

# Borges, Courage, and Will

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In writing his stories over the last forty years, Jorge Luis Borges has made continual use of knife duels and violence. He explains his liking for heroic and bloody rivalries with deceptive simplicity: physical courage appeals to him because he lacks it, and he feels guilty for being a bookish person who cannot carry on in the tradition of his military forebears.<sup>1</sup> He speaks of his ancestors killed in battle and says they “perhaps account for my yearning after that epic destiny which my gods denied me, no doubt wisely.”<sup>2</sup> His fiction testifies to this feeling; in his most autobiographical story, “The South,”<sup>3</sup> his protagonist is ashamed to be dying of septicemia in a hospital and dreams of a more epic death by the knife under an open sky (years ago, Borges himself almost died of septicemia). Borges’s affinity for the “cult of courage” (a phrase he took from the poet Evaristo Carriego) stretches across four decades of fiction-writing to 1970, when he filled the stories of *Doctor Brodie’s Report* with duels and death. These primeval battles take on, by accumulation, the look of legend or myth and seem to celebrate Argentina’s heroic, violent past—her national glory and tragedy.

But Borges’s fascination with bravery is much more than a preoccupation with national history, fighting, and physical bravado. In a duel to the death a man comes to grips with destiny, which sweeps aside all the moral and philosophical complexities of this confusion called life. “You North Americans,” Borges said in Texas in 1968, “are much concerned with right and wrong, perhaps to your own hurt. The question of what is right or wrong is less important than whether a man is a brave man or a coward.”<sup>4</sup> He has also said, “The issue of a fight is of no importance whatever. What is important is that a man should not let himself be bullied.”<sup>5</sup> But to fight in order to settle a quarrel is stupid, he believes: “If I quarrel with you and you quarrel with me, what has our swordsmanship or our marksmanship to do with it? Nothing—unless you have the mystical idea that God will punish the wrong.”

Borges’s preoccupation with bravery, then, is not based on admiration of combat nor on defense of the right. Alongside his cult of courage, moreover, we must put his cult of cowardice and treachery. In a number of stories he draws our attention to men who refuse to fight or whose loyalty is fickle. The backwoods warrior of “Story of the Warrior and the Captive”<sup>6</sup> betrays his tribe in order to defend a city he has never seen before. The police sergeant of “The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz” (*The Aleph and Other Stories*) turns against his companions to fight beside the outlaw Martín Fierro. Jacob Fischbein of “The Unworthy Friend” (*Doctor Brodie’s Report*) turns traitor to his hoodlum god, Ferrari, in a way that leaves us wondering whether *traitor* is the right word. A story from this same collection, “Rosendo’s Tale,” explains that a barroom rogue who we thought turned coward in a story Borges wrote forty years ago, “Streetcorner Man,” did so only because he realized how foolish it was to be a knife-wielding thug.<sup>7</sup> In other recent stories it is not physical courage that is celebrated, but cruelty and primitive violence; for example, in “The End of the Duel” (*Doctor Brodie’s Report*) two rival knife-artists who have never chosen to kill each other, and who serve side-by-side in the army without speaking, are captured by the enemy, and a cruel captain forces them to compete in death by running a race after their throats are cut. Incongruously, this collection contains a gentle story about the amiable rivalry of two women painters, and it bears the iron title “The Duel.”

Borges's reader is driven to look for a common denominator in these tales of bravery and cowardice, cruelty and gentleness. Knife-dueling is only a subdivision of the larger category of interpersonal rivalry (competing theologians, painters, and scholars as well as warring toughs), and the whole thing might better be called *conflict*. Conflict is violence, and violence, says the dictionary, is injury done to anything which is supposed to be respected: profanation, violation. In final terms, violence is first an attitude—a refusal to respect or to be bullied by something. It implies apostasy, independence, and willfulness. In its ultimate abstraction, violence is the arbitrary exercise of the will in disregard of the sacrosanct.

When we come right down to it, it is not Borges who venerates physical courage; he merely writes about men who do. What fascinates him is that such men have made a religion of it, as he says in his prototypical story-essay "The Challenge" (*The Aleph and Other Stories*). About this piece he has said, "I think the reader will find in 'The Challenge' a full explanation of my feeling for the subject of knives, knife fighters, courage, and so on, as it has concerned me over the past forty or forty-five years."<sup>8</sup> The story or legend is about Wenceslao Suárez, a peaceable man who nevertheless has a reputation for courage with the knife. A stranger wants to test his mettle, so he writes him a respectful letter, visits and eats barbecue with him, and afterward suggests a little friendly sparring, which Suárez, out of courtesy, cannot refuse. Before the knife-play has gone very far, the stranger turns deadly and cuts off Suárez's hand, leaving it dangling by a piece of skin. Suárez steps on it and tears it off, then kills the stranger with a single jab. Borges explains that the legend appeals to him because these gauchos are keepers of a chivalrous code; the gaucho "forged a religion . . . and his faith (like all others) had its ethic, its mythology, and its martyrs" (p. 95). This "manly faith . . . was no mere form of vanity but rather an awareness that God may be found in any man" (p. 95).

But although Borges's other tales of duels portray knife-fighting as this same kind of impersonal, unemotional, even ceremonial obeisance to the iron gods of courage, in many of them the code is not idealized. Some (such as "Streetcorner Man" and "Rosendo's Tale") show dueling as the first and last resort of the bully and the coward. In the latter type, a man's true calling or destiny requires that he reject blind devotion to the tyrannical custom. What is significant here is that the gesture—the violence—is carried to a level above dueling and embodied in its opposite, a refusal to fight ("Rosendo's Tale") or a betrayal of some other sacrosanct idea of loyalty ("The Unworthy Friend," "History of the Warrior and the Captive," "The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz"). The cult of courage is courageously repudiated.

It is no wonder that Borges, so famously bewildered by the inscrutable, labyrinthine universe, should dramatize the arbitrary knife that resolves all complexities in the same way that Omar's "whirlwind Sword" scatters the "black Horde of Fears and Sorrows that infest the Soul," or that he should finally extol the higher philosophical or religious act that the duel symbolizes. When he idealizes the duel, as in "The Challenge," he makes it a symbol of an apostasy that it takes courage to uphold—a religious or philosophical position which makes the individual human will the sole arbiter of what is correct or incorrect, right or wrong, saving or damning. The common denominator—the only thing finally given reverence in Borges's stories of the knife, or in his whole work for that matter—is the individual's obligation to live, move, and have his being without any kind of official sanction. Borges will not be bullied (this, of course, is well known) by hallowed ideas, sacred dogmas, or authoritarian truths, not to mention despotic men like Borges's favorite enemy, the late Juan Perón. Borges seems to declare in his stories of supposed cowards and turncoats that loyalty and treachery, courage and cowardice, are relative to one's personal and even momentary values; one man's marching music is another man's cacophony, and the only "right" drumbeat

is the rhythm of one's own heart. Borges's "violence" is an arbitrary resistance to the arbitrary, a willful counterattack on the imperious and inflexible. It is not this or that unbending dogma he fights, but unbendingness itself when it expects human beings to sacrifice their integrity and identity to it.

The duel—whether fought with knives or with paint brushes—is an apt symbol of human self-affirmation unsupported by logic or any other authority than one's existence and will. We must not be fooled by Borges's continual implications that human personality is an illusion, that all men are the same man, and that he is "in a sense" or "more or less" Borges; he is very much concerned for his identity and integrity *vis-a-vis* the universe. Somewhere in his past he has been disturbed by the existential questions—guilt, fate, meaninglessness—but these have been answered in the man, and his work is built on his conclusions. In Borges's work suprahuman destiny is usually credited with determining the fate of the characters, but this is only a way of giving cosmic validity to their autocratic and often unconscious choices; what a person chooses is what he was destined to choose. This is not a denial of free will nor an affirmation of "official sanction" but a declaration that will and destiny are the same thing and that the will is the "God in any man."

Borges is steeped in the ideas of Schopenhauer, as well as in Spinoza's, Nietzsche's, and others'. Schopenhauer held that everything that happens to us is willed by us and that every man's destiny is his own choosing even when it seems accidental or Providential. He advocated getting rid of the will because it brings unhappiness, but Borges sees this as impossible although he uses the idea sometimes. What he takes from Schopenhauer with some seriousness is the notion of will as destiny.

There are two stories, written many years apart, into which Schopenhauer's concept of will as destiny is conspicuously woven: "Deutsches Requiem" (*El Aleph*) and "Guayaquil" (*Doctor Brodie's Report*). "Deutsches Requiem," like "The South," has autobiographical details; Borges and his protagonist, Otto Dietrich zur Linde, share military ancestors, a probable Jewish forebear, and a love of music and metaphysics, and each has abandoned theology in favor of Schopenhauer. The narrator, a Nazi, equates destiny with chance ("chance, or destiny, wove my future," pp. 83-84) and sums up Schopenhauer's idea that every man wills his fate. Chance, destiny, and will are made the same thing, and this is laid as a background to zur Linde's exaltation of violence as the supreme good for which he and Germany are perishing. Germany's defeat is victory, for she has forced the nations of the world to resort to violence willfully, in profanation of "Judaism and that sickness of Judaism, the Christian faith" (p. 88). Borges has said that he wrote this story to depict a Nazi who intimately willed his own destruction, as Borges believes Hitler did; but it can also be read as a story about a man—Borges who extols violence as a symbol of the God in all men. The despicable Hitler did not know he was fighting for the good of all nations, the narrator tells us, but this hardly matters because "his blood knew it, his will knew it" (p. 88). It is revealing that the doomed Nazi, who wants violence deified though his own place be in hell, utters this pious hope in almost the same language that Borges uses in "The Library of Babel" (*Ficciones*) to pray that although his place may be in hell, someone will decipher the order and meaning of the chaotic library-universe. Violence, or will, puts order into chaos, not for all men, but for each one.

"Guayaquil" is a story of an intellectual duel between two historians, each of whom may get the privilege of editing a newly-discovered letter of historical importance. They meet to decide which of them it will be. Logically it should be the narrator, an expert in South American history, but he finally concedes the honor to

the other, Zimmerman, who is hardly qualified. The reason must be inferred, because the conversation is oblique and subtle and seldom touches the subject. The weapons seemingly used by Zimmerman in this brainy duel are not finally the real ones. He hints at certain professional disadvantages to be suffered by the narrator if he edits the letter, and he implies aesthetic reasons why he should do it himself, but these arguments are ancillary.<sup>9</sup> What finally defeats the better historian is the realization that although he is the logical one to do the job, Zimmerman wants to do it—wills to do it—despite all logic. To do it is therefore his destiny. “His tone was neither challenging nor mocking; his words were the expression of a will that made of the future something as irrevocable as the past. His arguments hardly mattered. The strength lay in the man himself, not in them” (p. 104). At the end, Zimmerman speaks of Schopenhauer and suggests that his rival has lost the scholarly struggle because he secretly willed it. The story has duels within the duel; two parables tell of a battle that is also a chess game and a song contest between two bards.

My thesis, in sum, is that when Borges puts two hoodlums, scholars, painters, or theologians against each other, he is talking about courage and will which are exercised without appeal to argument, logic, doctrine, or right, although these may be the superficial trappings. Whether he romanticizes and idealizes physical conflict or whether he scorns it as foolish, there is always something in it which speaks of the faith of the doctrinal skeptic, the courage of the agnostic, the stoicism of the deep-dyed humanist, the courage-to-be of the confirmed freethinker. The knife puts an end to speculation, it ignores reason, it cares not for sacred beliefs; but the knife can be a cowardice, as Borges shows, when it becomes an end in itself. Borges is honest to the last; his gods denied him the epic destiny of his fathers and caused him to conclude, as he wrote in “The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz,” that “one destiny is no better than another, but that every man must obey what is within him” (*The Aleph and Other Stories*, p. 57).

But what shall we do with those lady painters of “The Duel”? How does their charming story fit in? It, too, is violence. In several stories it is implied with emphasis that the duel is in the rivalry, not in the act of combat or killing. This is clear in “The End of the Duel,” where the hapless gauchos have their throats cut and run a race; their deaths are the end of their competition of many years, which was the only thing that gave value to their “poor and monotonous lives” (p. 46). It is also clear in “The End” (*Ficciones*), where a long enmity is closed with the death of Martín Fierro. But more important, in calling attention to duels as long-time rivalries which are ended, Borges combines the loser’s death with the existential reduction of the winner. The Black gaucho who kills Fierro loses his identity: “Now he was nobody; or rather, he was the other one” (p. 180). When one of the rival painters of “The Duel” dies, the other’s life as an artist loses its meaning; she paints her dead competitor’s portrait and lays down the brush.

I conclude that the principle of “againstness” is fundamental. For Borges, the human personality exists only in relation to something opposite and challenging, because it consists in the will. The will cannot operate if it has nothing against which to assert itself. Again, a theological concept is involved; faith as courage or will exists only in the face of doubt and opposition. If the meaning of the world were clear, we would not have to think or to create our own meaning. We would be nothing, write nothing, paint nothing; the duel would be finished. If God were visible, we would become one with Him; we would be God. Borges’s “God in any man” is the will-principle spread among all, and it alone survives. When the rival thinkers of “The Theologians” (*El Aleph*) die and go to God, the Creator is unable to tell them apart.

We should finally acknowledge, I suppose, that all of this can be taken out of the philosophical arena and put into the purely aesthetic. In the production of literature a la Borges, the arbitrary will of the writer is the creative force, and the writer creates ambiguously, not expressively, because if he is too clear he leaves the reader nothing to do. The reader has a will of his own, and his interpretation is a willful, creative act. Where there is perfect clarity there is no need for continued reading; the reader becomes the writer and the duel is finished. Borges's literature is an endless duel, he hopes, in which the reader goes on seeing "the imminence of a revelation which never comes."<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This explanation, often given, is repeated in Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 26-27.

<sup>2</sup>Jorge Luis Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," in *The Aleph and Other Stories*, ed. and tr. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with Borges (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), p. 140. In quoting or referring to stories from this collection and from *El informe de Brodie (Doctor Brodie's Report)*, tr. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with Borges, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), I use the titles and language of Borges and di Giovanni. Titles and quotations from other stories are my own translations from the Spanish.

<sup>3</sup>Jorge Luis Borges, "El sur," *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1956).

<sup>4</sup>Said following a lecture on *Don Quixote* at the University of Texas, March, 1968.

<sup>5</sup>This and the following quotation are from Burgin, *Conversations*, pp. 25-27.

<sup>6</sup>Jorge Luis Borges, "Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva," *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1957).

<sup>7</sup>Both stories are included in *The Aleph and Other Stories*.

<sup>8</sup>"Commentaries," *The Aleph and Other Stories*, p. 200.

<sup>9</sup>In a previous article, "Borges' New Prose," *TriQuarterly*, 25 (Fall 1972), 403-440 I interpreted differently the reason for the concession. Zimmerman's arguments included the implication that the narrator, if he edited the letter, would destroy the aesthetic ambiguity of a historical event. The interpretation, though valid, slighted the central reason.

<sup>10</sup>This is Borges's famous "definition" of the aesthetic event, given in an essay, "The Wall and the Books" (*Otras inquisiciones*, 1952, translated as *Other Inquisitions* by Ruth L. C. Simms, (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1964).