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Borges and Bertolucci: Two Conceptions of the Traitor and the Hero

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Ficciones, a collection of short narratives by Jorge Luis Borges, contains "Tema del traidor y del héroe," which, as the title suggests, treats the theme of ambivalent identity. Not a traditional short story, but a piece of metafiction that reveals the author's process of literary creation, "Tema del traidor y del héroe" informs the reader of a story Borges will perhaps write someday. "He imaginado este argumento," (141) he writes, which still lacks precision and detail, and which can take place in any one of a number of countries in the world. Borges' tendency toward minimalism and simplification is seen in this framework which, by its sparseness, draws specific attributes to itself. As Borges explains to the reader, he chooses a specific setting—Ireland in 1824—almost reluctantly, "para comodidad narrativa" (141), and gives a brief plot outline that accords little or no importance to the characters' psycho-emotional states. The contemplated narrative presents an Irish patriot seeking to untangle a web of history that mars his great-grandfather's reputation; it is a self-referential, abstract variation on a theme, not unlike minimalist works of art that are reduced to their essence, requiring the viewer's participation for completion.

A different approach is taken by Bernardo Bertolucci's *La strategia del ragno*, a film based on Borges' "Tema del traidor y del héroe," which aired on Italian television in 1970. Bertolucci's work retains the general theme and some of the story line of Borges' narrative in a more detailed and intimate context. As the product of a particular geographical, historical, and political set-

ting, this story could not take place anywhere nor at any other time than it does. It concerns a young Italian who returns to his father's native city, Tara, where the older man is regarded as an anti-fascist hero. There is some doubt, however, as to the father's destiny and his loyalty to the Resistance, and it becomes the son's duty to investigate the matter. This investigation and its personal consequences for Athos Magnani, Jr. become the focal point of the film, whereas in "Tema del traidor y del héroe" Borges explains in a parenthetical interruption that "(esa investigación es uno de los hiatos del argumento). . ." (144) and concentrates on the schematic patterns of the plot.

In contrast to Borges' opening paragraphs where the metafictional nature of the still "non-existent" narrative is made clear, Bertolucci's film opens with a traditional tale-like beginning: the arrival of a train at a small-town station, a scene which immediately draws the reader in as if he or she were also entering a new setting. The protagonist, Athos Magnani Jr., descends, and so does a young sailor, perhaps a figure of identification or double for the viewer, as the camera follows their progress on foot into Tara.

Borges draws attention to the philosophical question of time and to his own process of writing "Tema del traidor y del héroe" through the use of different verb tenses. "La acción transcurre . . .," he writes, then rectifies this to "Ha transcurrido, mejor dicho, . . ." (141). The character who will be the narrator of the intended fiction is

introduced by Borges in a sentence with a complex set of temporal references: "El narrador se llama Ryan; es bisnieto del joven, del heroico, del bello, del asesinado Fergus Kilpatrick . . ." (142). The two verbs are in the present tense with "el narrador" as their subject, but a regression in time is made obvious by the adjectives that describe a youthful Fergus Kilpatrick: "joven . . . , heroico . . . , bello . . ." On the other hand, "asesinado" obliterates the meaning of the foregoing adjectives, and the noun "bisnieto," referring to Ryan, superimposes two time frames and the identities and traits of the two men. Borges uses a minimal amount of words, but their significance is extensive.

In *La estrategia del ragno*, time is also an important theme, though it is treated with less metaphor, less abstraction, and more subjective experience. Francesco Casetti and Robert Phillip Kolker have written about Bertolucci's manipulation of the viewer's perceptions and emotions through movement of the camera. Casetti comments upon the "piano-sequenza" (64), a technique which highlights a progressive discovery of reality. He describes it as "uno sguardo indagatore . . . , ripetuto . . ." (65), or an inquisitive, repeated glance. Near the beginning of *La strategia del ragno*, when Athos looks up to read a street sign with his father's name on it (the same as his own), and again shortly thereafter to see one that reads "Cerchio Giovanile Athos Magnani," the camera lingers on the signs while the character walks away. When the camera must then hurry to catch up with Athos, the viewer becomes aware of his or her own perception as distinct from Athos, Jr.'s; the viewer lingers, still trying to understand, while Athos, already involved, leaves quickly, perhaps angrily, because of his previous relationship with the man whose name is on the sign, and his simultaneous failure to identify with him. This technique

of camera movement and visual perception involves the viewer emotionally.

As the story within the story of "Tema del traidor y del héroe" progresses, Borges continues using the present tense when referring to Ryan, and the preterite and imperfect tenses to refer not only to the circumstances surrounding the death of the great-grandfather, Fergus Kilpatrick, and to the writings of his chronicler and co-conspirator James Alexander Nolan, but also to analogous literary antecedents in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. The reader comes to perceive history as a fabrication, that is, as whatever is written, for "real" events vanish and literature endures. The author of "Tema del traidor y del héroe" evokes a certain intellectual and philosophical disposition in his reader, superimposing an awareness of the writing process, the Swiss Festspiele, Shakespearian drama, documents, historical events, and the proposed narrator's perceptions of truth and time: "un dibujo de líneas que se repiten" (143), a pattern like a spider's web or abstract art. While Ryan's high intellectual level is taken for granted, no mention is made of his emotional or psychological reaction to the question of Fergus Kilpatrick's real identity as hero or traitor. Possibly, a great-grandson questioning events 100 years after they occurred would not be as intimately wrapped up in the investigation "(esa investigación es uno de los hiatos del argumento)" (144) as a son seeking to know his father's true fate. Synthesis and comprehension for Borges seem to be distillations of inferior elements such as imagination and emotion, which he relegates to the easily-deceived masses: "Sugirió que el condenado muriera a manos de un asesino, desconocido, en circunstancias deliberadamente dramáticas, que se grabaran en la imaginación popular . . ." (145).

La estrategia del ragno presents an insecure, searching protagonist who wants to under-

stand the past with both his heart and his mind. Athos Magnani, Jr. seems simultaneously fascinated by and disappointed in the man with whom he shares a name. The wealth of memory and historical pageantry collectively embodied in his father's three cronies, in Draifa, and in Tara itself disconcert him; eventually he is overwhelmed by the emotional and intellectual struggle to construct an image of the past that permits his experience of the present. As Borges observes in another piece of short fiction,

Modificar el pasado no es modificar un solo hecho; es anular sus consecuencias, que tienden a ser infinitas. Dicho sea con otras palabras; es crear dos historias universales. ("La otra muerte" 80-1)

At the end of the film, when the past has been scrutinized and reworked, a different universal order seems to be in effect in Tara, one in which time takes on spatial qualities, blocks the passage of trains, and traps Athos Magnani, Jr. (though not the sailor, or the viewer) in the town. In retrospect, the beginning of the film which pictures the traditional, realistic arrival of a train at a station, is negated and transformed by Athos' experience.

Sante Matteo points out Bertolucci's concern with an Italian national identity, and with the nature of the Western world in general as depicted in alternating images of Athos Magnani, Jr. as a traitor and as a hero, as fascist and anti-fascist (20-1). It was a plot to assassinate Mussolini during a performance of *Rigoletto* that the elder Athos revealed to the enemy. Instead, he himself was shot, as was Fergus Kilpatrick, in a well-staged attempt to redeem his image and his cause, at the moment *Rigoletto* cried out "Ah! La maledizione!" The moment was an appropriate one, evoking the concept of

original sin with its subsequent curse, thus suggesting that mankind is inconstant by nature; that betrayal and loyalty depend on one another for meaning. Though Borges' metafictional text refers to its own gaps ("hiatos"), two notable ones are not recognized: Fergus Kilpatrick's motive for treason, and Ryan's personal reaction upon discovering his ancestor's treason. The conceptual world of Borges' narrative, void as it is of sensuality, dismisses the generic nature of human disloyalty. But *La strategia del ragno* suggests an explanation through the presence of Draifa, Athos Magnani, Jr.'s mistress. In a flashback sequence, Draifa asks Athos, Jr. who is better, she or his wife. When he fails to answer, she slaps him and calls him "vigliacco," (not so much "traitor" as "coward"), the same word used by his three fellow *partigiani* when they discover his betrayal. Thus Athos, Jr., like Mussolini himself, has committed two betrayals that his son must contend with, one political and one personal. The personal betrayal of two women, one of them presumably Athos Jr.'s mother, points again to inborn inconstancy as mankind's legacy, and casts doubt upon the authenticity of all human undertakings. Borges does not portray the personal lives of Ryan or Fergus Kilpatrick, but he initiates "Tema del traidor y del héroe" with an epigraph from Yeats which also imparts a sense of humanity's illegitimacy: "All men are dancers and their tread / Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong" (141).

Borges' poor eyesight did not allow him fully to enjoy theatre and film, but this is not the sole cause of his apparent disinterest in writing for the stage. Interviewed on the subject of the filming of "El muerto," he said:

Insistí en que tomaran el cuento como un punto de partida nada más, y que luego dejaran volar su

imaginación. . . . Además, les expliqué que no sabía nada acerca de ciertos detalles visuales, y que no estaba seguro de qué cara tenían los personajes, ni cómo iban vestidos. (quoted in Molachino 86)

and on film-viewing in general: “estamos viendo fotografías de disfrazados, y sin embargo creemos en ellos. . . mientras dura la proyección” (87).

Borges made clear his unwillingness to get involved with visual details and incidentals that had no bearing on the thematic aspects of his work. Possibly, he wanted to avoid specificity, preferring universality because in “Tema del traidor y del héroe” literary creation goes from the universal to the specific (“un país oprimido . . . Digamos . . . Irlanda; digamos 1824”), taking on particularities only as a concession to the annoying material world. Material objects, always too numerous, are obstacles to insight. In *Elogio de la sombra*, Borges wrote, “Siempre en mi vida fueron demasiadas las cosas; / Demócrito de Abdera se arrancó los ojos para pensar” (quoted in Molachino 97). Borges adopted a minimalist posture in his art toward the representation of sensual and incidental situations, objects, and events, and so assigned limited significance to the emotional pain of a devastating discovery; he would probably not have described carefully, with pauses for the absorption of every physical detail, a scene such as the one in *La estrategia del ragno* in which Gaibazzi, amid hanging sausages, tells young Athos about the origins of the anti-fascist party.

On the frontispiece of a book entitled *Minimalism* by Kenneth Baker, there is a quote by Antonio Porchia: “The virtues of a thing do not come from it: they go to it.” Though Borges cannot be called a minimalist in the strict sense of the word because it refers to a specific, contemporary, New

York-based group of sculptors, Porchia’s statement nonetheless describes Borges’ art. In “Tema del traidor y del héroe,” one sees that abstract truths and qualities pre-exist for Borges, and give rise to historical and fictitious events. The specific events do not give rise to courage, cowardice, loyalty, or treason, rather they go to them. In Bertolucci’s neo-realist film, however, Athos Magnani, Jr. first inherits a given situation which “fleshes out” for him as reality before he makes the discovery of an all-pervasive betrayal, of cyclical time, of the deception of language, of the falseness of myths, of the non-existence of free will and individual identity. In a world already filled with a multiplicity of objects and their reflections, and with words that are only metaphors for the objects they represent, Borges wishes to simplify and eliminate the superfluous. Only certain truths, movements, shapes, elements, and abstractions appear to exist in the world beyond individual perspective and circumstance. They are portrayed in “Tema del traidor y del héroe” with the “mise-en-abîme” technique (boxes within boxes) since the reader perceives the story through the eyes of the author, Borges, who in turn creates Ryan, who focuses on the life of his great-grandfather Fergus Kilpatrick; chess game-like strategies (black and white alternating squares); ambivalent identities (the mirror images of Ryan, Fergus Kilpatrick, Julius Caesar, and Macbeth); and cyclical time (circles which represent the infinite mystery).

The background of intellectual imagery that emerges from “Tema del traidor y del héroe” recalls the work of minimalist artists and sculptors, while *La estrategia del ragno* offers the film-viewer a cornucopia of sensual images from the primitive art of Vittorio Ligabue that serves as backdrop for the opening credits of the movie, to the Renaissance architecture, the greenery of the north Italian countryside surrounding Tara, and the presence of Draifa who is the missing

link between the traitor and the hero.

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