

BORGES ON LOCATION: DUPLICITOUS NARRATION AND HISTORICAL TRUTHS IN 'TEMA DEL TRAIADOR Y DEL HÉROE'

Published in 1944 in the collection *Ficciones*, 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' has received less critical attention than more famous and favoured stories such as 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' and 'La muerte y la brújula'. In spite of this relative neglect, a critical consensus has developed around the story's slim and embryonic frame, to which two general approaches apply. The first focuses mainly on the paradox announced in the title and enacted in the fictional story of Fergus Kilpatrick: hero and traitor of a conspiracy to free Ireland from English rule early in the nineteenth century. The second approach dwells on the intricacies and effects of the story's narrative design, which resembles a nest of concentric circles or, alternatively, a tiered structure, comprising: the story of Kilpatrick, with particular attention to the decade stretching from 1814 to the night of his death in August 1824; the biography undertaken, almost a century later, by Kilpatrick's great-grandson, Ryan; the narrative presentation, in the third person, of Ryan's reconstruction of his great-grandfather's life and death; a master-plot by one of Kilpatrick's fellow conspirators, James Alexander Nolan, modelled to a large extent on two plays by William Shakespeare; the narrative, in the first person, of an authorial figure who dates his account 3 January 1944 and introduces his subject as nothing more than a kernel of a narrative that he may perhaps develop one day ('que escribiré tal vez').¹ The provision of an epigraph taken from 'The Tower' (1928) by W. B. Yeats and the conspicuous mention of several other authors, including Robert Browning, Victor Hugo, and G. K. Chesterton, endows the text with further thematic resonances and dimensions of literary form.

Apropos the paradox of a man who is/was at once a traitor and a hero, Efraín Kristal has helpfully identified a probable source of Borges's subject. This is 'The Sign of the Broken Cross' by G. K. Chesterton, where 'a man, venerated as a hero, is actually a traitor to his homeland'.² Borges's predilection not only for paradox but also for themes of the double and *coincidentia oppositorum* (a perfect example can be found in 'Los teólogos' in *El Aleph*) lends considerable support to this basically thematic approach to 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', which had already been tried out by Gene Bell-Villada, among others, before Kristal.³ Interestingly, although Kristal cites the debt to Chesterton as an instance of 'invisible work' of adaptation and translation

¹ 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', in Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, 3 vols (Barcelona: Emecé, 1989), 1, 496–98 (p. 496).

² Efraín Kristal, *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), p. 130.

³ Gene Bell Villada, *Borges and his Fiction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), pp. 81–83.

in the Argentine author's output, he does not extrapolate from this to the relation between translation and deceit in 'Tema del traidor y del héroe'.

By contrast, a sense of narrative duplicity is very much to the fore in John Sturrock's enthusiastic appreciation of Borges's art, which he assesses at its most virtuoso in the 'conspiratorial process', elaborate plotting, and almost limitless duplicity of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe'.⁴ In professing this view of the text, Sturrock was expanding on Paul de Man's remarks in his 1964 review of several stories translated into English and published under the title of 'Labyrinths': there, in a packed paragraph devoted to 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', de Man had analysed the interplay of 'several layers of reflection' in the narrative, which he held up as a prime example of Borges's 'diabolical ingenuity'.⁵ Some years later, the sense of play that Sturrock appreciated so keenly in Borges's fictions would once again be prominent in Sylvia Molloy's *Signs of Borges*, where she comments on the story's 'plural narrative effort' and highlights its treatment of the theme of 'duplicitous reading', which involves not only the characters, but the readers of Borges's story too.⁶

Against this background, 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' stands out as one of Borges's most complex fictions in technical and conceptual terms; in addition, it is without doubt one of his most contrived, most potentially confusing, and most deliberately misleading narratives. An illustration of that duplicity is the identification, in the second paragraph, of Ryan as the second-level narrator of the story. Registering this, the reader of Borges's narrative expects a shift into the first person, where the voice that has introduced the 'tema' will grant immediacy to Ryan. But the expected does not happen. Instead, the narrator will continue to refer to Ryan in the third person, creating an effect of strangeness on which Kane X. Faucher has commented: 'The narrator [. . .] calls himself Ryan [. . .], peculiarly referring to himself in third person [*sic*]'.⁷

Another illustration of duplicity is the narrator's plausible but ultimately slippery relationship with Irish history. The setting of the story of Kilpatrick in and around the 1820s evokes accurately the climate in which Daniel O'Connell, 'the Liberator', organized popular resistance to British rule.⁸ However, the claim that (the patently fictitious) Fergus Kilpatrick 'pereció en la

⁴ John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 138, 153.

⁵ Paul de Man, 'A Modern Master', *New York Review of Books*, 19 November 1964, pp. 8–10; reproduced in *Hispanic Literature Criticism*, ed. by Jelena Krstović, 2 vols (Detroit: Gale Research, 1994), I, 280–84 (p. 282).

⁶ Sylvia Molloy, *Signs of Borges*, translated from the original Spanish and adapted by Oscar Montero in collaboration with the author (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 35–39 (pp. 37, 39).

⁷ Kane X. Faucher, 'Modalities, Logic and the Cabala in Borges' "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero"', *Variaciones Borges*, 13 (2002), 105–54 (pp. 134–35); Faucher is one of many critics who add a superfluous definite article to the title, in English translation, of Borges's story.

⁸ See 'Ireland: History to 1921', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 23 vols (London 1969), XII, 548–65.

víspera de la rebelión victoriosa que había premeditado y soñado' (p. 496) does not square with the historical record: in fact, it requires us to fast-forward to the third and, arguably, the fourth decade of the twentieth century, when Ireland had still to resolve the political and military tensions that had come to a head in the Easter Rising of 1916.⁹ Furthermore, 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' employs a largely parodic idiom of melodrama that is evident from the early description of Ryan as 'bisnieto del joven, del heroico, del bello, del asesinado Fergus Kilpatrick' (p. 496); Nolan will exploit this (fundamentally Romantic) idiom in formulating his 'extraño proyecto' (p. 498), which involves a cover-up of Kilpatrick's betrayal in order to preserve the myth of a heroic conspiracy and glorious rebellion leading ultimately to independence from colonial rule. Theatrical contrivance is of the essence in Nolan's plot, translated into the most brilliant and self-conscious cinema by Bernardo Bertolucci in *Strategia del ragno/The Spider's Stratagem* (1970).¹⁰ Among the many controversial implications of Nolan's plot, the most provocative has to be the willing participation of the entire Irish nation in a theatrical spectacle and illusion that would 'perdur[ar] en los libros históricos, en la memoria apasionada de Irlanda' (p. 498). For all its wit and extravagance, Nolan's scheme carries within it the scandalous implication that the modern nation state of Ireland was founded on a collective act of self-delusion and a lie. Masquerading, on the surface, as an exploration of metaphysics and moral ambiguity, 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' betrays less than heroic thoughts and a profound disquiet about the origins and foundation of the modern nation state.

In the present study I intend to delve deeper into the thematic labyrinth and the patterns of artistic contrivance in Borges's story, which half a century after publication still has many secrets to disclose to interested critics and readers. Building on Sturrock, Molloy, and others, I will reconsider aspects of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' which are essential to its constitution as a fiction. The first of those aspects is geographical and historical location, which has been interpreted almost universally by the critics as privileging arbitrariness and play over any mimetic design; such a view is perhaps understandable, given the narrator's nonchalance regarding the setting of his story: 'Digamos (para comodidad narrativa) Irlanda' (p. 496). However, taking a leaf out of Daniel Balderston's book on historical reference in Borges's fiction,¹¹ I will detect

⁹ See 'Ireland, Republic of', *ibid.*, pp. 571–86.

¹⁰ Arguably the most perceptive analysis of Bertolucci's adaptation of the Borges story is that of Robert P. Kolker, who emphasizes the connection between political commentary and the resignification of cinematic codes in *The Spider's Stratagem*. See his *Bernardo Bertolucci* (London: British Film Institute, 1985), pp. 105–25.

¹¹ Daniel Balderston, *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1993). Chapter 4 provides a model instance of the recuperation of historical material in fiction by Borges.

layers of historical correspondence in ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’ which alter radically our received ways of reading the story. The second aspect of ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’ that will be addressed is the relationship of the narrative to truth. Postmodernism has contributed a lot to the view of Borges as an author who disavows truth and insists instead on the limits and limitations of knowledge systems.¹² While acknowledging Borges’s pre-eminence as a practitioner of postmodernist irony and metafiction, I will argue, perhaps unfashionably, that ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’ is also motivated by a set of personal and political convictions which do not rest easily with the scepticism routinely attributed to the Argentine author; family honour and heroism are key considerations in this regard. A final, and related, concern of this essay will be the discussion of a number of intertexts which converge on ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’ and confirm its character as a story that addresses issues of history, nationhood, and political freedom.

The narrator sketches the outline of the plot (‘tema’ or ‘argumento’) that he has in mind, in the second paragraph of Borges’s story:

La acción transcurre en un país oprimido y tenaz: Polonia, Irlanda, la república de Venecia, algún estado sudamericano o balcánico . . . Ha transcurrido, mejor dicho, pues aunque el narrador es contemporáneo, la historia referida por él ocurrió al promediar o al empezar el siglo XIX. Digamos (para comodidad narrativa) Irlanda; digamos 1824. (p. 496)

Considering Ireland as an example of ‘un país oprimido y tenaz’, we may agree that the description is an accurate reflection of the country’s experience of British colonial rule from at least the time of the Cromwellian revolution, in the early 1650s. At the turn of the eighteenth century, Theobald Wolfe Tone was a leading proponent of Irish radicalism, followed by Robert Emmet—the author of an abortive rising in Dublin in 1803—and, more or less contemporaneously, by Daniel O’Connell, who took inspiration from the doctrines of the French Revolution and agitated in the cause of national freedom until his death in 1847. The end of the nineteenth century saw a nationalist revival in the spheres of politics, language, industry, and agriculture, and culminated in the founding of Sinn Féin in 1900. With the Great War raging from 1914, Irish nationalism was able to gain momentum and found dramatic expression in the street violence of Easter 1916, which drew from W. B. Yeats the memorable observation about a terrible beauty being born. Borges heads his story with an epigraph from Yeats, which resonates with the Irish theme.¹³

Interestingly, there is another intertext that Borges does not acknowledge

¹² An important study is Mark Frisch, *You Might be Able to Get There from Here: Reconsidering Borges and the Postmodern* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), Chapter 6 of which (pp. 113–29) contains some material on ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’.

¹³ In the Irish context, we should not forget the political dimensions of Yeats’s writings and of his place in the literary canon. For a trenchant critique of Yeats’s affiliations, see Terry Eagleton,

either by title or by the author's name. I refer to *The Informer* by Liam O'Flaherty, who was born on Inishmore, the Aran Islands, in 1896 and lived a long life spanning essentially the same period as Borges (O'Flaherty died in 1984, a mere two years before the death of Borges).¹⁴ Awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in the year of its publication, *The Informer* (1925) is a novel set in Ireland in the strife-torn decade of the 1920s. In the storyline a gang of Socialists and Communists who style themselves revolutionaries commit acts of terrorism, including the murder of a representative of the Farmers' Union; they live an underground existence and are led by Commandant Dan Gallagher, the brains behind the 'Revolutionary Organization'. A striking characteristic of the narrative is the sense that it conveys of a world of secrecy and violence and, especially pertinent here, of betrayal. The story revolves around the character of Gypo Nolan, an erstwhile member of both the police force and the Revolutionary Organization, from which he had been expelled. On the day of the action he informs on his closest companion, Francis Joseph McPhillips, who is tracked down and killed by the authorities. Assailed by guilt, Gypo seeks distraction in the company of women and the uncontrolled consumption of alcohol; he is eventually brought to justice by the Organization and dies of gunshot wounds in a church where he pleads with McPhillips's mother and she, echoing some fabled biblical words, answers, 'I forgive ye . . . Ye didn't know what ye were doin'.¹⁵

From this outline, the reader can appreciate that there are close similarities in plot between *The Informer* and 'Tema del traidor y del héroe'. Gypo Nolan's betrayal of McPhillips is a prequel of Kilpatrick's treachery, while his surname is recycled in the longer name of James Alexander Nolan, who equates, in Borges's story, with the figure of the mastermind Dan Gallagher in O'Flaherty's novel. Gypo Nolan's history as 'an active member of the Revolutionary Organization [who] always acted with Francis Joseph McPhillips, so that they were known in revolutionary circles as the "Devil's Twins"' (p. 15) has a Borgesian ring to it. And there is a pleasing coincidence in the narrative's informing us that 'Frankie McPhillips had once told [Nolan]', apropos Mulholland and Connor of the Revolutionary Organization, 'that they tracked a man to the Argentine Republic, somewhere the other side of the world. Shot him dead in a lodging-house' (p. 74). In a more substantial parallel, when Mulholland and Connor catch up with Gypo they take him to Ryan's, which is a pub (p. 75) and another name that finds its way into 'Tema del traidor y

Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 52–58.

¹⁴ Using Google, I was able to make this connection via the website <http://innisfree1916.wordpress.com> which I accessed for the first time on 17 February 2009.

¹⁵ Liam O'Flaherty, *The Informer* (London: Cape, 1971), p. 272. All further references are to this edition and are cited in parentheses in the text.

del héroe'. By way of contrast, *The Informer* develops a love interest between Gallagher and the dead Frankie's sister, Mary, which is absent from Borges's story. However, Gallagher exercises a charismatic charm that makes Mary wonder, 'Was she going to be drawn into the web of his conspiracies [. . .]?' (p. 106), thus anticipating the title and central image of Bertolucci's adaptation of Borges in *The Spider's Stratagem*. A final, and noteworthy, point of contact with Borges's fiction is Gallagher's blueprint for an ideology, which he confides to Mary as 'the new consciousness that I am discovering. But I haven't worked that out fully yet. It's only embryonic' (p. 107).

We cannot know for sure whether Borges read the novel by O'Flaherty or not. It is however possible, if not likely, that he became familiar with the story around 1935, when *The Informer* was made into a film by John Ford, who was O'Flaherty's cousin. By the time he wrote 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' in the final third of 1943, Borges would have had the opportunity to read O'Flaherty as well as Yeats: he would also have a sense of the political unrest that had rumbled on in Ireland ever since Easter 1916. The story of Vincent Moon, in 'La forma de la espada', attests to the continuing struggle 'por la independencia de Irlanda' in the year 1922 (*Obras completas*, I, 492), when the narrator alludes to armed conflict between, on the one hand, men and women loyal to the Republican cause and, on the other, the Black and Tans, recruits from England who took the place of Irish police who had resigned their posts. Written in 1942, the story of Vincent Moon features an anti-hero, very much in the mould of Gypo Nolan, who betrayed his fellow Irishmen to their political enemies. Less than two years later in 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', Borges revisits the subject, this time projecting his idea of a story of betrayal back into a more distant but no less revolutionary period of Irish history, some hundred and twenty years before the time of writing. In Borges's scenario of plot and counterplot in nineteenth-century Dublin, imaginative truth joins hands with historical probability to produce an effect that is neither fanciful nor fortuitous but verisimilar.

A similar plausibility inheres in the narrator's suggestion that his story could also be set in Poland 'al promediar o al empezar el siglo XIX' (p. 496). Just before the turn of the century, 1794 was the year of the Kosciuszko Insurrection against the Russian occupation, and the precursor to events of 1823. In that year, students at Wilno University were part of an active conspiracy which the tsarist authorities crushed, ordering many arrests and sending the alleged ringleaders into exile.¹⁶ Just outside the time-frame of 1814 to 1824, another insurrection would take place in 1830 involving Teodor Korzeniowski, a captain in the Polish army and later the grandfather, on the paternal side, of the

¹⁶ Harold B. Segel provides a vivid account of this episode in Polish history, in his introduction to *Polish Romantic Drama: Three Plays in English Translation* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1997), pp. 16–18.

author who would eventually take up residence in England, acquire British citizenship, and call himself 'Joseph Conrad'. In the years around 1824, therefore, Poland qualifies exactly for the narrator's formulation, in Borges's story, of 'un país oprimido y tenaz'.

In addition to a correspondence at the level of historical facts, the literary tradition supplies us, and may have supplied Borges, with another significant intertext, which is the narrative poem 'Konrad Wallenrod' by Adam Bernard Mickiewicz (1798–1855). Written after the events at Wilno and when Mickiewicz was in exile between 1824 and 1829, 'Konrad Wallenrod' narrates a 'wildly Romantic poetic tale' of deceit, alleged treason, and betrayal,¹⁷ which overlaps with Borges's 'tema' on a number of scores. At the start of the poem Konrad, 'whose name is glorious',¹⁸ is hailed by a gathering of Teutonic knights, who elect him as the Master of their Order and supreme leader in their fight against the hated Lithuanian enemy (ll. 333–38). After much procrastination, Konrad issues the call to arms but, instead of leading the Germans to victory, he presides over failure:

All is destroyed; Konrad has failed his host:
He, who by martial deeds had won such fame,
He, who was wont of his cool craft to boast,
Timid and careless in this war became.

(ll. 1568–71)

Twelve 'judges most august' (l. 1640) meet at Marienburg and condemn Konrad for betraying their cause. In the final part of the poem Mickiewicz brings Konrad's cunning and duplicity to light: he is in fact a Lithuanian patriot who has inveigled his way into the German camp in order to sabotage their cause and promote his own people's security and independence. In this respect his 'patriotic treason' is the inverse of Kilpatrick's in Borges's skeletal tale, since Konrad remains loyal to Lithuania and does not compromise his heroic credentials;¹⁹ the element of paradox is therefore absent from Mickiewicz's treatment of the theme of the traitor and the hero. 'Konrad Wallenrod' nevertheless rests on essentially similar narrative and thematic foundations centring on conspiracy against the motherland, imputations of shame, a council or conclave which sits in judgement, and a man condemned to death. As well as this, Mickiewicz's poem features the motif of the preservation and

¹⁷ I quote from George Gómöri's entry on Mickiewicz in *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760–1850*, ed. by Christopher John Murray, 2 vols (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), 1, 739–42 (p. 740).

¹⁸ 'Konrad Wallenrod' and Other Writings of Adam Mickiewicz, translated from the Polish by Jewell Parish, Dorothea Prall Radin, George Rapall Noyes, and others (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1925), p. 18. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

¹⁹ The Machiavellian concept of 'patriotic treason' is applied to Mickiewicz's play by George Gómöri in *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era*, 1, 740.

transmission of Konrad's heroic reputation, taken upon himself by his companion, Halban, who proclaims:

Let me remain, that I may close thine eyes;
 Remain, that I unto the world may give
 The glory of thy deed. Song never dies;
 And I the bard will travel up and down
 Through villages and castles, every town
 Of Lithuania; where I do not go
 My song will penetrate on tireless wing [. . .]
 (ll. 1935–41)

Halban's declaration of intent prefigures elements of James Alexander Nolan's plan to etch Kilpatrick's glorious deeds for ever in the mind and memory of the people of Ireland. The literary tradition thus reinforces the historical 'convenience' and credibility of Poland as a theatre for the events anticipated in Borges's deceptive sketch of a narrative.

From among the other possible settings mentioned by the narrator, the Republic of Venice can also be assimilated to the landscape of personal and national destinies that unfolds in 'Tema del traidor y del héroe'. The Republic had fallen to the French in 1797 after eleven centuries of independent governance by the doges. By the time Lord Byron arrived in the city in 1816, Venice was under tyrannical Austrian rule, as reflected in the following lines of 'Ode on Venice':

And the harsh sound of the barbarian drum,
 With dull and daily dissonance, repeats
 The echo of thy tyrant's voice along
 The soft waves, once all musical to song,
 That heaved beneath the moonlight with the throng
 Of gondolas—and to the busy hum
 Of cheerful creatures [. . .]

(ll. 20–26)²⁰

From an intertextual perspective, these verses are remarkable, first of all, for the chord they initially strike with the epigraph by W. B. Yeats chosen by Borges to head 'Tema del traidor y del héroe': 'All men are dancers and their tread | Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.' Second, it is known that Byron's poem acted as a source of inspiration for other writers, including Robert Browning, who shared Byron's love for Venice and wrote 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' (1842) on a Venetian theme;²¹ Browning is also the author of 'The Patriot: An Old Story' (1845), in which an erstwhile hero awaiting execution

²⁰ Lord Byron, 'Ode on Venice' (also known as 'Venice: An Ode'), in *Poetical Works*, ed. by Frederick Page, a New Edition, corrected by John Jump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 103–05 (p. 104).

²¹ Baldassare Galuppi (1706–1785) was a celebrated Venetian composer of operas and other

blames his fall from glory on the fickleness of public opinion.²² Readers of Borges's story recall that Browning is mentioned by surname, along with Victor Hugo, in the second paragraph of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe'. A third and final intertextual connection between Byron and Borges is the contrast, in the lines quoted above, of 'the festivities of the past with the sadness of the present under Austrian rule';²³ that connection will receive attention below.

As much as the names of Browning and Hugo—the authors, according to Borges's narrator, of poetic homilies to the dead Kilpatrick—it is Byron and Hugo who facilitate the transition, in my argument, to the penultimate location of a story set, for narrative convenience, in 1824. Apropos the reference, in the narrator's exposition, to 'algún estado [. . .] balcánico', I interpret this to include, and almost certainly mean, Greece during its War of Independence from Turkish control. Historically, the creation, in 1814, of a Greek independence party, the Philiki Etairia, was a catalyst for widespread resistance to Turkish authority in Constantinople, the Black Sea coast, the Peloponnese, and other areas of the eastern Mediterranean.²⁴ Full-scale hostilities broke out in 1821 and within a year Greek independence was proclaimed at Epidaurus. Turkish retaliation then reversed the Greek gains, which were also sabotaged by internal disagreements and civil war; when Greek independence was finally secured by the Treaty of Andrianople in 1829, this would be thanks in large part to Russian, French, and British intervention. Across Europe and in the United Kingdom, support for the Greek cause was forthcoming in the 1820s from the Philhellenes, aristocratic young men including Goethe, Shelley, Byron, and Hugo.²⁵ In January 1824 Byron, who had arrived in Greece some months earlier, travelled to Messolongi to help in the fight against the Turks and died of pneumonia in April of that year. His death, at the age of thirty-six, is just one reason why historians of the War of Independence regard 1824 as 'a fateful one for the Greek cause'.²⁶ The same historians also register the negative impact of 'internecine feuds' and acts of treachery among the Greeks themselves. They cite the famous case of one Odysseus, who, having been 'the hero of so many exploits and so many crimes', 'had ended by turning traitor and selling his services to the Turks'. In a story redolent of the fate of Fergus Kilpatrick, the evocatively named Odysseus was 'captured, imprisoned

kinds of music. 'A Toccata of Gallupi's' is classified as one of Browning's lyric poems and occupies pages 18–20 of *The Poems of Robert Browning* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928).

²² Robert Browning, 'The Patriot: An Old Story', in *The Poems of Robert Browning*, pp. 53–54.

²³ Stephen Hawlin, 'Browning's "A Toccata of Galuppi's": How Venice Once was Dear', *Review of English Studies*, 41 (1990), 496–509 (p. 499).

²⁴ I have drawn the bare bones of this narrative from the *Britannica*, vol. x, which supplies much of the information collected at www.1911encyclopedia.org/War_Of_Greek_Independence.

²⁵ Kane Faucher acknowledges this but takes it no further, in 'Modalities, Logic and the Cabala in Borges', p. 135.

²⁶ See the entry in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for 1911 in electronic form, cited in n. 24 above.

in the Acropolis, and finally assassinated by his former lieutenant Gouras' on 16 July 1824.²⁷

With all this data piling up before us, it is dizzyingly difficult to keep separate facts and fictions of patriotic heroism and betrayal played out in no fewer than four different geographical locations. But if we make allowances for the anachronism of the imminent triumph of rebellion in Ireland in 1824, we can still identify a common backcloth or scenario that is valid for the locations of Ireland, Poland, Venice, and Greece in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Essentially, this is the backcloth of 'romantic nationalism',²⁸ involving patriotic resistance against the colonial presence of overlords who, in the terms of Borges's story, are the English, the Russians, the French and Austrians (in the case of Venice), and the Turks. At the level of historical fact, all but one of the conflicts under review resulted in the birth of new, independent nations whose resistance was championed, at the time, by writers such as Mickiewicz, Byron, Hugo, et al. Romantic nationalism of the early and mid-nineteenth century supplies both the broad historical matrix and the rationale behind the range of plot locations put forward by the narrator of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe'.

It remains for us to discuss one final geographical variant for Borges's story of heroism and treachery set somewhere, some time 'al promediar o empezar el siglo XIX'. Between the mention of the Republic of Venice and an unspecified state in the Balkans, Borges's narrator slips in a reference to 'algún estado sudamericano'. It is surprising how very few critics have paid any attention at all to this detail, or taken it as a cue for a local-based reading of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe'. But such a reading is both plausible and indeed called for by the peculiar conjunction of time and place in Borges's narrative. For, as well as the geographical locations rehearsed at the start of the story, Borges cites, as the day when Fergus Kilpatrick is finally put to death, 6 August 1824, which is a landmark date in the political history of South America. As millions of Argentinians, Peruvians, and others need no reminding, it is the day in history when the Battle of Junín was fought and won, high up in the Andes, by an army of loyalists under the joint command of Venezuela's Simón Bolívar and José Sucre of Peru; followed shortly after by the Battle of Ayacucho, Junín precipitated the end of Spanish rule in South America and paved the way for the emergence, throughout the subcontinent, of a number of budding nation

²⁷ This was almost certainly Odysseus Androutsos, a chieftain with a power base in eastern Greece, who, according to the *Britannica*, 'defied the government and even collaborated with the Turks' (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, x, 850).

²⁸ A useful overview of the historical context is provided by Raymond F. Betts, *Europe in Retrospect: A Brief History of the Past Two Hundred Years* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1979); see Chapter 3, 'The Age of Revolution 1815–1848'. On 'romantic nationalism', also called 'National Romanticism', I have found the entry in *Wikipedia* especially enlightening: en.wikipedia.org/Romantic_nationalism.

states, starting with Colombia and Venezuela in the north and going all the way down to Chile and Argentina in the south. The date chosen by Borges for the final act in the life of a hero-turned-traitor could not be more evocative or more intriguing.

From a historical perspective, the interleaving of 'algún estado sudamericano' in among a list of countries or states including Ireland, Poland, Venice, and Greece points faithfully to a wider context of struggle, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, for independence from a host of imperial powers: Great Britain, Russia, France, Austria, the Ottoman Empire, and, lest we forget, Spain. Within the embryonic and wilfully open narrative design of 'Tema del traidor o del héroe', the relation of Peru, Chile, or Argentina to Spain in the 1820s is comparable, perhaps even identical, to that of Greece to the waning Ottoman Empire, or that of Poland (historically, Lithuania) to tsarist Russia. Beyond that time-frame, the equivalences set up at the beginning of Borges's story also allow for the comparison of Peru and Argentina with countries such as Ireland and Poland after 1824, from the point of view of their evolution towards fully fledged modern statehood. However, in the immediate context the most noteworthy consequence of the assertion of an equivalence between five locations is the iconoclastic implication that heroism and betrayal were inseparable at the birth of not just one but all of the nation states where 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' could have been set. For an Argentine (or a Peruvian or a Chilean) readership, it is one thing to imagine and give credence to a scenario of betrayal in nineteenth-century Ireland or Greece, quite another to countenance the thought that it might be valid for one's own home country or a close neighbour. But that is what is sanctioned by the permissive and multivalent narrative design of Borges's story.

This iconoclastic interpretation gives rise to some potentially embarrassing questions about the history of Argentina and other nations which fought for independence from Spain. Assuming interchangeability of locations in Borges's reconstruction of history/histories, might there have been a local 'Kilpatrick' or a South American 'Odysseus' who undermined the work of Bolívar, Sucre, San Martín, and others between 1814 and 1824, for instance? Could there be grounds for suggesting that the soldiers who fought at Junín and Ayacucho were as much traitors as heroes in their rebellion against Spanish rule? Or might all rebels have played the part of heroes, while those who remained loyal to the Spanish crown were, effectively, traitors? If these questions push against the limits of what is known, and what can reasonably be surmised, about South American history, it is perhaps because they assume too close a relationship with historical fact in Borges's story and because the approach adopted here to the theme of heroes and villains needs to be complemented by other vistas.

At this critical point, the family and autobiographical codes of ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’ can be usefully invoked. As stated earlier, the story of the discovery of Kilpatrick’s treachery is framed, in ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’, within the story of his great-grandson, Ryan, who embarks on ‘una biografía del héroe’ (p. 496) a century after Kilpatrick’s death.²⁹ In a *ficción* full of metafictional asides and winks to the reader, we should not forget Borges’s own hero-worship of Isidoro Suárez, who was his great-grandfather on the maternal side. Suárez was born a full century before Jorge Luis Borges and forged a brilliant career for himself as a soldier. In 1824 he led the cavalry charge against the Spanish at the Battle of Junín, and was singled out for praise by none other than General Simón Bolívar. Coincidences with the story of Kilpatrick point to the possibility, at least, of a biographical or autobiographical subtext in Borges’s story.

The conjunction of the historical and the family codes in ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’ is not without problems. If Ryan equates with Borges on the basis of a shared literary vocation and attitude of hero-worship towards a great-grandfather who played a prominent role in the fight for national independence, might it be that Borges actually harboured doubts about the hero of Junín and used ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’ as a canvas on which to explore or sublimate a paradoxical view of morality? I think not: Borges would write about Suárez on several occasions, including ‘Página para recordar al coronel Suárez, vencedor en Junín’, collected in *El otro el mismo* (1964), and throughout his life he would regard his great-grandfather (and other relatives such as Francisco Laprida) with nothing short of reverence. It is far more likely that Suárez’s heroism would be counterbalanced, in Borges’s view of South American history and the birth of nations, by the cowardice and treachery of others, which would be in keeping with the treatment given to the theme by Mickiewicz in ‘Konrad Wollenrod’, for example. Alternatively, Borges may have been suspicious deep down about myths of national origins which exclude or deny the counter-heroic, at the same time as he staunchly defended a personal myth of glorious ancestry and family involvement in the liberation of South America on and after 6 August 1824; at least one of his biographers agrees with this proposition.³⁰

As well as being treated synchronically within the historical parameters

²⁹ It is highly significant that in his adaptation of Borges, Bertolucci transformed the Ryan–Kilpatrick relationship into a classic Oedipal conflict between sons and fathers. One of the effects of this change was a foreshortening of the historical perspective of the film narrative, which concentrated on Italy in the pre- and post-war years, from the 1930s to the 1960s. However, a link with the politics and culture of the nineteenth century was preserved through a systematic pattern of operatic references to works by Giuseppe Verdi, including *Il trovatore* and *Rigoletto*. On these works and their connection with themes of conflict and betrayal, see Kolker, *Bernardo Bertolucci*, pp. 112–24.

³⁰ See Edwin Williamson, *Borges: A Life* (Harmondsworth: Viking Penguin, 2004), pp. 3–7.

drawn above, the relationship between heroism and treachery is also explored on a transhistorical basis, which extends all the way down to the time of writing and to the second of the key dates in 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', which is 1944. Reviewing the work of the critics, it is again surprising how many are blind or indifferent to the general subject of dates in 'Tema del traidor y del héroe'. An exception is Kane X. Faucher, who in a detailed analysis of Borges's story acknowledges the appearance, in the following order, of what he claims are five discrete dates: 1944, 1824, 1814, 1824, and 1824 again. Employing 'an occult semantics of numerology' as well as conventional methods of addition, so that, for example, '1944 becomes 1+9+4+4', Faucher proposes that the story is organized around the numbers 5, 14, 15, 18, and 32, and that at least three of these numbers are equivalent to 5: $14=1+4$; $32=3+2$, etc. Less convinced that there is much to be gained through applying the methods of 'cabalistic deconstruction',³¹ I maintain that 1824 and 1944 function at face value, as dates which carry significance in ordinary historical discourse. We have seen this work for '1824'; '1944' is no less pregnant with historical reference, as a cursory overview confirms. Discounting Ireland for the moment, Poland in that year can reasonably be considered the epitome of 'un país oprimido y tenaz' and a veritable theatre of popular resistance since 1939, if not before. Borges would not have known, early in 1944, that the people of Warsaw would rise against their German oppressors between 1 August and 3 October of that year, but he was a keen observer of the war in Europe and wrote a short note about the liberation of Paris, dated precisely 'Anotación al 23 de agosto de 1944' (*Obras completas*, II, 105–06). Nor could he have had any inkling of the disputes that would inflame Polish and other academics decades later, around the questions 'Was the [Warsaw] Rising a betrayal? Was it heroism? Was it realism? Was it folly?'³² But this only throws the visionary prescience of his 'tema' into starker relief.

Looking elsewhere, occupation and resistance were also facts of life throughout Greece, Yugoslavia, etc., and there is good reason to believe that, in his reference to 'algún estado balcánico', Borges had in mind the hardships suffered in those locations, not only in the 1820s but in the 1940s too. On top of this, national causes were vulnerable to betrayal and subversion, as hundreds of stories about collaboration with the enemy during the Second World War attest. It is worth repeating the point: although Borges wrote 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' some months *before* the start of 1944, the peoples of continental Europe had been suffering variously since 1939, and he would have been all too aware of the torn and fragile fabric of their lives.

³¹ Faucher, 'Modalities, Logic and the Cabala in Borges', pp. 150–51.

³² See Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, 'The Warsaw Rising 1944' <www.citinet.net/ak/polska> [accessed 1 October 2009]. The forums of the debate, which took place in the early 2000s, included the US news network CNN.

When we turn to Argentina, it is not so much war as barbarism that provides a conceptual, and a political, link with the nation's past. The epigraph from Yeats evokes a terrible cyclicity, where codes of ethics alternate but do not fundamentally change: 'the Platonic Year | Whirls out new right and wrong, | Whirls in the old instead'. According to Yeats, neither Christianity nor governments provide any guarantee of progress or civilized behaviour; rather, he observes, 'All men are dancers and their tread | Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong'. By tying his story to the threshold date of 3 January 1944, Borges insists on viewing the New Year in the terms of Yeats's pessimistic vision, which casts a forward shadow over the plot of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe'. Crucially, that vision gives prominence to a single term which cannot avoid calling up nineteenth-century Argentine debates about the nation's polity; more immediately, the word 'barbarous' cries out as a comment on the current state of affairs in Argentina. Thus, even before the story of Fergus Kilpatrick gets under way, Borges projects a nightmare scenario of collapsing civilization, which is as true for Argentina as it is for Poland, Greece, or any other of the settings where his 'tema' might unfold.

As Borges saw it, Argentina was indeed in the grip of 'barbarie' from the mid-point of 1943 on. A military coup had taken place in June of that year, 'masterminded by a group of young army officers who were pro-Axis and strongly *nacionalista* in ideology'. The new junta 'soon revealed its fascist inclinations', especially in the cultural sphere, where it issued a decree 'condemning artists and intellectuals who showed insufficient interest in "historical themes", by which was meant Argentine history as interpreted by the *nacionalistas*'.³³ Within a couple of months, Borges would start work on 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', in which it is difficult not to see a two-fingered riposte to the *nacionalista* agenda: answering the call to treat a historical theme, for sure, but doing so ironically, in disregard of monolithic myths affirming the noble origins of the nation and in defiance of the junta's cultural politics. By the time he completed 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', Borges would have also taken note of the appointment of a young colonel, Juan Domingo Perón, as secretary of the Department of Labour and Welfare in Buenos Aires, from which Perón would move upwards, in February 1944, to the combined posts of Vice-President and Secretary for War under General Edelmiro Farrell. The objective conditions in Argentina were such as to confirm Borges's sense that he was living under a regime which was hostile to peaceable values and nowhere near acceptable standards of government.

In the circumstances, Borges must have been sensitive to the glaring contrast between the heroism of a generation of patriots including his great-grandfather, and the contemporary collapse of Argentina into what he saw

³³ Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, p. 265.

as government-sponsored barbarism and repression. Surveying the moral and historical landscape, he would have no difficulty in defending Isidoro Suárez's lasting credentials as a national and family hero; in the role of traitor and agent of *barbarie*, he could look around him and see Farrell and Perón, wearing the inherited mantle and the military uniform of Rosas, whose name was synonymous, in one of Borges's early poems, with tyranny and bloodshed: 'Famosamente infame | Su nombre fue desolación en las casas, | Idolátrico amor en el gauchaje | Y horror del tajo en la garganta' ('Rosas', *Obras completas*, I, 28). The spectacle of Rosas redivivus occupying the seat of government could only add to Borges's sense of Fascist menace hanging over Argentina in the second half of 1943 and the early days of 1944.

The contrast between a heroic past and a degenerate present is of course a staple theme in literature and politics, and one which resounds clearly in much Romantic writing. In the verses quoted earlier from 'Ode on Venice', Byron reports on 'the harsh sound of the barbarian drum [repeating] the echo of the tyrant's voice along the soft waves, once all musical to song [. . .] and to the busy hum of cheerful creatures' (ll. 20–26). Mickiewicz is less bucolic, but to the point: as noted by George Gómöri in his authoritative essay on the Polish writer, the Wajdelota in the middle of 'Konrad Wollenrod' delivers 'a typical Romantic comparison of the greatness of valiant ancestors with the servile mediocrity of the present generation'.³⁴ Skating over the question of transmission (via Joseph Conrad, perhaps), Mickiewicz's and Byron's poems may be considered precursors of Borges's story and threads in an intertextual tapestry on which he draws and to which 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' makes a distinctive contribution in return.

The themes of betrayal and hero-worship are given a final, and personal, twist at the end of Borges's story. By now Ryan has come to realize the truth about his great-grandfather's repeated betrayals of his fellow conspirators, whose ultimate goal was to expel the British from Ireland; he also understands that he is personally ensnared in a web of pretence spun by Nolan: 'comprende que él también forma parte de la trama de Nolan'. This degree of self-awareness places Ryan in a dilemma: if he decides to tell the truth about Kilpatrick, he will destroy a myth behind the creation of a modern Ireland, which continues to give it legitimacy; if he lies, he will be in breach of the moral imperative. Readers might welcome some insight into Ryan's thought-processes, but the narrative simply informs us that he 'resuelve silenciar el descubrimiento. Publica un libro dedicado a la gloria del héroe'; the narrative then adds nicely, 'también eso, tal vez, estaba previsto' (p. 498). The hypothesis of determinism is a familiar theme in Borges, who employed it in the story of the magus in 'Las ruinas circulares', also of 1944. In 'Tema del

³⁴ Gómöri, *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era*, I, 740.

traidor y del héroe' the hypothesis of determinism goes only so far as an explanation and excuse for Ryan's conduct, which at bottom involves duplicity and the silencing of the truth. For Borges, writing under arduous conditions in Argentina in 1943 and 1944, the truth is not to be silenced or denied. It can, however, be disguised. In the story of Ryan and Kilpatrick he critiques Romantic nationalism in as many as five locations and poses tricky questions about patriotism, heroism, and the legitimacy of nations, including 'algún estado sudamericano'. Near the start of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' the apparently otiose attribution of the 'historia' that is about to be related to a narrator described as 'contemporáneo' points to an essential link with current conditions and brings the contemporary moment within the scope of Borges's historical critique. Unlike Ryan, or the magus in 'Las ruinas circulares', who accepted their roles in a predetermined plot, Borges in 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' creates a complex and flexible narrative framework within which to manoeuvre and to express a view of Argentina's past and present which is at odds with *nacionalista* ideology: all of this while remaining loyal to a forebear who was an out-and-out hero at Junín. From the dual perspective of great-grandson and committed writer, Borges could justifiably claim that, in spite of its embryonic condition, his 'tema' or 'argumento' 'ya de algún modo me justifica' (p. 496).

The present analysis and interpretation of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' reinforces Borges's reputation as a master craftsman of fiction, while also stressing his engagement with concerns of history, politics, and mimesis. As we have seen, selected dates from the nineteenth century tie the story of Fergus Kilpatrick to the broad context of the wars of independence in Europe and South America, while that of his great-grandson Ryan and the avowedly 'contemporary' narrator addresses a panorama of crisis affecting Western civilization more than a century later, in the years 1943 and 1944. The plurality of locations in the first of these interlocking stories gives 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' the appearance of a kaleidoscope; in point of fact, the events that unfold around Kilpatrick, Nolan, and other citizens of Ireland have historical analogues in the other four settings where the narrator says his story could equally well have been set. In relation to the nineteenth century, therefore, Borges's story shows remarkable regard for historical verisimilitude, making 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' a perfect example, on the face of it, of literature copying history.

However, the story also features several trademarks of Borgesian duplicity. One of these is the burden imposed on Ryan as both a character in his own right (i.e. as Kilpatrick's great-grandson) and a double for Borges's remembering and honouring his own great-grandfather, Isidoro Suárez. Another example of duplicity is the story's dual temporal perspective, which allows for

a reflection or superimposition of Borges's (imagined) scenario of political betrayal in nineteenth-century Ireland onto present-day Argentina, in the realm of fact. A third is the narrator's choice, as the location for his story, of the one 'país oprimido y tenaz' where 'glorious rebellion' did not in fact achieve immediate success resulting in the creation of a new, independent, and sovereign state in the 1820s; in this respect Ireland is very much 'the odd one out' in Borges's quintet, giving rise to the thought that it is either a red herring or a foil for one of the other four locations, which, in the light of the family code, would have to be Argentina. But this would risk imposing on the story a reductive reading which would close off the other geographical paths signposted in the narrator's exposition. Qualifying an earlier statement, we may conclude that literature copies history in 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', but that the historical narratives that literature produces are multivalent, and free to incorporate material that is either invented or departs in some way or another from the historical record.

At another level, 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' stands out as an exemplary instance of literature copying literature (which, in some cases, has itself already copied history). As my comments on works by Byron, Browning, and Mickiewicz have endeavoured to show, 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' grows out of a tradition of writing produced in the Romantic era, about patriots and patriotism, glorious rebellions, and heroic struggles, on the one hand, and acts of betrayal, villainy, and deceit, on the other. The name of Mickiewicz is absent from Borges's narrative, but his dramatic tale about Konrad Wallenrod chimes in perfectly with its thematic design. From a later period, G. K. Chesterton is certainly a pertinent point of reference, but so is Liam O'Flaherty, whose life and work coincide almost to the year with Borges's. Such an abundant intertextuality is to be taken for granted in Borges's output and poetics; in the case of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' it underpins both the narrative scaffolding of the story and the author's commitment to truths relating to history, politics, and the clash between civilization and barbarism.

A final matter to which Borges's narrative directs attention is the relation of the reader to the author and the possibility that the former might be manipulated by the latter. The focus is most immediately on Ryan, who in the concluding paragraph of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' comes to suspect that Nolan, referred to as 'el autor', intercalated 'los pasajes imitados de Shakespeare' as a lure for a future reader whose role would be to discover 'the truth': 'para que una persona, en el porvenir, diera con la verdad' (p. 498); it also dawns on Ryan that he may be that person, a full century after Nolan devised his cunning plot. Ryan's research into the circumstances of his great-grandfather's death does not produce instant results, but he eventually reads beyond the surface accoutrements of Nolan's narrative and solves the

'enigma' (p. 496) surrounding Kilpatrick's death. The relevance of this to the reader of Borges's narrative is double-edged. On the one hand, the reader *of* the text can end up like the reader *in* the text: unsure as to whether s/he is the prisoner of a determinist narrative—a web spun by Borges—from which there seems to be no escape, either intellectual or moral. On the other hand, the model of reading that is described in the final paragraph of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' does not preclude the refusal to acquiesce: like everything else in the story, the model of reading is a sketch, and a blueprint of and for a reader who has both sufficient intelligence to recognize the encoding of an enigma in Borges's narrative, and sufficient tenacity to work on, and eventually crack, that code. As argued above, Borges encoded at least two semi-secret messages in his story of Kilpatrick: one relating to Argentine heroism at the time of the wars of independence, the other to political circumstances obtaining in Argentina around the time of writing. The reader who unpicks the skein of historical, biographical, and intertextual references in 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' will come closer to 'the truth' than one who remains mystified by the story's systematic duplicity. It is my contention that Borges has such a reader in mind; what is more, in the case of the contemporary Argentine reader, he counts on a sympathetic recognition, echoing Byron, that 'tyranny of late is cunning grown' ('Ode on Venice', l. 131). Thereafter, readers at a later stage of history may well attain the same heightened historical and political perspective as Ricardo Piglia and perhaps agree with that literary son of Borges that 'Más allá de la barbarie y del horror que hemos vivido, en algunas páginas de nuestra literatura persiste una memoria que nos permite, creo, no avergonzarnos de ser argentinos'.³⁵

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³⁵ Ricardo Piglia, 'Ficción y política en la literatura argentina', in *Literatura argentina hoy: de la dictadura a la democracia*, ed. by Karl Kohut and Andrea Pagni (Frankfurt a.M.: Vervuert, 1989), pp. 97–103 (p. 103).