

JORGE LUIS BORGES

sensitive, so well equilibrated—a magnificent instrument which never fails to dramatize the children of his fertile imagination. Borges fuses his colorful fantasy with cold intellectual calculations which, paradoxically enough, endow his narratives with greater puzzlement and dramatic force.

Jorge Luis Borges

(1899-1986)

BORN IN a cultured, well-to-do family rooted in the history of Argentina—several of his ancestors were military heroes—Borges studied in Buenos Aires. Revealing an early interest in languages and foreign literatures, Borges was sent to Switzerland and allowed to travel widely in Europe, an ideal preparation for the future translator of Kafka, Melville, Michaux. After advanced studies at Cambridge, he returned to Buenos Aires as a well-equipped teacher of modern languages, and a dynamic literary innovator. *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), showed him a gifted experimentalist, conversant with European vanguard poetry; and *Luna de enfrente* (1925) and *Cuadernos de San Martín* (1929) ranked him high among poets writing in the Spanish language. In addition he lectured, translated and wrote perceptive critical essays and articles collected in *Inquisiciones* (1935), *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926), etc.; and finally revealed himself as a master of the short story. Expert craftsman and consummate stylist, Borges has written realistic stories such as the little masterpiece "Hombre de la esquina rosada" (1935), as well as fantastic stories somewhat reminiscent of Franz Kafka, in his remarkable collections of tales: *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1944), *El Aleph* (1949), etc. No writer living today surpasses Borges in his manipulation of language—so sober, so

LA FORMA DE LA ESPADA

por Jorge Luis Borges

LE CRUZABA la cara una cicatriz rencorosa: un arco ceniciento y casi perfecto que de un lado ajaba la sien y del otro el pómulo. Su nombre verdadero no importa; todos en Tacuarembó¹ le declan² el Inglés de *La Colorada*.³ El dueño de esos campos, Cardoso, no quería vender; he oído que el Inglés recurrió a un imprevisible argumento; le confió la historia secreta de la cicatriz. El Inglés venía de la frontera, de Río Grande del Sur⁴; no faltó quien dijera⁵ que en el Brasil había sido contrabandista. Los campos estaban empastados; las agnadas, amargas; el Inglés, para corregir esas deficiencias, trabajó a la par de sus peones. Dicen que era severo hasta la crueldad, pero escrupulosamente justo. Dicen también que era bebedor: un par de veces al año se encerraba en su cuarto del mirador y emergía a los dos o tres días como de una batalla o de un vértigo, pálido, trémulo, azorado y tan autoritario como antes. Recuerdo los ojos glaciales, la enérgica flacura, el bigote gris. No se daba con⁶ nadie: es verdad que su español era rudimental, abrasilerado.⁶ Fuera de alguna carta comercial o de algún folleto, no recibía correspondencia.

La última vez que recorrí los departamentos del Norte, una crecida del arroyo Caraguatá¹ me obligó a hacer

THE SHAPE OF THE SWORD

by Jorge Luis Borges

ACROSS HIS face ran an angry-looking scar, an ash-colored, almost perfect arc that disfigured the temple on one side and the cheekbone on the other. His real name does not matter—everyone in Tacuarembó called him the Englishman from *La Colorada*. The owner of those fields, Cardoso, did not wish to sell; I have been told that the Englishman resorted to an unforeseeable stratagem; he told him the secret story of his scar. The Englishman came from the frontier, from Río Grande do Sul. Everyone said that he had been a smuggler in Brazil. The fields were overgrown with weeds and the sources of drinking water, acrid; the Englishman, in order to remedy these drawbacks, worked as hard as any of his peons. They say he was harsh to the point of cruelty, but scrupulously fair. They say, too, that he was a heavy drinker: a couple of times a year he would lock himself up in a room of his summerhouse and emerge after two or three days as if from a battle or a daze, pale, shaky, scared, and as bossy as before. I recall his cold eyes, his energetic leanness, and gray mustache. He did not associate with anyone; of course his Spanish was rudimentary and full of Brazilianisms. Except for occasional business circulars or folders, he received no mail.

The last time I traveled through the Northern districts, a flooding of the Caraguatá forced me to stop for the night

noche ¹ en *La Colorada*. A los pocos minutos creí notar que mi aparición era inoportuna; procuré congraciarme con el Inglés: acudí a la menos perspicaz de las pasiones: al patriotismo. Dije que era invencible un país con el espíritu de Inglaterra. Mi interlocutor asintió, pero agregó con una sonrisa que él no era inglés. Era irlandés, de Dungarvan.¹ Dicho esto, se detuvo, como si hubiera revelado un secreto.

Salimos, después de comer, a mirar el cielo. Había escampado, pero detrás de las cuchillas del Sur,² agrietado y rayado de relámpagos, urdía otra tormenta. En el desmantelado comedor, el peón que había servido la cena trajo una botella de ron. Bebimos largamente, en silencio.

No sé qué hora sería cuando advertí que yo estaba borracho; no sé qué inspiración o qué exultación o qué tedio me hizo mentar ³ la cicatriz. La cara del Inglés se demudó; durante unos segundos pensé que me iba a expulsar de la casa. Al fin me dijo con su voz habitual:—Le contaré la historia de mi herida bajo una condición: la de no mitigar ningún oprobio, ninguna infamia.

Asentí. Esta es la historia que contó, alternando el inglés con el español, y aun con el portugués:

"Hacia 1922, en una de las ciudades de Connaught,¹ yo era uno de los muchos que conspiraban por la independencia de Irlanda.¹⁰ De mis compañeros, algunos sobreviven dedicados a tareas pacíficas; otros, paradójicamente, se batían en los mares o en el desierto, bajo los colores ingleses; otro, el que más valía, murió en el patio de un cuartel, en el alba, fusilado por hombres llenos de sueño; otros (no los más desdichados), dieron con su destino en las anónimas y casi secretas batallas de la guerra civil. Éramos republicanos, católicos; éramos, lo sospecho, románticos. Irlanda no sólo era para nosotros el porvenir utópico y el intolerable presente; era una amarga y cariñosa mitología, era las torres circulares y las ciénagas rojas, era el repudio de Parnell ¹¹ y las enormes epopeyas que cantan ¹² el robo de toros que en otra encarnación fueron héroes y en otras peces y mon-

at *La Colorada*. After a few minutes I began to feel that my arrival was inopportune. I tried to ingratiate myself with the Englishman by resorting to the least perspicacious of passions: patriotism. I said that a nation endowed with the spirit of England was invincible. My interlocutor agreed, but added with a smile that he was not English. He was Irish, from Dungarvan. Having said this, he stopped short, as if he had disclosed a secret.

After supper we went outside to look at the sky. It had stopped raining, but back of the hills to the south, cracked and streaked with flashes of lightning, another storm was brewing. Into the shabby dining-room the peon who had served supper brought a bottle of rum. We drank in silence for a long time.

I did not know what time it could have been when I realized I was drunk; nor did I know what inspiration, what exultation, or boredom made me mention the scar. The Englishman's face altered, and for a moment or so I thought he was going to throw me out of the house. Finally, he said in his usual voice: "I will tell you the story of my wound on one condition—that you will not spare me any shame or any infamy."

I agreed. And this is the story he told me, mixing English with Spanish, and even with Portuguese:

In 1922 or thereabouts, in one of the cities of Connaught, I was one of the many who were conspiring for Irish independence. Of my comrades, some survive, devoted to peaceful tasks; others, paradoxically enough, are fighting on the seas or in the desert, under the English flag; another, the finest, died in the courtyard of a barracks, at dawn, shot down by a squad of sleepy men; others (and not the most unfortunate) met their destiny in the anonymous and almost secret battles of the civil war. We were republicans, Catholics; we were, I suspect, romantics. Ireland was for us not only the Utopian future and the intolerable present, but a bitter, fond mythology; it was circular towers and red marshes; it was Parnell's repudiation and the tremendous epics which tell of the theft of bulls which in another incarnation were heroes, and in others, fish and moun-

LA FORMA DE LA ESPADA

tañas . . . En un atardecer que no olvidaré, nos llegó un afiliado de Munster: ¹ un tal John ¹² Vincent Moon.

Tenia escasamente veinte años. Era flaco y foto a la vez; daba la incómoda impresión de ser invertido. Había cursado ¹⁴ con fervor y con vanidad casi todas las páginas de no sé qué ¹⁵ manual comunista; el materialismo dialéctico le servía para cegar cualquier discusión. Las razones que puede tener el hombre para abominar de otro o para quererlo son infinitas: Moon reducía la historia universal a un sórdido conflicto económico. Afirmaba que la revolución está predestinada a triunfar. Yo le dije que a un *gentleman* sólo pueden interesarle las causas perdidas . . . Ya era de noche; seguimos disintiendo en el corredor, en las escaleras, luego en las vagas calles. Los juicios emitidos por Moon me impresionaron menos que su inapelable tono apodíctico. El nuevo camarada no discutía: dictaminaba con desdén y con cierta cólera.

Cuando arribamos a las últimas casas, un brusco tiroteó nos aturdió. (Antes o después, orillamos el ciego paredón de una fábrica o de un cuartel.) Nos internamos en una calle de tierra; un soldado, enorme en el resplandor, surgió de una cabaña incendiada. A gritos nos mandó que nos detuviéramos. Yo apresuré mis pasos; mi camarada no me siguió. Me di vuelta: John Vincent Moon estaba inmóvil, fascinado y como eternizado por el terror. Entonces yo volví, derribé de un golpe al soldado, sacudí a Vincent Moon, lo insulté y le ordené que me siguiera. Tuve que tomarlo del brazo; la pasión del miedo lo invalidaba. Híimnos, entre la noche agujerada de incendios. Una descarga de fusilería nos buscó; una bala rozó el hombro derecho de Moon; éste, mientras huíamos entre pinos, prorrumpió en un débil sollozo.

En aquel otoño de 1922 yo me había guarecido en la quinta del general Berkeley. Éste (a quien yo jamás había visto) desempeñaba entonces no sé qué cargo administrativo en Bengala; ¹ el edificio tenía menos de un siglo, pero era desmedrado y opaco y abundaba en perplejos corredores y en vanas antecámaras. El museo y la enorme biblioteca usurpaban la planta baja: libros controversiales e incom-

THE SHAPE OF THE SWORD

tains . . . One evening I shall never forget, a party member from Munster came to us—one John Vincent Moon.

He was scarcely twenty, both skinny and soft, and gave one the uncomfortable feeling that he was spineless. He had studied with fervor and vanity almost every page in some Communist handbook or other; dialectical materialism served him as a means of cutting off any discussion. The reasons one may have for hating or loving another human being are countless: Moon would reduce world history to a sordid economic conflict. He claimed that the revolution was bound to triumph. I replied that a *gentleman* could be interested only in lost causes . . . By now it was night; we continued the dispute in the hallway, on the stairs, and then along the meandering streets. The opinions uttered by Moon impressed me less than his inflexible, apodictic tone. The new comrade did not argue—he laid down the law disdainfully and rather angrily.

When we reached the last house, a sudden sound of firing stunned us. (Sooner or later, we skirted the thick, windowless wall of a factory or barracks.) We turned into an unpaved street; a soldier, looming large in the glare, came out of a flaming hut. He screamed, ordering us to halt. I hurried on; my comrade did not follow me. I turned around; John Vincent Moon stood still, fascinated, as if petrified by terror. Then I returned, knocked the soldier down with one blow, shook Moon, insulted him, and ordered him to follow me. I had to take him by the arm; the passion of fright had rendered him helpless. We fled into the night riddled with fires. A volley of rifles sought us out; a bullet grazed Moon's right shoulder, and as we fled through the pines, he heaved a faint sigh.

In that autumn of 1922 I had found shelter in General Berkeley's villa. The general (whom I had never met) was then away, carrying out some administrative assignment in Bengal. The building was less than a century old, but dilapidated and dark, with many perplexing corridors and useless halls. Its museum and enormous library took up the entire ground floor: controversial and incompatible books

LA FORMA DE LA ESPADA

patibles que de algún modo son la historia del siglo XIX; cimitarras de Nishapur,¹ en cuyos detenidos arcos de círculo parecían perdurar el viento y la violencia de las batallas. Entramos (creo recordar) por los fondos. Moon, trémula y resaca la boca, murmuró que los episodios de la noche eran interesantes; le hice una curación,¹⁶ le traje una taza de té; pude comprobar que su "herida" era superficial. De pronto balbuceó con perplejidad:

— Pero usted se ha arriesgado sensiblemente.

Le dije que no se preocupara. (El hábito de la guerra civil me había impedido a obrar como obré; además, la prisión de un solo afiliado podía comprometer nuestra causa.)

Al otro día Moon había recuperado su aplomo. Aceptó un cigarrillo y me sometió a un severo interrogatorio sobre los "recursos económicos de nuestro partido revolucionario." Sus preguntas eran muy lucidas; le dije (con verdad) que la situación era grave. Sendas descargas de fusilería conmovieron el Sur. Le dije a Moon que nos esperaban los compañeros. Mi sobretodo y mi revólver estaban en mi pieza; cuando volví, encontré a Moon tendido en el sofá, con los ojos cerrados. Conjeturé que tenía fiebre; invocó un doloroso espasmo en el hombro.

Entonces comprendí que su cobardía era irreparable. Le rogué torpemente que se cuidara y me despedí. Me abochornaba ese hombre con miedo, como si yo fuera el cobarde, no Vincent Moon. Lo que hace un hombre es como si lo hicieran todos los hombres. Por eso no es injusto que una desobediencia en un jardín contamine al género humano; por eso no es injusto que la crucifixión de un solo judío baste para salvarlo. Acaso Schopenhauer¹⁷ tiene razón: yo soy los otros, cualquier hombre es todos los hombres, Shakespeare es de algún modo el miserable John Vincent Moon.

Nueve días pasamos en la enorme casa del general. De las agonías y lucas¹⁸ de la guerra no dié nada: mi propósito es referir la historia de esta cicatriz que me afrenta. Esos nueve días, en mi recuerdo, forman un solo día, salvo el penúltimo, cuando los nuestros irrumpieron en un cuartel

THE SHAPE OF THE SWORD

which somehow constitute the history of the nineteenth century; Nishapur scimitars, in whose sweeping, incomplete circles the wind and violence of battles still seem to linger. We entered—I recall—by the back door. Moon, with quivering, dry lips, whispered that the events of the night had been interesting; I gave him first aid, brought him a cup of tea, and discovered that his "wound" was superficial. All of a sudden he stammered perplexedly:

"But you've taken an awful risk."

I told him not to worry. (The civil war routine had impelled me to act as I had; besides, the imprisonment of even one party member might have jeopardized our cause.)

The next day Moon had recovered his composure. He accepted a cigarette and subjected me to a severe questioning about the "economic resources of our revolutionary party." His questions were very lucid; I told him (and it was true) that the situation was critical. Single rifle shots disturbed the south. I told Moon that our companions were waiting for us. My overcoat and revolver were in my room; when I returned, I found Moon stretched out on the sofa, with his eyes shut. He guessed he had a fever; he mentioned a painful spasm in his shoulder.

Then I realized that his cowardice was incurable. I begged him, rather awkwardly, to take care of himself, and left. I was ashamed of this frightened man, as if I were the coward, and not Vincent Moon. One man's deeds are like the deeds of all mankind. This is why it is not unfair that one disobedience in a garden should contaminate the human race; this is why the crucifixion of a single Jew should suffice to save it. Perhaps Schopenhauer is right: I am others, any man is all men. Shakespeare is, in some way, the miserable John Vincent Moon.

Nine days we spent in the general's enormous house. Of the agonies and glories of war I shall say nothing: my aim is to tell the story of this scar which affronts me. Those nine days, in my recollection, form a single day, except for the next to last, when our men burst into the barracks and

y pudimos vengar exactamente a los dieciséis camaradas que fueron ametrallados en Elphin.¹ Yo me escurría de la casa hacia el alba. Al anochecer estaba de vuelta. Mi compañero me esperaba en el primer piso: ¹⁹ la herida no le permitía descender a la planta baja. Lo recuerdo con algún libro de estrategia en la mano: F. N. Maude o Clausewitz. "El arma que prefiero es la artillería," me confesó una noche. Inquiría nuestros planes; le gustaba censurarlos o reformarlos. También solía denunciar "nuestra deplorable base económica"; profetizaba, dogmático y somnoliento, el ruinoso fin. *C'est une affaire fâchée*,²⁰ murmuraba. Para mostrar que le era indiferente ser un cobarde físico, magnificaba su soberbia mental. Así pasaron, bien o mal, nueve días.

El décimo la ciudad cayó definitivamente en poder de los *Black and Tans*.²¹ Altos jinetes silenciosos patullaban las rutias; había cenizas y humo en el viento; en una esquina vi tirado un cadáver, menos tenaz en mi recuerdo que un maniquí en el cual los soldados ejercitaban la puntería, en mitad de la plaza. . . . Yo había salido al amanecer; antes del mediodía volví. Moon, en la biblioteca, hablaba con alguien; el tono de la voz me hizo comprender que hablaba por teléfono. Después oí mi nombre; después que yo regresaría a las siete; después la indicación de que me arrestarían cuando yo atravesara el jardín. Mi razonable amigo estaba razonablemente vendiéndome. Le oí exigir unas garantías de seguridad personal.

Aquí mi historia se confunde y se pierde. Sé que perseguí al delator a través de negros corredores de pesadilla y de hondas escaleras. Moon conocía la casa muy bien, haría mejor que yo. Una o dos veces lo perdí. Lo acorraté antes de que los soldados me detuvieran. De una de las panoplias del general arranqué un alfanje; con esa media luna de acero le rubriqué en la cara, para siempre, una media luna de sangre. Borges: a usted que es un desconocido, le he hecho esta confesión. No me duela tanto su menosprecio."

Aquí el narrador se detuvo. Noté que le temblaban las

we succeeded in avenging to a man the sixteen comrades who were machine-gunned at Elphin. I would sneak out of the house around dawn. By nightfall I would return. My companion waited for me upstairs: his wound prevented him from coming down to the ground floor. I remember him holding some book on strategy in his hand—by F. N. Maude or Clausewitz. "The weapon I prefer is artillery," he confessed to me one night. He would inquire about our plans. He liked to criticize or alter them. He would also usually denounce "our deplorable economic base" and prophesied the ruinous end in his dogmatic, gloomy way. *C'est une affaire fâchée*, he would mumble. To show that he was unperturbed about being a physical coward, he magnified his mental pride. So, for better or for worse, ten days elapsed.

On the tenth, the city fell once and for all into the hands of the Black and Tans. Tall, silent horsemen patrolled the by-ways; there were ashes and smoke in the wind; on a street corner I saw a corpse stretched out, which impressed me less than a mannequin the soldiers were using for shooting practice in the middle of the public square. . . . I had left at dawn; I returned before noon. Moon was talking to someone in the library; from the tone of his voice I knew he was using the phone. Later on I heard my name; then, that I would return at seven; and then, instructions to arrest me when I crossed the garden. My reasonable friend was selling me reasonably. I heard him demand some guarantees for his personal safety.

Here my story becomes confused and trails off. I know that I pursued the informer down black, nightmarish corridors and the steep stairs. Moon knew the house very well, much better than I. Once or twice I lost track of him. I cornered him before the soldiers arrested me. From one of the general's panoplies I grabbed a cutlass; with that half moon of steel I marked his face forever with a half moon of blood. Borges, to you, a perfect stranger, I have made this confession. Your contempt does not hurt me so much. Here the narrator stopped. I noticed that his hands were

LA FORMA DE LA ESPADA

manos.

—¿Y Moon?—le interrogué.

—Cobró los dineros de Judas y huyó al Brasil. Esta tarde, en la plaza, vió fusilar un maniquí por unos borrachos.

Aguardé en vano la continuación de la historia. Al fin le dije que prosiguiera.

Entonces un gemido lo atravesó; entonces me mostró con débil dulzura la corva cicatriz blanquecina.

—¿Usted no me cree?—balduceó. ¿No ve que llevo escoria en la cara la marca de mi infamia? Le he narrado la historia de este modo para que usted la oyera hasta el fin.

—Yo he denunciado al hombre que me amparó: yo soy Vincent Moon. ¡Ahora desprécieme!

THE SHAPE OF THE SWORD

trembling.

"And Moon?" I asked.

"He took Judas money and fled to Brazil. This afternoon, in the square, he watched a gang of drunkards shooting at a mannequin . . ."

I waited in vain for the story to be continued. Finally, I told him to go on.

A moan went through him; then, with gentle sweetness, he showed me the curved, whitish scar.

"Don't you believe me?" he stammered. "Don't you see that I bear the mark of infamy written on my face? I have told you the story this way so that you would hear it to the end."

"I denounced the man who had given me shelter—I am Vincent Moon. Now despise me!"