brown has with Flambeau, the former criminal who, thanks to the priest’s persuasive powers, has been redeemed and converted into an ally in the arduous process of criminal investigation. As they walk through a forest, Father Brown tries to find the reason why the subject of his inquiry, British general Sir Arthur St. Clare, acted absurdly in the last battle he commanded. The battle took place years ago, during a military conflict between England and Brazil, in this country’s territory.² Revered in all of his country and famous for his flawless ethics and military knowledge, the decisions St. Clare made during this battle contradict his honorable character. He committed a tactical error that caused the death of almost 800 of his men, when he deployed them in such a manner that they became an easy target for the Brazilian artillery. Father Brown is also intrigued by another fact in this puzzle: why St. Clare’s enemy, the merciful Brazilian Olivier, who usually pardoned and freed his prisoners, failed to do so with the general and apparently hanged him. Such a death contributed to the worship of the Englishman; numerous monuments were put up in his memory, in which he was por-

2 In his annotated edition of *The Innocence of Father Brown*, Martin Gardner points out that a possible historical background of this story is a border dispute between Brazil and Great Britain over the region of Pirara, in today’s Guyana (formerly British Guiana). The dispute arose when a British missionary settled in Pirara in 1838, an action that prompted the Brazilians to expel him and the British to send troops to eject the Brazilians. No gun-battle took place and both countries finally turned to a diplomatic solution. The question was finally settled in 1904 through the arbitration of the King of Italy and the awarding of parts of the territory to each country. Gardner says that after this year “the anti-Brazilian sentiment in England, mentioned by Father Brown, quickly faded” (*Annotated* 235, n. 16). However, it does not seem that at the time the British public was interested in this dispute to the point of creating what the story calls an “anti-Brazil boom.” On the other hand, as Rivière observes, the Brazilians “have never lost the conviction, voiced at the time and frequently since then, that the whole affair was a plot to further British imperialist interests and expand their frontiers to the Amazon” (176). There were also conflicts between England and Brazil around slavery. For further information on this issue, see Needell.

trayed with the broken sword of his last battle, the ultimate symbol of his courage.

Faced with such incongruities, Father Brown tries to get the most from vague and reticent sources—most of them accounts from the protagonists and witnesses of the events. He keeps dragging Flambeau through all the places that commemorate St. Clare until they arrive at his tomb. There the priest sees what he was looking for or rather, as he puts it, “I didn’t see what I didn’t want” (195). Intrigued by his mentor’s observation, Flambeau asks: “‘What are you hunting for in all these crypts and effigies?’ ‘I am only looking for one word,’ said Father Brown. ‘A word that isn’t there’” (195). This omission reflects the witnesses’ decision of keeping the events secret, a silence that finally leads Father Brown to the terrible truth. St. Clare was in financial problems, and when the Brazilians learned this thanks to a spy (whose service was hired behind Olivier’s back, who disapproved of espionage), they offered him money, a pact that turned him into a traitor. Major Murray, a member of his army, found out and demanded that he surrender in order to be tried. St. Clare killed him, but his sword broke when driven into Murray’s body. In order to hide the evidence, the general gave an immediate call to arms: his plan was to ensure that the major’s body be buried within piles of corpses so that no one would realize the true cause of his death.³ Finding himself lost (but with his personal mission accomplished), St. Clare surrendered and was captured by Olivier, who later freed him. Upon discovering the truth, his own men hanged him and swore to remain silent, not only for the sake of England’s honor but also for that of St. Clare’s daughter.

Father Brown and his companion arrive at an inn appropriately named “The Sign of the Broken Sword.” Flambeau, upset by the recent discovery, exclaims: “I thought we had done with the leper,” and spits on the road. Father Brown responds—and this is, as I argue, Ryan’s “long and stubborn deliberation”:

“You will never have done with him in England,” said the priest, looking down, “while brass is strong and stone abides. His marble statues will erect the souls of proud, innocent boys for centuries, his village tomb will

3 Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares used this plot element in their story “Las doce figuras del mundo,” from their book in collaboration *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi* (1942).

smell of loyalty as of lilies. Millions who never knew him shall love him like a father—this man whom the last few that knew him dealt with like dung. He shall be a saint; and the truth shall never be told of him, because I have made up my mind at last. There is so much good and evil in breaking secrets, that I put my conduct to a test. All these newspapers will perish; the anti-Brazil boom is already over; Olivier is already honoured everywhere. But I told myself that if anywhere, by name, in metal or marble that will endure like the pyramids, Colonel Clancy, or Captain Keith, or President Olivier, or any innocent man was wrongly blamed, that I would speak. If it were only that St. Clare was wrongly praised, I would be silent. And I will.” (211)

Father Brown’s decision is consistent with his sense of punishment. In none of the stories of *The Innocence of Father Brown* is the criminal, whether the playful Flambeau or the evil Aristide Valentin, punished in accordance with the laws of human justice. For a priest, divine justice is more important. Father Brown is not concerned with a judicial sentence, but is instead interested in the criminal’s redemption—as is in the case of Flambeau, transformed now into a detective—, and this seems to exist outside of the penitentiary system. The punishment is often limited to a conversation with the culprit, the content of which we know nothing, due to the fact that Father Brown is bound to his vow of silence. Thus, justice is exclusively shared between him, the criminal, and God. In some instances, “divine justice” is executed in the form of suicide, as in the case of the atheist Valentin, chief of the Paris Police, who kills the American multimillionaire who was planning to donate a considerable sum of money to the Catholic Church.⁴

These pardons take place on a personal level, but in the “The Sign of the Broken Sword” Father Brown decides to keep secret an episode that could change the history of a country. The worship of St. Clare serves to stimulate patriotism throughout the region, inspiring children and generating economic profit—the area is an active tourist destination and has a number of inns named “The Sign of the Broken Sword.” Nonetheless, this cult has a false base: St. Clare not only betrayed his own country and began to receive money from the enemy, but also sent 800 of his men to a

4 See “The Secret Garden” (24-45).

sure death in an attempt to conceal the death of one. It is an atrocious act, but it must not be revealed to the generations that venerate him.

This time, however, we know Father Brown's reasons for not revealing the truth, unlike the stories in which only he, the criminal, and God share them. These reasons have to do with the promotion of good feelings—if patriotism and loyalty to one's country are two of them—over the truth. It is understandable that, as a priest, Father Brown gives more importance to these positive feelings than to the actions that generated them. He does not forgive unjust accusations—he is willing to speak out if somebody blames the other protagonists for something they did not do—, but he does forgive undeserved praise as long as it serves good causes. His silence may be seen as a tacit acknowledgement of the fact that those feelings often obey a distorted perception of historical truth, but he denies others a more complex access to the human nature, whose darkest aspects he knows in depth. Flambeau himself, in spite of having a criminal past, does not know that side as well as Father Brown and offers a naive explanation of the events. According to him, St. Clare suffered from hereditary madness. Having realized he could not control the illness any longer, and in order to keep this secret from his daughter, he resolved to commit suicide by hanging himself, not before breaking his sword. Father Brown replies: "Yours is a clean story... A sweet, pure, honest story, as open and white as that moon. Madness and despair are innocent enough. There are worse things, Flambeau" (199-200). Father Brown's acute perception comes precisely from the direct contact with human nature that the sacrament of confession—a central aspect in his sense of punishment—has given him.⁵ His condition as a priest is central to his capacity to deduct the solution to the most unimaginable crimes. It is, too, what keeps him untouched by all that world of human horrors.

There is also the question of the hero. Father Brown seems to act under the assumption that once people have chosen their heroes there is little that can be done to change their minds. Their heroism seems to reside in the context of the war itself, and their actions are justified completely by the side to which they belong. In other words, the existence of two enemy

5 See, for example, his answer in "The Blue Cross" when Flambeau asks him how he knows "all these horrors": "Has it never struck you that a man who does next to nothing but hear men's real sins is not likely to be wholly unaware of human evil?" (23).

entities and of people taking sides with one of them is enough to preserve a monolithic view of their respective heroes. But Father Brown's discovery demonstrates that heroes are, in reality, more contradictory than how they are historically portrayed or constructed in the minds of the people. For the purpose of the "great causes," a deep look into the reality of their lives, their motives and behaviors, could prove to be counterproductive. In fact, Father Brown's findings about St. Clare are not limited to the general's last days; he also shows that his military past in other continents is not exactly heroic: "In each of the hot and secret countries to which the man went he kept a harem, he tortured witnesses, he amassed shameful gold; but certainly he would have said with steady eyes that he did it to the glory of the Lord" (207).

The other reason given by Father Brown—and this one contradicts the persistence of the cult of St. Clare—is the ephemeral nature of conflicts between nations, exemplified by how the newspapers treated the war between Brazil and England. The conflict has been almost forgotten and the protagonists on both sides are equally honored. At first, Father Brown's position appears to be a critique of nationalisms. At a personal level, he has made it clear since the beginning of the story that he is above such divisions. He praises Olivier all the time, and his view of the two generals takes us back to an archaic and idealized military ethics: he compares them to Hector and Achilles. But his personal view contrasts with the elements that serve as incentives of St. Clare's cult. His epitaph, for example, reminds visitors that the general "Always Vanquished his Enemies and Always Spared Them, and Was Treacherously Slain by Them At Last. May God in Whom he Trusted both Reward and Revenge him" (194-95). The call for revenge leaves no doubt about the kind of feelings that a visit to his tomb may stimulate.

The main motive for Father Brown's silence is found, however, somewhere else. According to him, "[t]here is so much good and evil in breaking secrets" (211). This argument, however, is the weakest of all, since he does not offer an explanation but rather issues a challenge: "I put my conduct to a test" (211). The invitation to reflect on his position, to test it in similar circumstances, leaves the story open-ended. If the revelation of a secret is not pertinent when it comes to an individual conflict, when it implicates the history of a country Father Brown's position continues to be

ambiguous. On the one hand, he criticizes the simplistic views on which nationalisms are founded; on the other, he does not dare challenge a well-established public sentiment even though it is based on a lie. The access to the truth, the knowledge of the real nature of human beings and of the course of history, are kept for only a few.

A final contradiction resides in the fact that Father Brown does allow an innocent man to be wrongly blamed. Olivier goes down in history as St. Clare's executioner. The compensation for this public reputation—shown in the language inscribed in St. Clare's tomb—is that Olivier is "honoured everywhere," which seems to be enough for Father Brown not to reveal the truth. But this is a general idea that does not specifically address the significance of this event in both of these men's lives. Unlike Kilpatrick's story, where there is no one to blame except the hero, in St. Clare's somebody has to be responsible for the publicly known—and false—version of the events.

Father Brown is a Catholic priest, convinced that divine justice is more important than human justice; his judgment is understandable. I will now analyze Ryan's reasons to remain silent and see if they depart in any way from those of Father Brown. In "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," Chesterton's story has been stripped down to its basic conflict. For Borges, the treacherous act is not important in itself: in fact, we are never told what Kilpatrick did to help the enemy. It is sufficient to know that the two conditions coexist in him. Such a simplification, or rather schematization, is to be expected in a short story that openly dramatizes its own writing process. To begin with, the narrator confesses the sources—Chesterton and Leibniz—that inspired the story, which is presented as a future project: "in my spare evenings I have conceived this plot—which I will perhaps commit to paper but which already somehow justifies me. It needs details, rectifications, tinkering—there are areas of the story that have never been revealed to me" (*Collected* 143) ("[h]e imaginado este argumento, que escribiré tal vez y que de algún modo me justifica, en las tardes inútiles. Faltan pormenores, rectificaciones, ajustes; hay zonas de la historia que no me fueron reveladas aún" [*OC* 1: 496]). He later makes the reader participate in the reasoning process that led him to select a place, a historical period and a narrator: "the story...occurred in the mid or early nineteenth century—in 1824, let us say, for convenience's sake; in Ireland,

let us also say. The narrator is a man named Ryan” (*Collected* 143) (“la historia... ocurrió al promediar o al empezar el siglo XIX. Digamos (para comodidad narrativa) Irlanda; digamos 1824. El narrador se llama Ryan” [OC 1: 496]). It is possible that, in order to be consistent with the rough draft feel of the text, Ryan’s deliberations are never made explicit. It is good enough to know that, like Father Brown, he opted for the heroic side. But although Father Brown’s arguments may explain Ryan’s decision, other factors contribute to it.

First of all, the characteristics of the plays that both St. Clare and Nolan conceive are different. Due to time constraints, St. Clare is forced to improvise, an improvisation that nevertheless, according to Father Brown, was his most brilliant act.⁶ Nolan has more time at his disposal—although not enough—to write his script, and hundreds of actors participate in it. Even Kilpatrick himself cannot resist the temptation of being part of such a magnificent play and, “moved almost to the ecstasy by the scrupulous plotted fate that would redeem him and end his days, more than once [he] enriched his judge’s text with improvised words and acts” (*Collected* 145) (“arreatado por ese minucioso destino que lo redimía y que lo perdía, más de una vez enriqueció con actos y con palabras improvisadas el texto de su juez” [OC 1: 498]). Irish history books record every one of Kilpatrick’s actions and words, but Nolan had preconceived them with the exact intention of being recorded. The writing of history thus becomes one of the short story’s main topics. The fact that, unlike Father Brown, Ryan is a historian and that his purpose is to write a biography of his ancestor cannot be ignored.

In Borges’s story the writing of history appears in reverse order: it precedes the events or, even more, it creates them. These events are then are put back into written form, full of concealments and distortions that have already been predicted by the original script. There is not an actual event to which writing may refer. Silvia Dapía has written about this aspect of

6 “Never, I’ll swear, was he so lucid and so strong as when poor Murray lay a cold lump at his feet. Never in all his triumphs, as Captain Keith said truly, was the great man so great as he was in this last world-despised defeat... He had killed, but not silenced. But his imperious intellect rose against the facer; there was one way yet. He could make the corpse less unaccountable. He could create a hill of corpses to cover this one. In twenty minutes eight hundred English soldiers were marching down to their death” (208).

“The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” and “Emma Zunz” in relation to what Fritz Mauthner, one of Borges’s favorite philosophical readings, called “the superstition of the word”: “He [Mauthner] reminds us that ‘because a word is there,’ this does not mean that ‘something real must correspond to that word’” (“Why” 175). She points out that in both short stories the account of the events does not correspond to what actually happened. In consequence, they are filled with words that do not represent a reality, much like St. Clare’s epitaph, or the many speeches that Kilpatrick gives before his execution. Mauthner’s “word-superstition” could be inverted in Chesterton’s story because the words that are not there are precisely the ones that describe the reality: the silence of the many witnesses, the things that are not said about St. Clare.

In a similar manner, objects do not correspond to their symbolic meaning. The image of St. Clare that remains in England’s memory is that of the general on his horse, attacking with his broken sword. But the symbol of his bravery, the venerated and frequently replicated object, appears devoid of its true content; that is, it represents precisely the opposite. And it is precisely this sword what allows Father Brown to uncover the truth when he realizes that every witness mentions it. “‘Well,’ says Flambeau, ‘what’s the matter with swords? Officers generally have swords, don’t they?’ ‘They are not often mentioned in modern war,’ said the other dispassionately; ‘but in this affair one falls over the blessed sword everywhere’” (204).

The writing of history is also the subject of Borges’s article “El pudor de la historia” (“The Modesty of History”), published in 1952. In it Borges writes about the minor occurrence, invisible beneath the uproar of the so-called major events. He argues: “I have suspected that history, real history, is more modest and that its essential dates may be, for a long time, secret” (*Other* 167) (“Yo he sospechado que la historia, la verdadera historia, es más pudorosa y que sus fechas esenciales pueden ser, durante largo tiempo, secretas” (*OC* 2: 132)). In turn, the events that governments want to immortalize are exaggerated. When analyzing Goethe’s reaction after the defeat of the Weimar army against French militias in 1792, Borges asserts:

Since that time historical days have been numerous, and one of the tasks of governments (especially in Italy, Germany, and Russia) has been to fabricate them or to simulate them, with an abundance of preconditioning propaganda followed by relentless publicity. Such days, which reveal the

influence of Cecil B. de Mille, are related less to history than to journalism. (*Other* 167)

Desde aquel día han abundado las jornadas históricas y una de las tareas de los gobiernos (singularmente en Italia, Alemania y Rusia) ha sido fabricarlas y simularlas, con acopio de previa propaganda y de persistente publicidad. Tales jornadas, en las que se advierte el influjo de Cecil B. de Mille, tienen menos relación con la historia que con el periodismo. (*OC* 2: 132)

The reference to specific countries leaves no doubt that Borges had in mind the totalitarian fabrications of Fascism, Nazism, and Soviet socialism, but such a statement also constitutes a reference to the rise to power of Juan Domingo Perón, whose verbal and gestural ostentation he rejected.⁷ The construction of history acquires another dimension in this article: when the event does not exist, it is fabricated or simulated. The manner in which this is done is similar to Cecil B. de Mille's films, a director that for Borges represented the paradigm of an empty grandiloquence.⁸ A similar conception of history runs through many of the stories of *Ficciones*. In "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," the narrator says that for the main character, "[h]istorical truth... is not 'what happened'; it is what we believe happened" (*Collected* 94) ("La verdad histórica, para él, no es lo que sucedió; es lo que *juzgamos* que sucedió" [*OC* 1: 449]). The end product reminds us of the conclusion of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," when the imaginary world of Tlön begins to replace the narrator's reality. As he puts it: "already the teaching of Tlön's harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has obliterated the history that governed my own childhood; already a fictitious past has supplanted in men's memories that other past, of which we now know nothing certain—not even that it is false" (81) ("ya la enseñanza de su historia armoniosa (y llena de episodios conmovedores) ha obliterado a la que presidió mi niñez; ya en las memorias un pasado

7 See this aspect of Borges's political preferences in Balderston's article "Borges, el joven radical". The critic analyzes Borges's early celebration of the liberal president Bernardo Yrigoyen as a taciturn and reclusive man, distrustful of public appearances and big speeches.

8 See, for example, his references to De Mille's capacity to shoot scenes with thousands of extras whose identity could be easily transformed by the use of costumes and make-up ("Films" *OC* 1: 224).

ficticio ocupa el sitio de otro, del que nada sabemos con certidumbre —ni siquiera que es falso” [OC 1: 443]).

“The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” is similar to other stories in *Ficciones* in yet another aspect: the treatment of secrets, one of the central themes of the book. The secret of history and that of its reading are interwoven to persuade us that the accurate interpretation of a text, a historic account, or everyday reality, is a selective act to which only a few have access, a position that coincides with that of Father Brown. The examples are numerous: Herbert Quain’s final book, *Statements*, contains deliberate strategies to mislead the unobservant reader; in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” the narrator of the novel imagined by the characters Borges and Bioy Casares voluntarily alters the facts so that the truth is revealed only to “a few of the book’s readers—a very few—” (68) (“a unos pocos lectores —a muy pocos lectores—” [1: 431]); in “The Garden of Forking Paths” Ts’ui Pên leaves his work “to several futures (not to all)” (125) (“a varios porvenires (no a todos)” [1: 477]). In both “The Sign of the Broken Sword” and “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” reading takes place through—and in spite of—history’s reticence. The details that would reveal the truth are obscured by impassioned and often simplistic political feelings and by propaganda. In the other examples quoted above, in which the subject of inquiry is literary texts, the truth is often veiled by the reader’s conditioning. The literary market and its consumption trends have imposed ways of approaching texts and literary fashions.⁹ The attentive reader is the one that does not let those non-literary aspects influence his or her interpretation. This conception of reading as a selective activity lends itself to a double meaning. On the one hand, it denounces the superficiality created by political propaganda or the literary market, respectively; on the other hand, it perpetuates the idea that the correct interpretation of a text, a historical event, is a privileged, almost secret act.

9 As an example, see the reception of Herbert Quain’s books. The first one, *The God of the Labyrinth*, is compared to the works of Agatha Christie and Gertrude Stein. The third one has a similar fate: “Report had it that *The Secret Mirror* was a Freudian comedy; that favorable (though fallacious) reading decided the play’s success” (*Collected* 111). (“La fama divulgó que *The Secret Mirror* era una comedia freudiana; esa interpretación propicia [y falaz] determinó su éxito” [OC 1: 464]). Quain cannot avoid being read in the light of the reading trends that successful authors of his time have created.

It is not by chance that such a perspective appears in detective stories. After all, as many critics have pointed out, this genre originated as a response to the changes in the activity of reading brought about by the new conditions of the literary market in the early and mid-1800s. According to John Irwin, Edgar Allan Poe thematized these changes with the invention of detective fiction. The critic argues:

Consequently, if one were to invent a type of story that thematized the act of reading, that presented reading as the analytic interpretation, the decipherment, of a text contained within the framing text of the tale, then one would have created a form of both universal interest and unparalleled immediacy for readers, a form in which the emotional energy generated by the reader's effort to interpret the text would flow directly into the main character's activity of solving the mystery, a genre in which the reader would be asked to interpret the author's intentions by participating in the detective's attempt to interpret the criminal's. (414)

Terence Whalen puts this dynamic on the context of the new circumstances affecting the publishing industry and the readership of that time. The transformation of this industry was due to a notable increase in the quantity of publications: it had grown so much that in 1840 it was the primary economic sector in cities like New York.¹⁰ "The detective story," Whalen explains, "therefore represents Poe's most profound response to the transformation of the publishing industry and the birth of a vaguely ominous mass audience" (247). The reader, in consequence, must learn to discriminate among an overabundance of information that places all texts at the same level: one more product of consumption and, as such, no better than any other. In the detective story, the overabundance of information is contrasted with the scarcity of data that the detective must confront in order to solve the case. The detective then becomes the attentive reader, who knows how to discriminate and pay attention to the most hidden and minor details: the reader *par excellence*.

For Borges, "The Sign of the Broken Sword" must have constituted the perfect detective story. Not only is there no action in the classic sense, but

10 "The 1840 U.S. Census, for example, showed that New York had nearly 2,000 workers employed in printing and publishing, making it the city's 'single most important industry'" (Whalen 77).

also the investigation focuses on a past occurrence about which there is hardly any evidence. Furthermore, there is no one to punish. When writing his articles about the importance of honesty in a good detective story, he must have had a story like this one in mind.¹¹

There is one more element in the comparison of these two stories that deserves analysis. If Father Brown discovers the truth because he does not see what he did not want to see, the detail that gives Ryan the solution to his enigma is different. It is not the grandiose theatrical representation itself, but the passages that Nolan copies from “another playwright: the English enemy William Shakespeare” (145). After observing that several events in Kilpatrick’s last days, as well as words he says or hears, coincide with passages from *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, Ryan discovers his great-grandfather’s double condition. However, he does not do this by recognizing Shakespeare’s words, but by realizing that the imitated passages do not have the same dramatic weight as the rest of the “play.” To repeat the quote: “In Nolan’s play the passages taken from Shakespeare are the *least* dramatic ones; Ryan suspected that the author interpolated them so that someone, in the future, would be able to stumble upon the truth” (145, emphasis in the original).

Nolan has devised a brilliant script in which, from a dramatic point of view, even Shakespeare is inferior. There is no doubt that his task is extremely difficult: to make a great number of people interpret roles over an extended period of time and to ensure that their condition of actors remain secret to the majority. He also has to make certain that the play ends with a real tragedy: the death of his protagonist. Not only is his play interwoven with the lives of the characters that are or are not part of it, but it also has an assassination and the beginning of an armed rebellion as consequences. Nolan is perhaps the only character in Borges’s work who over-

11 See, for example, “Chesteron and the Labyrinths of the Detective Story,” where he argues: “The genuine detective story—need I say it?—rejects with equal contempt physical risks and distributive justice. It serenely does without jails, secret stairways, remorse, gymnastics, fake beards, fencing, the bats of Charles Baudelaire, and even the elements of chance” (*Borges. A Reader* 71). (“El genuino relato policial —¿precisaré decirlo?— rehúsa con parejo desdén los riesgos físicos y la justicia distributiva. Prescinde con serenidad de los calabozos, de las escaleras secretas, de los remordimientos, de la gimnasia, de las barbas postizas, de la esgrima, de los murciélagos de Charles Baudelaire y hasta del azar” [*Borges en Sur* 126]).

comes a dichotomy very dear to the Argentinean: he is at the same time a man of arms and a man of letters. He situates himself in a dimension above the artistic level, whose influence he recognizes as limited. What can Hamlet's monologue be when compared to the impact of an actual death? If it is in fact true that the whole world is a stage,¹² Nolan seems to have understood this in a more radical sense than Shakespeare. The coded message that Nolan sends Ryan through time is to portray Shakespeare as an inferior playwright, a signal that the latter knows how to read. But why does he know how?

In the story, Shakespeare is presented as an enemy even though he lived more than two hundred years ago. The joke could refer to Nolan's patriotism, who was rebelling against English hegemony, and suggests that the same nationalist feelings are still present in Ryan. Thus the realization that Shakespeare's passages are the least dramatic ones cannot be seen only as a mere theatrical detail. Nolan had no other reason to use the enemy's words than to send a secret message to someone that, feeling the same enmity, could understand his intentions. If Ryan can detect the different dramatic characteristics of Shakespeare's passages, it is due to the fact that he has a different relationship with the English literary tradition. He does not see himself as constrained by that tradition and therefore is able to see the flaws in Shakespeare's work. He could be another example of Borges's reasoning in his famous lecture "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," where he uses precisely the case of Ireland and England to explain the favorable situation of Latin American writers:

In the case of the Irish, we have no reason to suppose that the profusion of Irish names in British literature and philosophy is due to any racial pre-eminence, for many of those illustrious Irishmen (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) were the descendants of Englishmen, were people who had no Celtic blood; however, it was sufficient for them to feel Irish, to feel different, in order to be innovators in English culture. I believe that we Argentines, we South Americans in general, are in an analogous situation; we can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences. (*Labyrinths* 178)

12 The famous phrase, "All the world's a stage," comes from the comedy *As You Like It* (II.7).

Tratándose de los irlandeses, no tenemos por qué suponer que la profusión de nombres irlandeses en la literatura y la filosofía británicas se deba a una preeminencia racial, porque muchos de esos irlandeses ilustres (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) fueron descendientes de ingleses, fueron personas que no tenían sangre celta; sin embargo, les bastó el hecho de sentirse irlandeses, distintos, para innovar en la cultura inglesa. Creo que los argentinos, los sudamericanos en general, estamos en una situación análoga; podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas. (OC 1: 273)

If on the one hand Nolan's use of Shakespeare may represent a reaffirmation of radical nationalism, on the other it indicates the possibility of overcoming these feelings. Nolan is able to put himself above national conflicts and finish his play with fragments taken from his enemy's writings. He makes Shakespeare's words work on his behalf, in a momentary acknowledgement of the Bard's literary significance. This action reminds us of one of Borges's favorite historic moments: Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson's account of the battle between Earl Tostig and his brother the King of England, Harold Godwinson. The latter, with the help of the Norwegian King Harald Sigurdarson, had landed on England and was met by an army commanded by his brother, who offered him his pardon and a third of his kingdom. Tostig asked: "If I accept ... what will the King give to Harald Sigurdarson?" // 'He has not forgotten him,' replied the horseman [Godwinson]. He will give him six feet of English sod and since he is so tall, one more" (*Other* 169) ("—Si acepto... ¿qué dará al rey Harald Sigurdarson? // —No se ha olvidado de él —contestó el jinete—. Le dará seis pies de tierra inglesa y, ya que es tan alto, uno más" [OC 2: 133]). The fact that Sturluson, who belonged to the invaders' side, acknowledges the enemy's ingenious reply and bravery fascinated Borges. He concludes "The Modesty of History" precisely with this anecdote, and remarks that the true historic event was not when Harold Godwinson said the famous words. It was, on the contrary, "the day when an enemy perpetuated them... A date that is a prophecy of something still in the future: they day when races and nations will be cast into oblivion, and the solidarity of all mankind will be established" (*Other* 170) ("[El día] en que un enemigo las perpetuó... Una fecha profética de algo que aún está en el futuro: el olvido de sangre y de naciones, la solidaridad del género humano" [OC 2: 134]).

The analysis of “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” and “The Sign of the Broken Sword” reveals once again how the reference in Borges is always specific and contributes significant elements to understand his texts. Ryan’s silence is best explained if we see the connection between the story and the text that provided a foundation for Borges. Both texts present history as a simplified account that omits, in many cases, the actual cause of an action. When both protagonists become accomplices of history’s many silences, they construct a narrative without imperfections, in which the heroes are always heroes and traitors are assigned the worst reputation. In making these two conditions coexist in the same person, Borges demonstrates that the boundaries between hero and traitor are not so well defined.

The true nature of historical events does not seem to reside in those “moving episodes,” in the harmonic perfections for which Ryan almost fell at the beginning of his investigation when he thought that Kilpatrick was Julius Caesar reincarnated. A historical account may contain narrative techniques that remind us of literary texts, but when these features are exaggerated the tale becomes suspicious. Ryan begins to suspect when he realizes that it was surprising enough that history might have copied history, but “that history should copy literature is inconceivable” (144). Nolan’s play was too perfect because it had deliberately incorporated episodes and phrases from fictional texts. What for others had been perfect narrative that contributed to their hero’s greatness, led Ryan to discover that the truth of the events was more simple and mundane.

“The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” also insists on one of Borges’s central themes: the coexistence of various and frequently opposed identities in the same person. This dichotomy could be found in many short stories of *Ficciones* and *The Aleph*: “The Shape of the Sword” (also with an Irish theme), “Three Versions of Judas,” “The End,” “Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden,” “A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874),” and “The Theologians,” to name some examples. In the majority of these stories, the solution is the reconciliation and sometimes the annulment of the two identities or sides of the conflict. These frequent *dénouements* have been read as one of Borges’s biggest cultural statements: the inexistence of one center from which everything else could be characterized as other. The warrior that embraces civilization and the captive woman who

decides to stay with the Indians are equally valid positions.¹³ But in many stories the characters choose one side. In “The Garden of Forking Paths,” despite being presented with many other futures, Yu Tsun ends up killing the person who gave meaning to his past; in “The Shape of the Sword” John Vincent Moon betrays, without regret, his fellow countrymen; in “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” Kilpatrick collaborates with the insurrection by actively participating in Nolan’s play. A universe of endless possibilities and perfect compensations is a philosophical theme that fascinated Borges, but, as he pointed out in “New Refutation of Time”, referring to himself, “[t]he world, alas, is real” (*Other* 187).¹⁴

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13 This topic has been widely addressed by critics. A classic example is Beatriz Sarlo’s *Borges. A Writer on the Edge*. Sarlo observes that neither of Borges’s two lineages—in which she sees a symbol of the relationship between rural and urban culture in Argentina, and between Latin America and Europe—“can be completely repressed or abolished; neither should be emphasized to the point of obliterating the other. Their coexistence results, however, not in any classical symmetry but in conflict” (47).

14 “El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real” (*OC* 2: 149).

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