In Evaristo Carriego's poem "El guapo," dedicated to San Juan Moreira but probably referring to Carriego's contemporary, the cuchillero Juan Muraña, Carriego says:

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

No one of course would deny the guapo's deeds to his face because that would be an ostentatious challenge to his manhood, and would inevitably lead to a knife fight. Furthermore, as Borges discovers in his book on Carriego, the provoker of a knife fight is inevitably the loser of it; the successful knife-fighter does not look for fights, but fights to defend himself when necessary.

The guapo of Carriego's poem is not the already mythical heroic gaucho (Moreira or Santos Vega), but the electoral thug (compadre) or its humbler imitation, the local delinquent (compadrito). That is, the guapo of the poem is at one or two removes from the heroic world in which he would prefer to live, but through his song he assumes a heroic identity or, better, imposes it on himself and on his listeners:

El barrio le admira. Cultor del coraje,
conquistó, a la larga, renombre de osado;
se impuso en cien riñas entre el compadraje
The poem reads:

"The Empty Glass"

The poem begins with a reference to an empty glass:

The process of evaporation and condensation is much more clear when one reads a story about the process. The story is about a glass filled with water, which slowly evaporates and then condenses back into water. The story is a metaphor for the process of life, where things may appear to be lost but can be regained. The poem then goes on to discuss the beauty of the natural world, and the importance of appreciating it.

For example:

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Me habré cruzado con él
En una esquina cualquiera.
Yo era un chico, él era un hombre.
Nadie me dijo quién era.
No sé por qué en la oración
Ese antiguo me acompaña.
Sé que mi suerte es salvar
La memoria de Muraña.
Tuvo una sola virtud.
Hay quien no tiene ninguna.
Fue el hombre más animoso
Que han visto el sol y la luna.
A nadie faltó el respeto.
No le gustaba pelear,
Pero cuando se avenía,
Siempre tiraba a matar.
Fiel como un perro al caudillo
Servía en las elecciones.
Padece la ingratitude,
La pobreza y las prisiones.
Hombre capaz de pelear
Líado al otro por un lazo,
Hombre que supo afrontar
Con el cuchillo el balazo.
Lo recordaba Carriego
Y yo lo recuerdo ahora.
Más vale pensar en otros
Cuando se acerca la hora.

The poem begins with an affirmation that the young Borges probably crossed paths with Muraña, a contradiction of the declaration in “Alusión,” though the future perfect of probability serves to cast this meeting into some doubt. The indeterminacy of the event is confirmed by the indefinite place (“una esquina cualquiera”), though the preterit verb at the end of the stanza (“Nadie me dijo quién era”) would seem to confirm that an encounter occurred, even if they did not meet. This mis-meeting is due to a lack of full contemporaneity between the two (“Yo era un chico, él era un viejo”), but given Borges’ obsession with circular time this unconsummated encounter suggests that the two will meet fully at some future time (perhaps now in this poem). The following stanza echoes two ideas that appear in “Alusión”: that the old cuchillero is magically present for Borges and that it is his duty as poet to save Muraña’s memory. To save Muraña’s memory, that blurred memory of innumerable victims: such is the daring purpose of Borges’ oración (sentence, oration, prayer).

The choppy, abrupt tone of the octosyllabic verse, broken into a series of short sentences, makes the poem a tense, bold oration for Muraña. That tension and abruptness is especially apt in the third stanza, in which Borges’ alleged desire to save Muraña’s memory verges on insult. He begins by saying that Muraña had but one virtue (courage), softening the statement by saying that some men have no virtues at all, but none the less reducing Muraña once again to the unthinking fighting machine described in Evaristo Carriego or the knife of “Alusión a una sombra...” In fact he mentions a second virtue in the following stanza—respect for others—that respect is qualified by Muraña’s professional thoroughness as a killer. (Elsewhere Borges says that Muraña and other cuchilleros were more interested in marking their victim than in killing him; here Muraña is reduced to a sort of methodical butcher.) The insulting tone returns in the fifth stanza: Muraña was “faithful as a dog” to the electoral boss, and suffered a dog’s life (misery, ingratitude, confinement). The examples of Muraña’s bravery in the sixth stanza—a willingness to fight even when tied to his opponent, to face bullets with only a knife for self-defense—suggest a foolhardy, if brave, fool. The heart of the poem, then, gives us an image of a man with far more faults than virtues, though the virtue of courage is supreme in the cuchilleros’ moral universe, and perhaps in that of Borges.

In the seventh stanza Borges, to maintain the eight syllable line, reduces the two syllable vowel cluster ea to the diphthong ia in pelear, a usage in keeping with gauchesque poetry and with the milonga form employed here. The distance between Borges and the world of Muraña is reduced by the popular pronunciation, by what Borges calls the intonation of the phrase. The closeness of poet to subject is reflected metaphorically in the same stanza, when Muraña is said to be “capaz de pelear/Liado al otro por un lazo”: though the immediate referent seems to be some exploit of Muraña’s, the line can also be read as descriptive of the link between the fighter and the other who provokes him, that other without whom (like the black man in “El fin”) he could scarcely exist.
The vagueness of the wording—"liado al otro," linked to the other, any other—suggests the poet's implicit counterpoint, his challenge and the acceptance of that challenge.

The final stanza recalls Carriego’s treatment of Muraña in "El guapo"—an equivocal treatment, as we saw initially, since Carriego describes the silence to which the hero condemns his listeners—and then has Borges take Carriego’s place (as the shift from past to present confirms). Borges concludes: "Más vale pensar en otros/ Cuando se acerca la hora." The couplet recalls the Muraña of Evaristo Carriego who thinks of the blurred images of his victims when his last hour approaches. Borges seems to suggest that he has assumed not only the function of saving Muraña’s memory (the memory of Muraña’s victims), but also of adding two new victims to the list: Muraña himself, and of course Evaristo Carriego. Many times over the years Borges has been asked why he wrote about such a minor poet as Carriego (the implication being that he should have written about the looming figure of Lugones), but surely part of the point of the exercise of writing a biography of Carriego is to appropriate his text for himself, annihilating the man in the process. Muraña is a less obvious and less willing victim, since he would seem to have had little to fear from the near-sighted boy who lived at 2147 Serrano St. Yet Muraña is a much more total victim of Borges, since his fame must now depend completely on the image created in a series of texts that extend from Evaristo Carriego to La cifra.

In his great poem on the tango Borges concludes:

El tango creó un turbin
Pasado irreal que de algún modo es cierto,
Un recuerdo imposible de haber muerto
Peleando, en una esquina del suburbio. 11

Death at the hands of a cuchillero (also sought for by Dahlmann in "El Sur," however we may choose to read that story) is for Borges as impossible as it is vicariously and essentially true. Perhaps he never met Juan Muraña, perhaps he will never have the chance to sing a payada or dance that other counterpoint that is a knife fight, yet the essential truth of Borges’ role as payador flashes like Muraña’s knife flashes out of the past. To evoke the world of the cuchilleros is to enter it, to provoke the mute violence of the dead, to release their violence in the dance of words and images. As Borges says, again in "El tango:"

Aunque la daga hostil o esa otra daga,
El tiempo, los perdieron en el tango,
Hoy, más allá del tiempo y de la aciaga
Muerte, esos muertos viven en el tango. 12

Muraña and his dead live and die, again and again, in Borges’ work, not least in his recent milonga, again and again evoked and provoked to show their essential manhood, their courage.

NOTES

2. For simplicity’s sake I will refer to the single volume of Borges’ so-called Obras completas (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974): 167-8. See also Borges and Silvina Bullrich, El compadrito (Buenos Aires: Fabril, 1968), in which A. Taullard is cited on p. 99: “Peleaban por imposición de las circunstancias, para demostrar que no eran ‘flojos’ para mantener su reputación de valientes.”
3. Carriego, Poesías completas, 66.
4. Borges, Obras completas, 129. The first edition of Borges’ Evaristo Carriego (Buenos Aires: M. Giezner, 1930), differs slightly from the later versions, in that the verb obró is used twice: “las muertes que obró—mejor: que el destino obró a través de él.” I prefer the reading obró a cobar.
5. Elsewhere Paredes is consistently named Nicolás, not Nicanor (see Obras completas, 103, 118, 159, 329, 1035).
6. There is also a story, "Juan Muraña," in El informe de Brodie, in which Muraña’s knife, ten years after its owner’s death, continues to protect his family (Obras completas, 104-7).
9. See the ironic note on courage in Borges’ Evaristo Carriego: “Si una comunidad resuelve que el valor es la primera virtud, la simulación del valor será tan general como la de la belleza entre las muchachas o la de pensamiento inventor entre los que publican; pero ese mismo aparentado valor será un aprendizaje.”—Borges, Obras completas, 128.
11. Borges, Obras completas, 889. He says the same thing in the article on the tango appended to the second and later editions of Evaristo Carriego: “En un diálogo de Oscar Wilde se lee que la música nos revela un pasado personal que hasta ese momento ignorábamos y nos mueve a lamentar desventuras que no nos ocurrieron y culpas que no cometimos; de mi confesaré que no suelo cito El Marro o Don Juan sin recordar con precisión un pasado apóstifico, a la vez estético y orgiástico, en el que he desafiado y peleado para caer al fin, silencioso, en un oscuro duelo a cuchillo.” In Borges, Obras completas, 162.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


FRANCISCO CEVALLOS

The Poems of the Gifts: The Inverted Image

When studying Borges’ literary opus the reader will find a series of symbols and rhetorical devices constantly repeated. The actual bibliography on these technical devices is enormous. Among the many aspects considered by critics, the image of the mirror—reflection—is undoubtedly predominant. It would seem that Borges’ work is, in some way, a reflection of itself. This reflecting structure has been studied in detail in Borges’ stories. Moreover, many of his poems are also structured like a mirror. It would be easy to expand this idea to his poetic works in general, and it is tempting to consider “The Poem of the Gifts” and the “Other Poem of the Gifts” as images reflected in a mirror: the second poem reflecting the first. However, after an initial confrontation of the texts, the seemingly reflective structure yields to a more contradictory one. In fact, the poems appear to be opposite texts, the second one inverting the structure of the first, and thus, paradoxically, becoming complementary of each other.

First the external structure of the poems must be considered. “The Poem of the Gifts” has ten hendecasyllabic quatrains and, with the exception of the second one, follows a constant rhyme pattern—abba. The poem is written within the conventions of traditional poetry, with a constant verse/stanza model throughout the text. On the other hand, the “Other Poem of the Gifts” is written in free verse. It consists of one stanza, with a total of eighty-one lines. There is no rhyme or metric pat-
Borges the Poet