

BORGES *the Poet*

Edited by Carlos Cortínez

The University of Arkansas Press
Fayetteville 1986

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Evocation and Provocation in Borges:
The Figure of Juan Muraña

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

La esquina o el patio, de alegres reuniones,
le oye cantar *hechos* que nadie le niega:
¡con una guitarra de altivas canciones
él es Juan Moreira, y él es Santos Vega!¹

No one of course would deny the *guapo's* deeds to his face because that would be an ostentatious challenge to his manhood, and would inevitably lead to a knife fight. Furthermore, as Borges discovers in his book on Carriego, the provoker of a knife fight is inevitably the loser of it; the successful knife-fighter does not look for fights, but fights to defend himself when necessary.²

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

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

y de las prisiones salió consagrado.
 Conoce sus triunfos y ni aun le inquieta
 la gloria de otros, de muchos temida,
 pues todo el Palermo de acción le respeta
 y acata su fama, jamás desmentida.³

The paradox of his fame is that he alone can speak or sing of it: his admirers are condemned to silence. Such is the sensitivity of the *cuchillero* that merely to tell someone that he has renown as a brave man (as in "Hombre de la esquina rosada") is to challenge him to a fight to the death, or at least to the point where one of the fighters "marks" the other, leaving a scar on the face. Thus, the cult of courage is one best practiced in silence, at least during the life (and especially in the presence) of the *cuchillero*.

The exploits of the *cuchillero*, then, can only be sung by himself in the first person, or by someone else in the third person after his death. To sing the hero's deeds in his presence is to invite a *payada*, a song in counterpoint in which the instruments are no longer the voice and the guitar.

Juan Muraña, Carriego's contemporary and *compadre* of Palermo, is for Borges the archetypal *cuchillero*, perhaps because they shared a neighborhood and some mutual friends, although in one poem Borges says he never saw Muraña. Muraña served as thug to the local political boss Nicolás Paredes (whom Borges got to know in the course of writing *Evaristo Carriego*, and to whom he later dedicated a poem). Muraña is mentioned many times in the course of the book on Carriego, most notably at the end of the discussion of "El guapo":

[El guapo] podía no ser un provocador: el guapo Juan Muraña, famoso, era una obediente máquina de pelear, un hombre sin más rasgos diferenciales que la seguridad letal de su brazo y una incapacidad perfecta de miedo. No sabía cuándo proceder, y pedía con los ojos—alma servil—la venia de su patrón de turno. Una vez en pelea, tiraba solamente a matar. No quería *criar cuervos*. Hablaba, sin temor y sin preferencia, de las muertes que cobró—mejor: que el destino obró a través de él, pues existen hechos de una tan infinita responsabilidad (el de procrear un hombre o matarlo) que el remordimiento o la vanagloria por ellos es una insensatez. Murió lleno de días, con su constelación de muertes en el recuerdo, ya borrosa sin duda.⁴

Incidents from Muraña's life were also the inspiration for Borges' first story, "Hombres pelearon" (in *El idioma de los argentinos*, 1928) later ex-

panded slightly under the title "Hombre de la esquina rosada" (*Historia universal de la infamia*, 1935), one of Borges' best-known and most enduring stories. In *El informe de Brodie* (1970), he published a sequel to this story under the same name "Historia de Rosendo Juárez." (Bioy Casares and Borges reworked a version of the same incidents in their filmscript *Los orilleros*.) Furthermore, Muraña appears in numerous Borges poems: he is mentioned in "El tango," "¿Dónde se habrán ido?," and "Milonga de don Nicanor Paredes,"⁵ while both "Alusión a una sombra de mil ochocientos noventa y tantos," a poem about Muraña's knife (*El hacedor*, 1960), and the recent "Milonga de Juan Muraña" (*La cifra*, 1981), are devoted wholly to him.⁶

"Alusión a una sombra . . ." reduces Muraña by synecdoche to his knife:

Por esa brava
 Región anduvo el sórdido cuchillero.
 El cuchillo. La cara se ha borrado.⁷

And in the same poem Borges says that he never met the man, but feels himself in company of this murderer whom he never met. Already in the reduction of Muraña to his knife Borges wipes out his face: he saves the memory of the fighter (symbolized at the end of the poem by the flash of steel) at the expense of the man. Similarly there is a blurring of Muraña's circumstance: the year is 1890-something, the deeds unnamed, the neighborhood itself lower and meaner. Muraña's knife shines out of the past, but the man himself is but a shade to be dismissed rather casually.

The blurring of the face of the dead man and the reference to him as a shade cannot but remind us of the evocation of Muraña at the moment of his death in *Evaristo Carriego*: "Murió lleno de días, con su constelación de muertes en el recuerdo, ya borrosa sin duda." To sing of Muraña, Borges has symbolically marked him, killed off the man to make him into a story. Saving his memory (that is, his memory of his dead) is to appropriate that memory, to remember his victims as if they were Borges' own, and to turn the evocation of the *cuchillero* into yet another deed which none dare challenge.

The same process of evocation and provocation is much more clearly seen in the recent "Milonga de Juan Muraña." The poem reads:

Me habré cruzado con él
 En una esquina cualquiera.
 Yo era un chico, él era un hombre.
 Nadie me dijo quién era.
 No sé por qué en la oración
 Ese antiguo me acompaña.
 Sé que mi suerte es salvar
 La memoria de Muraña.
 Tuvo una sola virtud.
 Hay quien no tiene ninguna.
 Fue el hombre más animoso
 Que han visto el sol y la luna.
 A nadie faltó el respeto.
 No le gustaba pelear,
 Pero cuando se avenía,
 Siempre tiraba a matar.
 Fiel como un perro al caudillo
 Servía en las elecciones.
 Padeció la ingratitud,
 La pobreza y las prisiones.
 Hombre capaz de pelear
 Liado al otro por un lazo,
 Hombre que supo afrontar
 Con el cuchillo el balazo.
 Lo recordaba Carriego
 Y yo lo recuerdo ahora.
 Más vale pensar en otros
 Cuando se acerca la hora.⁸

The poem begins with an affirmation that the young Borges probably crossed paths with Muraña, a contradiction of the declaration in "Alusión," though the future perfect of probability serves to cast this meeting into some doubt. The indeterminacy of the event is confirmed by the indefinite place ("una esquina cualquiera"), though the preterit verb at the end of the stanza ("Nadie me dijo quién era") would seem to confirm that an encounter occurred, even if they did not meet. This mis-meeting is due to a lack of full contemporaneity between the two ("Yo era un chico, él era un viejo"), but given Borges' obsession with circular time this unconsummated encounter suggests that the two will meet fully at some future time (perhaps now in this poem). The following stanza

echoes two ideas that appear in "Alusión": that the old *cuchillero* is magically present for Borges and that it is his duty as poet to save Muraña's memory. To save Muraña's memory, that blurred memory of innumerable victims: such is the daring purpose of Borges' *oración* (sentence, oration, prayer).

The choppy, abrupt tone of the octosyllabic verse, broken into a series of short sentences, makes the poem a tense, bold oration for Muraña. That tension and abruptness is especially apt in the third stanza, in which Borges' alleged desire to save Muraña's memory verges on insult. He begins by saying that Muraña had but one virtue (courage), softening the statement by saying that some men have no virtues at all, but none the less reducing Muraña once again to the unthinking fighting machine described in *Evaristo Carriego* or the knife of "Alusión a una sombra . . ." In fact he mentions a second virtue in the following stanza—respect for others—though that respect is qualified by Muraña's professional thoroughness as a killer. (Elsewhere Borges says that Muraña and other *cuchilleros* were more interested in marking their victim than in killing him; here Muraña is reduced to a sort of methodical butcher.) The insulting tone returns in the fifth stanza: Muraña was "faithful as a dog" to the electoral boss, and suffered a dog's life (misery, ingratitude, confinement). The examples of Muraña's bravery in the sixth stanza—a willingness to fight even when tied to his opponent, to face bullets with only a knife for self-defense—suggest a foolhardy, if brave, fool. The heart of the poem, then, gives us an image of a man with far more faults than virtues, though the virtue of courage is supreme in the *cuchilleros'* moral universe, and perhaps in that of Borges.⁹

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

The vagueness of the wording—"liado al otro," linked to the other, any other—suggests the poet's implicit counterpoint, his challenge and the acceptance of that challenge.

The final stanza recalls Carriego's treatment of Muraña in "El guapo"—an equivocal treatment, as we saw initially, since Carriego describes the silence to which the hero condemns his listeners—and then has Borges take Carriego's place (as the shift from past to present confirms). Borges concludes: "Más vale pensar en otros/ Cuando se acerca la hora." The couplet recalls the Muraña of *Evaristo Carriego* who thinks of the blurred images of his victims when his last hour approaches. Borges seems to suggest that he has assumed not only the function of saving Muraña's memory (the memory of Muraña's victims), but also of adding two new victims to the list: Muraña himself, and of course Evaristo Carriego. Many times over the years Borges has been asked why he wrote about such a minor poet as Carriego (the implication being that he should have written about the looming figure of Lugones),¹⁰ but surely part of the point of the exercise of writing a biography of Carriego is to appropriate his text for himself, annihilating the man in the process. Muraña is a less obvious and less willing victim, since he would seem to have had little to fear from the near-sighted boy who lived at 2147 Serrano St. Yet Muraña is a much more total victim of Borges, since his fame must now depend completely on the image created in a series of texts that extend from *Evaristo Carriego* to *La cifra*.

In his great poem on the tango Borges concludes:

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

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

violence of the dead, to release their violence in the dance of words and images. As Borges says, again in "El tango,"

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

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

NOTES

1. Evaristo Carriego, *Poesías completas* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1968): 66–7.
2. For simplicity's sake I will refer to the single volume of Borges' so-called *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974): 167–8. See also Borges and Silvina Bullrich, *El compadrito* (Buenos Aires: Fabril, 1968), in which A. Taullard is cited on p. 99: "Peleaban por imposición de las circunstancias, para demostrar que no eran 'flojos' o para mantener su reputación de valientes."
3. Carriego, *Poesías completas*, 66.
4. Borges, *Obras completas*, 129. The first edition of Borges' *Evaristo Carriego* (Buenos Aires: M. Gleizer, 1930), differs slightly from the later versions, in that the verb *obró* is used twice: "las muertes que obró—mejor: que el destino obró a través de él." I prefer the reading *obró to cobró*.
5. Elsewhere Paredes is consistently named *Nicolás*, not *Nicanor* (see *Obras completas*, 103, 118, 159, 329, 1035).
6. There is also a story, "Juan Muraña," in *El informe de Brodie*, in which Muraña's knife, ten years after its owner's death, continues to protect his family (*Obras completas*, 1044–7).
7. Borges, *Obras completas*, 827.
8. Jorge Luis Borges, *La cifra* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1981): 55–6.
9. See the ironic note on courage in Borges' *Evaristo Carriego*: "Si una comunidad resuelve que el valor es la primera virtud, la simulación del valor será tan general como la de la belleza entre las muchachas o la de pensamiento inventor entre los que publican; pero ese mismo aparentado valor será un aprendizaje,"—Borges, *Obras completas*, 128.
10. See, for example, the "Autobiographical Essay" appended to the English version of *El aleph*, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, Jorge Luis Borges (New York: Dutton, 1970): 233.
11. Borges, *Obras completas*, 889. He says the same thing in the article on the tango appended to the second and later editions of *Evaristo Carriego*: "En un diálogo de Oscar Wilde se lee que la música nos revela un pasado personal que hasta ese momento ignorábamos y nos mueve a lamentar desventuras que no nos ocurrieron y culpas que no cometimos; de mí confesaré que no suelo oír *El Marne* o *Don Juan* sin recordar con precisión un pasado apócrifo, a la vez estoico y orgiástico, en el que he desafiado y peleado para caer al fin, silencioso, en un oscuro duelo a cuchillo," in Borges, *Obras completas*, 162.
12. Borges, *Obras completas*, 889.