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Vulgarity as an Aesthetic and Political Category in Borges's Works

Martín Gaspar

Vulgarity is a recurring theme in Bioy Casares's memoir of his conversations with Borges.¹ Time and again in the voluminous 2007 book *Borges*, we find the friends poking fun at the “vulgar” writing of certain authors (Manuel Mujica Láinez, for example, is a favorite target, but Ernesto Sábato, Góngora and Balzac can be vulgar too), or pointing out that Macedonio Fernández and Samuel Butler could produce, on the other hand, “buena vulgaridad.”² Coarse jokes—like Guillermo Juan Borges's invention of

1 Since *Borges* constitutes a selection—a controversial one, to boot—the actual presence of this theme in these friends' exchanges may be overrepresented in the book. This does not disprove the fact that vulgarity stands out as a sustained topic in their conversations. Alan Pauls sketched a list of targets of Borges and Bioy Casares's disdain and creative abuse in this volume, and listed vulgarity was among them: “[Borges] practicaba tiro al blanco con sus enemigos (en primer lugar el peronismo, *bête noire* que no cesa de desafiar al tiempo cambiando de forma; después los comunistas, el psicoanálisis, la literatura de vanguardia, la vulgaridad, etc.)” (“Fiesta”). In Pauls's list, “vulgaridad” appears suggestively as an umbrella term that feeds off and expounds on the previous ones.

2 Although Mujica Láinez is not uniformly attacked and Bioy's and Borges's opinion of him vary, he is labeled as “vulgar” (1391), as “un farolero” (445), “un guarango”

“Reventarah Cagore,” a pun on Rabindranah Tagore—can be delightful, they claim (1113). In fact, when praising a particular pun of this ilk by J. E. Clemente, Borges concludes: “Hay un placer en la vulgaridad. *It kicks* de un modo especial. Es satisfactoria” (330). There is yet another connotation, or rather function, of vulgarity—due to its infectious nature, its typifying force—that can be distilled from the following passage:

Borges me refiere que la otra noche, en la fiestita de la Biblioteca, uno de los empleados tomó unas copas de más y con extrema facilidad representó un papel que indudablemente había representado miles de veces: el de malevo. Este empleado contó que su mujer le dijo una vez: “Viejo, vos sos grande” y que él contestó: “No, grande fue San Martín en Cañuelas” [...] Borges comenta: “La vulgaridad tiene fuerza representativa: uno imagina el tipo de persona que la profiere.” (390)

Vulgar is in this anecdote the uncouthness of the employee’s conduct (his actions at the party; what he said to his wife) but also the employee *himself* and others of his kind: a boastful person who imitates, while drunk and “for a thousandth time,” a well-known type. He incarnates, as it were, triteness. The anonymous individual (“uno de los empleados”) stands out in the party, only to dissolve into a collective (“un tipo de persona”). The culprit: vulgarity with its “fuerza representativa.”

It is tempting to trace the presence of the vulgar as an aesthetic category in Borges’s *oeuvre*, beyond the pleasant exchanges with his friend and collaborator at the dinner table. Indeed, as a mordant tool to validate disdain, as a simple way of revealing (popular, uncomplicated, or salacious) witticism, and to form collectives (“un tipo de persona”), vulgarity seems to pop up insistently when we look for it in Borges’s works. The “suburban classicism” that he finds in horse-cart inscriptions is no vulgarity or “good vulgarity,” and so is the earnest simplicity of Evaristo Carriego’s poetry (148). Laughing at vulgar writing is an experience that readers of

(1425), among other pejorative terms. We can surmise from the book that Mujica Láinez—whose queerness is often mentioned in the attacks—is more strongly disliked by Bioy than Borges. Ernesto Sábato is, in turn, savagely criticized: “Es curioso el caso de Sábato: ha escrito poco,” Borges remarks, “pero ese poco es tan vulgar que nos abruma como una obra copiosa” (187). As to “buena vulgaridad,” we find the reference in this passage: “[Borges me] refiere ‘una buena vulgaridad’ de Macedonio Fernández. Éste leyó en Taine: ‘A un francés, ante Carlyle, le parece estar ante el Minotauro’, y comentó: ‘A Carlyle, ante un francés, che, le parecería estar ante un *minetero*’” (1127).

Borges and Bioy’s invention, H. Bustos Domecq, know well.³ (It is quite easy to imagine them having a good time constructing the style of Adelma Badoglio, Domecq’s biographer, and crafting Domecq’s pretentious circumlocutions...) And if we look for the representative power of vulgarity, we can detect it, for instance, in the 1931 essay “Nuestras imposibilidades.” In it we read that individuals who utter expressions like “Tomá” and “Sufrá” (at movie theatres or to brag in conversations, respectively) reveal a distressing (“afligente”) *communal* Argentine ethos (18). And these are just some examples.

A reader of Borges will encounter vulgarity as a persistent, multivalent category in his works. Perhaps placing it as a focal point from which to read them, then, may produce new insights. More specifically: If we consider that behind every classification there is an ideology—and that every classifying subject participates (knowingly or not) in a system of power—, can we find a certain political logic of “the vulgar”? Is this aesthetic category also, as some of the above examples suggest, attached to certain mental, even moral dispositions? To answer these questions, in the following pages I will first sketch a definition of vulgarity while taking into account (and this is key) how the readers’ reaction towards it is controlled by and anticipated in the given text. I will then explore the productivity of approaching Borges’s works through the lens of vulgarity by looking at its presence and functions in “El Aleph.” To address the political question, I will show how Borges reads Carlyle’s theories of hero-worship as essentially tied to vulgarity—not only in his essays but especially in the dramatization of the philosopher’s ideas that can be observed in some of his short stories. “Tema del traidor y del héroe” showcases the appeal of the Carlylean vulgar in politics, while the late short story “El indigno” stands as a negative, revealing the conditions necessary for it to succeed.

3 Domecq’s parodic style—described by Alazrakis as steeped in “un lenguaje almidonado, hecho de clichés, hábitos y cursilerías”—is a source of inevitable laughter: “Y, claro, nos reímos hasta la carcajada,” the critic adds, “advirtiendo (o sin advertir) que nos estamos riendo de tanta página ilustre que ha entrado muy dignamente en historias y manuales” (89).

VULGAR INTONATIONS

To take a stab at a definition, we should quickly point out that for Borges and Bioy Casares vulgarity is neither linked to social class nor exclusively tied to lack of education or refinement. Whereas the vulgar is typically associated, according to Gombrich, to forms that “please the low” as opposed to noble forms which “only a developed taste can appreciate,” Borges’s position is markedly more democratic (17). In fact, luxury and riches can be (and tend to be) vulgar, as the narrators in Borges’s “Utopía de un hombre que está cansado” and Bioy’s “Clave para un amor” affirm.⁴ Ostentation and loudness—in all of their forms—certainly are. Whatever the origin of this aversion—Jason Wilson speculates, not unconvincingly, that his “scorn for wealth and luxury” is in part “inherited” (22)⁵—it is a fact that all forms of opulence and excess, from garrulousness to wealth, from loudness to flamboyance, are vulgar in Borges’s value system as it is revealed through his essays and fiction.

Borges attaches strident voices (often expressed in pejorative collective terms like “bochinche” and “vociñlería”) to vulgarity. In his book on Carriego, for example, he conveys his dislike for certain recent Italian immigrants (in particular those with long and bombastic last names) by painting the newcomers as loud.⁶ Borges admired a projected patrician reticence and economy of expression, lamenting that horse-cart inscriptions (to him admirable examples of wit, concision, and elegance) were in

4 In Bioy Casares’ 1954 “Clave para un amor,” we read: “Qué profusión, qué lujo. En todo lujo palpita un íntimo soplo de vulgaridad” (509). In Borges’s 1970 “Utopía de un hombre que está cansado”, the narrator from the future explains: “Ya no hay quien adolezca de pobreza, que habrá sido insufrible, ni de riqueza, que habrá sido la forma más incómoda de la vulgaridad” (64).

5 Wilson puts forth a sociological explanation for Borges’s attitude towards riches: “Borges [...] inherited an austerity, a scorn for wealth and luxury, especially from the lineage of his mother, Leonor Acevedo Suárez (1876-1975), who came from a family of once-rich landowners (in San Nicolás) who had lost their land. They were *hidalgos pobres*, the shabby genteel, those who mask their poverty with courtesy and culture” (22).

6 The *malevo*, he points out in a sociological section of his study on Carriego, used to know how to be a stoic “cultor del coraje” (“un estoico en el mejor de los casos”); the current, Italian inflected version, is a “cultor de la infamia” who pathetically and unashamedly sulks at his fate: “malevito dolorido por la vergüenza de no ser canfinflero” (128).

the 1930s becoming relics of a popular creativity that was being corrupted under the current, “italianados días” (148).⁷ Much has been said about Borges’s preference for understatement, and modesty (“pudor”) is mentioned as a key ingredient in his writing and overall creative project (see Pauls, Helft). The targets of his disdain are inevitably those who engage in pomposity.

Alan Pauls argued that to “become classic” Borges looked for inspiration to the voices of the street and to the subdued voice of a particular subject, Nicolás Paredes, which he tried to recuperate from oblivion (64). Indeed, his search for frugality of expression was programmatic and started early on. Already in a letter to the editor of the journal *Nosotros* in the 1920s, he humbly remarked that his early publications were “bochincheras y fervorosas” (qtd. in Pauls 10). To become classic is to avoid having to scream louder, and to do so dialogues are better than podiums. Borges associates being loud to the anxiety to sound different or “new” in a field—often a literary field—and to the participation in a cacophony of voices. In the 1969 “Prologue” to his *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, he points out that back when he wrote the book of poems in 1923 he was like other timid youths who, “[t]emerosos de una íntima pobreza, trataban como ahora, de escamotearla bajo inocentes *novedades ruidosas*” (OC 13, my emphasis). Being “ruidoso,” being anxious to stand out and secretly fearful of not having the materials to sustain such a goal, means losing individuality and becoming one of the many “jóvenes de 1923” (who, by the way, he says are not different from the ones in 1969). Here, again, we can recognize the “fuerza representativa” of vulgarity at play.

In a seeming paradox, then, a person loses individuality when making efforts to stand out. This is because, in trying to surpass others, the imitation of conducts or the production of trite contrivances are unavoidable. (The employee-turned-*malevo* at the library party is an example of this.) In this respect, but not in others, we can find a coincidence between Borges’s and Bourdieu’s thoughts on “distinction.” The sociologist notices that ef-

7 Note that patrician, nineteenth century life was not devoid of moments of discursive excess. Borges admired how Eduardo Gutiérrez described Juan Moreira’s duel with Leguizamón, but regretted that the gaucho asks the sargento to give him the knife “que he dejado olvidada allí” calling that a “bravata final, que es como una rúbrica inútil” (Gutiérrez 98, “Eduardo Gutiérrez” 40).

fort is associated to (middle brow) scholastic acquisition of cultural capital, whereas *ease* characterizes “aristocracy of culture” (11-18). The writer finds that distinction escapes those who strive towards it by proclaiming their exceptionality and trying to sound original according to a socially accepted value system. To him, taste is the result of idiosyncratic self-cultivation—as Alejandra Salinas has argued, for Borges one’s creative voice is found not in affirmations but in exchanges with other voices.⁸

In this respect, Borges engages a wide array of voices, treating the “high” and the “low” in the consecrated system of prestige as equals. (A useful emblem of his to drive the point home: in “La trama” an anonymous gaucho, having been betrayed by his godson, is equal to Ceasar, betrayed by Brutus, *OC* 793.) We can trace the democratizing impetus that created his idiosyncratic definition of “vulgar”—as the person or expression that tries too hard, imitates, pretends—to a number of possible origins and readings. Enrique Sacerio-Garí has remarked that writing reviews for a popular magazine like *El Hogar*—and, we may add, for *Revista Multicolor de los Sábados*—“provided Borges with an already mastered rhetorical starting point from which to develop his timid voice of a reader” (464). Writing in this format for a wide public certainly must have contributed to the radical economy of his prose.⁹ Readings of iconoclastic and “less distinguished” and popular authors like Stevenson and Chesterton, we learn from Daniel Balderston’s *El precursor velado*, did their part to help him challenge established references of prestige. And we can add to this picture his engagement with the “common reader” in prologues to the *Colección Jackson*,¹⁰ his promotion of detective stories—a genre that stands firmly in the “middle-ground” arts, according to Bourdieu (87)—in Col-

8 Salinas expresses this opinion concisely and convincingly: “I argue that Borges’s individuals are committed to a life-long search for a creative voice, and that they do so by engaging in conversations with multiple philosophical and literary traditions, on the basis of which they shape their voice” (23).

9 Nicolás Helft points out that in *Revista Multicolor de los Sábados* (a supplement to *Crítica*, published in 1933 and 1934), Borges had to write differently: “Temas populares, pero también velocidad—nada de pasarse tres semanas eligiendo un adjetivo—y masividad: *Crítica* imprimía ‘cien mil ejemplares por hora’, que los canillitas esperaban ansiosamente para salir a vender por las calles” (66).

10 For a study of these prologues and the creation of a “common reader,” see María Julia Rossi.

ección Séptimo Círculo and, finally, his presence innumerable television interviews in the 1970s. Rather than subscribing to an “ideology of innate tastes,” a certain arrogance of humility arises from these engagements. Refined players—the ones who can play refined games—are not the ones who speak too much but those who can be indifferent to the rules or come up with new ones.

AN ALEPH OF VULGARITY

Perhaps there is no better example of a vulgar character in Borges’s *oeuvre* than Carlos Argentino Daneri—a writer who is consumed with voicing his thoughts, achieving success, and standing out.¹¹ Borges, the narrator, paints him as the epitome of crassness:

Tan ineptas me parecieron sus ideas, tan pomposa y tan vasta su exposición, que las relacioné inmediatamente con la literatura; le dije que por qué no las escribía. Previsiblemente respondió que ya lo había hecho: esos conceptos, y otros no menos novedosos, figuraban en el Canto Augural, Canto Prologal o simplemente Canto-Prólogo de un poema en el que trabajaba hacía muchos años, sin *réclame*, sin bullanga ensordecedora, siempre apoyado en esos dos báculos que se llaman el trabajo y la soledad. (*OC* 619)

All the ingredients are there: a character who speaks with ineptitude, pomposity and excess, who wants to express “conceptos novedosos,” who imitates *an image* of a writer as a craftsman who works painstakingly and in isolation. His writing can only be vulgar—we sense it in his expressions in free-indirect discourse: the unnecessary French (“sin *recláme*”), the pedantry of “Canto Augural,” the pretentious metaphor of the “báculos.” By the time we read the several passages that he quotes to Borges, he is altogether “previsible” and entirely vulgar: someone who thirsts for the approval of prestigious experts and cannot help beating his own drum, who attempts complexity while lacking substance. It is thoroughly enjoyable to read Daneri’s “literature”—which, as María del Carmen Marengo

11 Daneri stands out, but there are other candidates. To name two: Bustos Domecq (who, as we pointed out above, is all middle brow pretentiousness) and the narrator of “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote.” This short story contains various forms of vulgarity—from an overall pretentious tone, to the narrator’s contrivances (“la señoril reserva”) and the coarsely grandiose name of a secondary character: “la condesa de *Bagnoregio*” (*OC* 444, my emphasis).

points out, is not dissimilar from Bustos Domecq's, another enjoyable writer—and despise his vulgarity by claiming superiority.¹² Or rather, it is enjoyable to despise Daneri himself: contempt involves a “globalist” response; in other words, it is an emotion that, unlike most, targets *badbeing* rather than wrongdoing (Bell 39-40).

It is productive to read this contemptible character along with the following statement in *Evaristo Carriego*: “Es de común observación que el italiano lo puede todo en esta república, salvo ser tomado realmente en serio por los desalojados por él. Esa benevolencia con fondo completo de sorna, es el desquite reservado de los hijos del país” (OC 114). Daneri “lo puede todo”—he gets access to the aleph, to recognition (he is awarded a second-place national prize) and, most importantly, to Beatriz. Despite loudly advertising his nationality (it is in his very name), he remains Italian and congenitally grandiloquent: “la ese italiana y la copiosa gesticulación italiana sobreviven en él” (618). Daneri “lo puede todo,” except being taken seriously by the (in more than one way) “desalojado” Borges, a true “hijo del país” who treats him throughout the narrative “con un fondo completo de sorna.” In this way, Daneri's guest engages in a “desquite reservado”—his narrative shows Beatriz's lover in the worst possible light.

Yet an implicit comparison is involved in this “desquite,” and here is where vulgarity attaches to the narrator himself. As Macalester Bell puts it, “the contemnor [in this case the narrator] makes a comparison between herself and the object of her contempt, and sees the contemned as inferior to her along some axis of comparison” (41). The feeling of superiority is at least in part compensatory—it is unequivocally tied to Borges's jealousy. But despising Daneri for his vulgarity also contaminates Beatriz (why would she write those obscene letters to her despicable cousin, or even get involved with him?)¹³ and ultimately Borges himself (why would he long for her, why does he despise Daneri so much?). “Difference is as-

12 Marengo points out that “[l]a retórica coloquial de Carlos Argentino es, a su vez, pretenciosa y muestra rasgos semejantes [...] a los de la escritura de Bustos Domecq. El relato ofrece un contrapunto entre la valoración positiva y exaltada de éste por su propia obra y la del narrador” (176). The appearance of “Mario Bonfanti” in both Domecq's chronicles and in “El Aleph” underscores this affinity.

13 Balderston points out that, to the narrator's dismay, he should have seen her having sex with the deplorable Daneri: “el narrador ve las cartas obscenas que Beatriz Viterbo le había escrito a su primo hermano, Carlos Argentino Daneri: habían tenido sexo y

serted against what is closest,” writes Bourdieu (479). And Daneri is too close for comfort.

Vulgarity is a sticky substance: excess, crassness, and need of validation are not limited to Daneri in “El Aleph.” An excessive number of photographs that asphyxiate the walls of the waiting room—“Beatriz Viterbo, de perfil, en colores; Beatriz, con antifaz, en los carnavales de 1921; la primera comunión de Beatriz; Beatriz, el día de su boda con Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz, poco después del divorcio, en un almuerzo del Club Hípico; Beatriz, en Quilmes con Delia San Marco Porcel y Carlos Argentino,” and so forth (OC 617)—anticipates the many more images of Beatriz contained in the aleph (“Baja; muy en breve podrás entablar un diálogo con *todas* las imágenes de Beatriz,” predicts Daneri, OC 624). The *horror vacui* of the “abarrotada salita” with its density of images is something of a vulgar overkill. But is Borges (the character) also vulgar? By association, as I have pointed out, but not just. As Alfredo Alonso Estenoz rightly argues, “[e]l narrador Borges no deja de denunciar la ridiculez de su rival, su retórica altisonante, su mala poesía, pero al mismo tiempo se presenta como un ser tan seguro de sus propios valores que no puede sino ser víctima él mismo de la parodia” (178). In fact, there is something of Daneri's rhetoric in him too, as we can see in these bitter sentences in the “Posdata del primero de marzo de 1943” that begin to bring the narrative to a close: “Huelga repetir lo ocurrido; Carlos Argentino Daneri recibió el Segundo Premio Nacional de Literatura. El primero fue otorgado al doctor Aita; el tercero, al doctor Mario Bonfanti; increíblemente, mi obra *Los naipes del tahúr*¹⁴ no logró un sólo voto. ¡Una vez más, triunfaron la incomprensión y la envidia!” (627). This Danerian need for validation (even within the “literary” institution that the narrator supposedly sneers at), those excessive exclamation marks... They all lead us to think that the incomprehension, and the envy, are also none other than the narrator's. There is no escaping the aleph of vulgarity.

el narrador (si realmente lo ve todo) debe haber visto eso también (lo cual está implícito en ‘el engranaje del amor’)” (“Sin superposición” 36).

14 “Los naipes del tahúr” is an element that places Borges (the writer) into the diegesis of “El Aleph”: it is the title of a collection of essays the author supposedly wrote and later destroyed during his stay in Spain (Vaccaro 165).

VULGAR POLITICS

If excessive, totalizing projects, like Daneri's goal of "versificar toda la redondez del planeta" (OC 619) with its pretentious style, reveal a vulgar spirit, so do totalitarian projects with their exuberant rhetoric. Consistently, in his "Biografías sintéticas," Borges attaches images of graceful contentment to writers he values (Joyce, Santayana, William James, Barrie, among others).¹⁵ Strident voices, emphatic dramas, are on the contrary revealing of a lack. Daneri, for one, "es autoritario, pero también es ineficaz" (OC 618). Thomas Carlyle—a writer that Borges read and wrote about, translated and taught—is Daneri-like too: over the years he comes to exemplify to Borges a certain kind of political vulgarity and rhetoric.

Carlyle's idealism first attracted Borges, but he quickly moved to Berkeley and Schopenhauer when he noticed objectionable aspects in the Scot's rhetoric and politics. As Sergio Sánchez points out: "a favor del desencanto obró que Borges percibiera cierta nota falsa en Carlyle, cierta teatralidad propia del personaje que terminó haciendo de sí mismo, a fuer de acentuar tan tajantemente sus afirmaciones" (65). Falsity, theatricality,¹⁶ emphasis: all the surface ingredients of vulgarity are present; but the political theory that underlies them is no less vulgar. Carlyle's thesis about the need for heroes, leaders—loud voices—is almost diametrically opposed to Borges's general skepticism and acknowledgment of human frailties.

Heroes are bound to disappoint, or worse, when they are emulated and given power. Anarchy is always preferable. As Salinas puts it, Borges "thinks that limitations and fallibility are not corrected, but enhanced by

15 "James Joyce," Borges writes in his mini-biography, "ahora, vive en un departamento en París, con su mujer y sus dos hijos. Siempre va con los tres a la ópera, es muy alegre y muy conversador. Está ciego" (*Textos cautivos* 83). Santayana is a "common man," leading a peaceful life in England, "el hogar de la felicidad decente y del tranquilo placer de ser uno mismo" (94); Hauptmann "vive en la soledad montañosa de Aguetendorf" (105); William James "es dueño de una estancia en Montana" (116); Sir James Barrie "[e]s aficionado a la soledad, al billar y las puestas de sol" (125).

16 Borges mentions Carlyle as one of "esos escritores que deslumbran, que parecen el prototipo del escritor," that "suelen acabar por abrumarnos. Empiezan siendo deslumbrantes y corren el albur de ser a la larga intolerables" (Arias 217). In *Borges*, Bioy Casares quotes him as saying "Carlyle, Léon Bloy, Mencken y algún otro energúmeno literario, crearon un personaje que era ellos mismos, y lo hicieron escribir en carácter" (1178, my emphasis).

existing political practices and institutions, as opposed to a liberal anarchist order where the situation is less dramatic, because individuals are less pretentious and/or less deceived about the oppressive tendencies of political activities" (2). In fact, Borges was, like Chesterton, alarmed by Carlyle's hero-worship drama, and along with Bernard Russell saw in him a precursor of the worst forms of totalitarianism in the twentieth century (Sánchez 68-69). In his "Estudio preliminar" to *De los héroes y el culto de los héroes*, Borges points out that, "[m]ás importante que la religión de Carlyle es su teoría política [...] Los contemporáneos no la entendieron, pero ahora cabe en una sola y muy divulgada palabra: nazismo" (54). Hitler, he writes elsewhere, is "un pleonasma de Carlyle" (OC 723). In short, as Sánchez explains, Borges and Russell "perciben y temen, el trasfondo bestial del entusiasmo, cuya expresión es el fanatismo" (73).

It would not be erroneous to place Borges along the lines of thinkers like Le Bon—who was fearful of masses following leaders with "worship and obedience"—or even Freud, who associated the relationship between a crowd and its leader to hypnosis (Le Bon 39; Freud 75-79).¹⁷ But beyond the actions of a man in a crowd that follows a leader (or as Freud would have it, a "horde" that obeys a "primordial father")—which Borges and Bioy somewhat portrayed in "La fiesta del monstruo"—Borges is mostly concerned with how and why individuals or groups become followers.

POLITICAL INDIGNITIES

Borges explored in several occasions the dynamics of leaders and followers in his fictions—entering in direct or indirect dialogue with Carlyle. One such story is, as Balderston pointed out, "Tema del traidor y del héroe," where Borges "explícitamente utiliza la figura del 'gran hombre' preconizado por Carlyle, y encarnado en la literatura del romanticismo en el héroe byroniano, como el tenso centro de su trama" (*Innumerables* 111). In this story the people's imagination is manipulated through a sort of Daneri-like pomposity and hyperbole. Nolan, the mastermind behind the plot to preserve Kilpatrick's glory, "[s]ugirió que el condenado muriera

17 The hypnotic subject, Freud explains, bestows the same power and authority on the hypnotist that a group bestows on its leader; both leader and hypnotist possess "a mysterious power that robs the subject of his own will" (125).

[...] en circunstancias *deliberadamente dramáticas*, que se grabaran en la imaginación popular” (OC 498, my emphasis). The spectacle of a dramatic, resounding, and for that reason memorable death was necessary—Nolan rightly concluded—to preserve the nation’s image of an idol. So he plagiarized Shakespeare’s plays to plan an execution that would reverberate in their imagination. Kilpatrick did his part by acting—“discutió, obró, rezó, reprobó, pronunció palabras patéticas” (OC 498)—and overacting: “arrebatao [...] enriqueció con actos y palabras improvisadas” (OC 498). The elements of vulgarity, emulations, and overstatements peppered in chronicles and documents give Ryan, the historian looking back on the episode, the clues to the conspiracy. Engrossed by emotion, blinded by idolatry to one Great Man—one of “the modellers, patterns and in a wide sense creators of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or attained” (2), according to Carlyle—, the nation could not have possibly seen past the many forms of emphasis.

Whereas “Tema del traidor y del héroe” presents the national hero as figure crafted out of somewhat vulgar materials, “El indigno” presents *lack of vulgarity* as the element that ultimately prevents hero-worshipping. In this short-story, an aging Santiago Fischbein recollects his youth, when he was in search of a leader and thus following, consciously or not, Carlyle’s directives. He tells Borges, his interlocutor in the story: “Carlyle ha escrito que los hombres precisan héroes. La historia de Grosso me propuso el culto de San Martín, pero en él no hallé más que un militar que había guerreado en Chile y que ahora era una estatua de bronce y el nombre de una plaza. El azar me dio un héroe muy distinto, para desgracia de los dos: Francisco Ferrari” (OC 1029).¹⁸ As a hero, Ferrari should be everything that Fischbein wants (“el héroe que mis quince años anhelaban”)—a living hero, brave, masculinely courteous, handsome, charismatic. Yet Fischbein ends up betraying Ferrari: instead of playing his part as lookout in a textile factory robbery, he informs the police, who eventually kill the leader in cold blood in the ensuing skirmish.

18 Attala has persuasively read this quote by Carlyle as an implicit reference to the plague of antisemitism: “no solamente Carlyle es un conocido aborrecedor de judíos sino que en la época en que Fischbein debió contar su historia, ya las obras de aquél habían sido asociadas con el nazismo” (127).

The reasons for the betrayal are not made explicit. Critics have read it in at least four ways: Fischbein is a figuration of Judas and the short story is a repetition of the myth (Aizenberg, Kellerman); Fischbein follows the Jewish law and saves himself from idolatry (Attala); Fischbein betrays in order to assimilate into a society that has been rejecting him (Aguirre); Fischbein anticipates he might end up at the wrong end of betrayal and betrays first (an alternative reading by Attala).¹⁹ The narrative plants seeds to validate most of these conclusions, which are not mutually exclusive in all cases. But read through the presence of Carlyle and the vulgar in politics suggests another possibility: that neither Ferrari nor Fischbein passes the test as hero and worshipper, respectively, and betrayal is but the outcome.

“Traté de rehuirlo y no me lo permitió,” recalls Fischbein in his retelling (OC 1031). The “amistad” extended by Ferrari is felt as undeserved (“Yo sentí que se había equivocado y que yo no era digno de esa amistad”) and this grace undermines his status as leader. Attentive, supportive, gallant, and kind: Ferrari does not live up to his role. A leader, Freud points out, “need love no one else, he may be of a masterful nature, absolutely narcissistic, self-confident and independent” (123). Ferrari commands respect but seems far from narcissistic, nor does he meet what Freud describes as the one need of the followers: “the members of a group stand in need of the illusion that they are equally and justly loved by their leader.” He plays favorites, and he deliberates (with Don Eliseo, his elder). The fact that his leadership is not sustainable is revealed by the fact that Fischbein is not the only one who fails the fateful night of the robbery: “Uno de los nuestros falló; don Eliseo dijo que nunca falta un flojo” (1033). In his essay

19 Aizenberg reads “El indigno” as a repetition of the Biblical myth of Judas and Jesus, “que es, a su vez, una repetición del mito de Caín y Abel. Fischbein traiciona a Ferrari, que es para él un dios” (145). Kellerman also points out that Fischbein is Judas-like. Attala proposes two possible and equally convincing readings of the betrayal. “Se puede explicar,” he points out, “por el más puro resorte judío: la severísima prohibición de seguir a otra divinidad, la abominación de los ídolos, esencia de la ley mosaica” (Attala 127). Alternatively, one could conclude that, “convencido de ser indigno de la amistad y la confianza que le otorga Ferrari, Jacobo Fischbein lo denuncia porque presente en ello motivos turbios que hacen presumir y presagiar el escarnio o la trampa” (132). Aguirre, finally, finds in Fischbein a completely cynical character (worse than Arlt’s Astier), “porque ha encontrado una justificación a su traición, el acomodarse en un medio social que antes de su delación lo había marcado ya como indigno por su condición de judío y cobarde”.

on Carlyle, Borges points out that “[u]na vez postulada la misión divina del héroe, es inevitable que lo juzguemos (y que él se juzgue) libre de las obligaciones humanas” (53). This “freedom” is also an *obligation*: only a crude, vulgar behavior is accepted of the leader.

It is a remarkable coincidence that in the short story that follows “El indigno” in *El informe de Brodie*, “Historia de Rosendo Juárez,” we find a former *malevo* narrating how he stepped down the pedestal of idolatry when he recognized that his position entailed not only power but, above all, a duty to perform a well-known, vulgar role. If we follow that path, we notice that in “Hombre de la esquina rosada”—a 1933 short story that refers back to the same incident, the evening when Rosendo refused to engage in a duel with “el Corralero”—there is a narrator who is *also* disgusted by vulgar behavior and cannot be part of the crowd of followers. Where Rosendo realizes the empty theatricality of his own behavior when looking at a cockfight—“Qué les estará pasando a estos animales, pensé, que se destrozan porque sí” (OC 1037)—, the narrator of “Hombre de la esquina rosada” becomes ashamed by the behavior of the crowd²⁰ he is a part of, concluding: “Me dio coraje de sentir que no éramos naides” (OC 332). Both Rosendo, who relinquishes his power, and the narrator in “Hombre de la esquina rosada”, who acts, are motivated by the avoidance of vulgarity.²¹

ON THE USES OF VULGARITY

As we have seen, the malleable category of “the vulgar” offers a perspective into Borges’s works. Already early on he deployed it as a weapon, as a source of enjoyment, and as a tool to refine his own writing. The fact that there is something of Daneri in the Borges-narrator of “El Aleph” (and the

20 The narrator sees them steal from a corpse (“Aprovechadores, señor, que así se le animan a un pobre dijunto indefenso”), lack spine (“Los primeros –puro italianaje mirón– se abrieron como abanico, apurados”), and express arrogance (“Para morir no se precisa más que estar vivo,” someone says, and another responds: “Tanta soberbia el hombre, y sirve más que pa juntar moscas”) (OC 333-34).

21 For a reading of these short stories that focuses on the dynamics between individual and collective voices, refer to my “La liturgia del duelo y la voz popular en tres relatos de cuchilleros de Borges.”

fact that the style of the pompous narrator of “Pierre Menard” is not always different from that of a Borges essay) shows that the writer is keenly aware of the infectious nature of vulgarity. Yet, perhaps precisely because of that, it is something to play with. Sneering at exaggerated rhetoric produces a certain kind of pleasure; constructing one does, too, so pompous vulgarity becomes a productive aesthetic choice (in “Pierre Menard,” “El Aleph,” and texts by Bustos Domecq). “Playing the vulgar” immunizes the parodic writer, so we find in these texts a particular freedom and relaxed humor—a humor that goes into overdrive, as we have seen, in Borges’s conversations with Bioy and their salacious, politically incorrect (or downright racist or homophobic) jokes.

As a moral category, charges of vulgarity offer a sure-fire way of censoring behavior.²² Because of its “fuerza representativa,” a loudmouth is a pompous individual and “another of those egotistic people.” A rich person who flaunts wealth is pretentious and pretending: a fake. When it comes to politics, a strident rhetoric like Carlyle’s inevitably matches an arrogant political view. To detect such emphasis and limit its damage (a dictum that Borges borrows from Herbert Spencer’s *The Man Versus the State*), quiet reasoning and sensitivity (Nolan’s, in “Tema del traidor y del héroe”) is necessary. But in fact whoever reads and listens well and will find all the clues. Now, for a vulgar forms or politics—such as Carlyle’s hero-worship paradigm—to succeed, it takes a particular kind of arrogance on the part of the leader (of which Ferrari is lacking) and a particular kind of follower who will willingly and without reservations accept such leadership. “Sorna,” however, is never a politically viable answer.

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22 To call the library employee a fake “malevo” or Kilpatrick “arreatado” are judgment values and, as such, cannot really be impeached.

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