

Borges and I · *Kenneth Lash*

DURING MY FIRST AFTERNOON with Jorge Luis Borges (Buenos Aires, winter, 1954-55), he complained at one point of being the only important member of his group of writers and intellectuals who had not been imprisoned by Perón. "I did as much as anybody," he said.¹ We were sitting in the run-down courtyard of the P.E.N. building, a place few of the major writers frequented until Perón blacklisted the organization . . . and in a comedy of error his people bombed the adjacent building under the mistaken notion that they were blowing up intellectuals. After that, P.E.N. was more or less let alone. The building, something between a large Spanish house and a small institute, was now a place where you dropped by to pay your disrespects to the regime, and where refugee writers crashed. (A circling stream of refugee writers was a demographic constant in Latin America.)

Borges made his complaint to me while we were identifying ourselves to each other; he didn't want me to have any wrong ideas about him. While we exchanged regrets about governments—I had McCarthyism to offer—he asked if the plight of blacks in the U.S. was as bad as pictured in Latin American and French newspapers. I said yes, if no worse than that of Algerians in Paris, and it was slowly improving, with musicians being more important than they knew. He was fascinated by black music, he said. I let drop that I knew Leadbelly a little. He gasped. It was as if I said Einstein was my cousin. He wanted to hear Leadbelly's songs, they were mostly unattainable, "everybody" knew of them and wanted to hear them. I said I knew some of the songs he sang but my version would be like Jimmy Stewart—did he know Jimmy Stewart? yes—singing Wagner. Never mind. A guitar was brought at once, several guitars. I play a hesitant guitar, effectively defeating its only real strength, the rhythmic flow; I carry a tune, but on the whole it would just as soon walk. But I was immersed in black music at the time, I could accurately reproduce the accents and intonations. I was a smash hit. During my three weeks in Buenos Aires I was asked, persuaded,

¹His mother and sister had been taken to jail for singing the national anthem. In June 1954, according to E.R. Monegal who published it in Uruguay, Borges wrote a poem, "The Dagger," that *La Nación* "considered to be too dangerous to be published in Buenos Aires."

N.B.: The footnotes throughout are awarenesses I had later, did not have at the time. Quotations are taken from *Borges: a Reader*, ed. by Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Alastair Reid (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981).

sometimes bullied to sing Leadbelly (“Take this hammer, carry it to the captain”) and other black songs, especially the satirical ones: “You got eyes like a hawg/ and feet like a frog/ but when you start to lovin I say O hot dog/ because I’m evil/ evil-hearted me. . . .”

A youngish 140-pound white man, who knew the suffering of watching Paul Muni in his chain-gang film, and the wickedness of living with hot-tempered Vassar girls. My musical career in Buenos Aires was surely a moment in history, history going grotesquely awry. But I was supplying a part of North American culture that these people felt for and identified with—the work of the creative oppressed. I didn’t think of it that way until later, but I did know by then that I was on a sentimental journey, that feelings matter most, both theirs and mine.

Borges and I didn’t that day, or later, talk about literature much, though I was at the time editor of *The New Mexico Quarterly*, an internationally respected (according to me and to the *London Times*) literary magazine, and was on a four-month tour of Latin America at the suggestion and expense of the Rockefeller Foundation “to meet with artists and writers.” Well, I met with Borges, quite a lot, more than with anyone else on the tour, but we never talked about his writing. In part because I knew relatively little of it, or felt I did, with only my amateur Spanish to go on (not much of the work was then published in the U.S.—a few Anthony Kerrigan translations, in *Partisan Review*, as I recall). But I don’t think that was the determining reason we spoke so little of his “art.” We were meeting in Buenos Aires at the end of Perón’s first reign, but still under his rule and odor. As Borges so early claimed, the *real* thing for now was what a person felt and did in relation to that. So we proceeded as people, as two people of differing cultures and histories, interested first in finding whether or not we could like each other. Without that, any exchange of ideas and attitudes we might have would be academic, and this was not the time or place for dilettante appreciations. We met and talked here and there (never in his home, he was living with his mother in a cramped apartment: he showed me the study he wrote in, it was the size of a walk-in closet). There were small parties with the group of *Sur* (the leading Latin American literary magazine; Victoria Ocampo, founder, editor, led me to all the folk I wanted to meet).

Borges took me along to a couple of literary salons at the apartments of well-to-do people. He was the paid guest, offering an informal lecture, a “talk” (though it couldn’t have been much, the income would have

been welcome at the time). He didn't speak of his own work. I recall his talk on Emerson and 19th-century American literature. He was such an enthusiast of the work that he seemed to glow as he spoke; he almost sang of transcendentalism. I felt such affection for him, that slight, mild-voiced man, sitting there in honor and disgrace. A collected edition of his work was soon to be published in Paris; in Argentina he had held (for nine years) a minor post—"third-class assistant"—in a municipal library. For signing democratic manifestoes, Perón promoted him . . . to inspector of poultry and rabbits at the municipal market. Borges resigned.²

One morning he phoned me at my hotel. Was I free for an outing? He wanted to show me something. I met him at his apartment. His eyesight at that time was down to where he couldn't easily distinguish sidewalk from curb, but he vetoed my offer of a taxi, pointing down the avenue. "Take us there," he said, "where it ends." It was no short distance. When we came to crossings, he put a hand against my elbow, softly. From there we took a bus. A long ride. Having arrived at a nondescript, almost deserted neighborhood, he pointed toward a high bridge a few blocks away, green steps leading up its side. They turned out to be metal, studded, turning rusty. And there were a lot of them. I didn't think we were going up there but we were. I didn't want to; I was afraid for him. Up we went. We stood, finally, staring down at a green river that didn't seem to be moving. It sat, slightly steaming as I remember it, between concrete banks. Out along its sides were factories that seemed to have been abandoned, windows broken, rusted machinery of indeterminate type lying around as if written there by Joseph Conrad. A wasteland of hopes and vehemence.

"I didn't think anyone else would show you this," is all he ever said of it.³

On the way back (down the other side of all those ringing metal steps) in the bus we began to talk of the cracks in Perón's facade. (It came apart soon after.) Having lunch in a railway station (his choice), we made

² "... all this was given to you and, with it,
the ancient nourishment of heroes—
treachery, defeat, humiliation."
(from his poem, "Matthew")

Soon after Perón's downfall (1955), Borges, blind, was appointed head of the National Library.

³"The native's map of Buenos Aires is well known: it encompasses the downtown area, the North End . . . the South End and Belgrano. The rest is an inconvenient land of shadows, a vain conjectural bus stop for commuters to the outlying slums." (from "Our Inadequacies") So, a taxi would have been all wrong.

play-bets on what measures Perón would take to salvage something on the way down. "He'll empty a hatful of edicts against the church hierarchy," I suggested. "No," Borges said, smiling, "he'll legitimize the brothels, and let the Church stamp its feet while his people laugh."

Borges had a great deal to do with the form and content of our meeting.⁴ But so did I. Granted that the auspices and my own disposition were influences, I had also been conditioned by the Latin Americans I saw and met along the way before Borges. By the hospitality and cruelty. By the fable of formalities and *mañana* (always write well ahead to give them time to arrange for meetings, I was advised; after my first stop I wrote no one, simply landed, phoned a name or literary magazine, and by day's end was happily in the middle of things). But the strongest note was sounded right off, in Puerto Rico, at the beginning of the trip.

I was fascinated by the sight and sound of writers so much of their people. They were not distanced from their society, and the energy level (in consequence?) was staggering. In Puerto Rico, most of the artists and writers worked paid or unpaid, part-time, for the government: doing instructive woodcuts of pasteurizing, school-building, and so on, with simple texts for those who could read. These were distributed to the rural poor, themselves looking like figures in woodcuts. In Uruguay, enjoying its golden moment of democracy, young poets like Benedetti or critics like Monegal wrote for the papers, edited journals, were heard in Montevideo. In Brazil, a poet was a senator; the Minister of Education gave me a dozen books published by the Ministry to read later; for now, during our visit, he wanted to discuss (jumping up and down to illustrate) Saul Steinberg's work. In Argentina, hope was rising. You could almost hear hidden manuscripts being dug up, brushed off, pens being filled.

The Latin American writers were adversarial. Their adversary was the fearsome organization of their society. The work was social, surreal, or a mixture of both. Emotional, broadly drawn, full of storybook rather than suburban grotesques. The grotesque is inevitably romantic. In Latin America we are often presented a 19th-century literature written with 20th-century techniques.

V.S. Naipaul, a man of heartfelt reason, is troubled by Borges'

"The state is impersonal; the Argentine can think only in terms of a personal relationship." (from "Our Poor Individualism"; repeated in "History of the Tango")

romanticizing of his family's past, the military heroes. I am troubled, impatient, with his romanticizing of knife fighters. Despite his intellectual games and brilliance, Borges is not predominantly a man of reason. He's a man of dreams, of marvelous constructs, of fantasy on an international scale. Something of a fantasy in himself. Think of him then: cooped in that tiny Buenos Aires apartment with his aged mother, hardly any money, nearly blind; persecuted, dismissed, dishonored—and glittering in the air. Intact.

So many of these people held themselves together, not disheartened in their disheartening circumstance. Fury helped. And sadness. But not sadness moving on to enervating melancholy. No Russian tavern scenes.

Victoria Ocampo, whose jailing by Perón drew protests in Paris, drove me in her old car to her country home for lunch. As I recall, a half-hour or so from Buenos Aires, through Tigre, a kind of countryside Venice, canals flowing through green fields. We were greeted and served lunch by an old man in a house servant's uniform, complete to white gloves. When he served me, I noticed the gloves had holes in them. Later, sitting on the veranda looking out over the untended acres, Victoria said, "Our money has been confiscated." The old servant with the tattered gloves (he wouldn't leave, she said), the old American car, the peeling estate, these were another variation of the theme that Borges had sounded for me, a dissonant chord of present and past in an essentially romantic set-piece. How else survive the Spanish legacy of oligarchy and conquest-for-plunder which has informed Latin American government for 400 years; and which, because they have not grown out of it, has deteriorated to low comedy (banana republic) and low tragedy (endless exploitation and brutalizing) dotted with occasional heroics. The one who can oppose, clasps to himself whatever personal dignity is possible. For the mass, machismo must substitute for dignity. The swaggering man; the soft-eyed woman, praying.

There is little sense in Latin America, not as reason would have it. There are deep feelings; there are historical traditions. The writers and artists I met were all, in a sense, revolutionaries. It was the honorable thing to be.

Borges has been called a metaphysical writer. I doubt there is any such thing. He's a thinker; he seems to have a temperamental affinity for metaphysics, perhaps because it leads to such exotic imaginings and

unbounded views. One may, as Borges has done, use the constructs and apparitions of metaphysics, their thin oxygen, to turn and twist the reader, disorient, ask us to permit ourselves to be lost in order to find ourselves in an unexpected, an attention-concentrating place. He's on record for the necessity of implicating the reader in the very act of the writing, a partner as he sees it. Fine. He requires a good reader, and company. But what he wants is what all people in the arts want: to find their own voice and have it responded to. What they're talking about is secondary. They talk about whatever it is that excites them enough to get them talking.

Critter comfort and enthusiasms. Have both in this life and you have all. Ideas are organizing principles, tools, sometimes a candle. Borges could have sung me his song about that. Certainly his writing has done so. Starting often from idea, and keeping the feet well off the ground, the head in strangely scented air, he has produced ten-part invention, circus, ceremony, song, film, masque and unmasking . . . all finally made into the necessary "world." The Borgesian world. It's like nature. The greatness of creation is not man, not even woman: it's variety. The seemingly infinite ability of "nature" to vary, to invent, to bring into being right in front of you the improbable. In a choice of colors. That's what's god-like. (And why nothing must be allowed to become extinct.) That's what we hear artists are after . . . to put on earth something of a shape and color that was not here before.

Borges' life is an opera, a saga. His work among the most original and influential of the century. Like Beckett, he "invented" a way of seeing that is, once experienced, not only unforgettable but incapable of not being used, a vocabulary of seeing. His honors are by now staggering, world-wide, the hero even of governments. He has the Falcon Cross from Iceland. And lives out his long life in Argentina, where the futility goes on and on, pumping blood into air.

Outside the family he is addressed as "Borges." I called him Jorge out of ignorance and North Americanism. He didn't correct me. Some ten or twelve years after the visit, I sent him a one-act play of mine that had been accepted for production. He didn't respond. Perhaps if he had (assuming he liked it), we might have gone on to the second half, the exchanges of mind. That not only can be done by letter, but can often be done better that way. Each personality safely at home. We might then have met on the increasingly frequent occasions of his appearances in the United States. I wish we had. Instead, I read the writer, try to take

the part he assigns me, carry on the missed dialogue in my study, the cat sleeping in the other chair.