# NERUDA AND BORGES

*No two Latin-American writers could be more important. No two writers could be more different. How did the author become the friend and translator of both?*

BY ALASTAIR REID

WHEN I first went to Spain, in 1953, I knew little about the living country and barely a word of the language. But my senses were in good working order, and I was instantly drawn in by Spain's rhythms and its landscapes—the burned, sun-stained earth, the silver-blue clarity of Mediterranean light, the warm solemnity of the people, the spareness of village life. Existence was honed down to its essentials, making the days longer, time more abundant. So I returned to Spain, and returned, and eventually went to live there in 1956, setting out to learn the country, and slowly absorb the Spanish sense of time. Spaniards have a gift for expanding the present, around a meal or a conversation; and they are masters of the cosmic shrug that sheds all preoccupations except those immediately at hand. But living in Spain meant, above all, entering the Spanish language, for in those early days I felt separated from the spoken life around me, a bafflement hard to bear. Spanish, at first encounter, is welcoming: you enter it by way of the market and the kitchen, but you soon find yourself stranded on that plateau of daily needs. The language lies still beyond. Living in another language means growing another self, and it takes time for that other self to become a familiar. While I went about learning the machinery and the music, I realized at the same time that the Spanish I was acquiring was as devoid of context as that of a young child, for I had no past in the language. I was lucky, however, in having wise friends, and, following their counsel, I entered a continuum of reading and listening.

There is nothing like immersion in an unknown—new places, new landscapes, new preoccupations, new loves, a new language—to sharpen the edge of attention. From Majorca, where I first landed, I moved to Madrid and then to Barcelona. I travelled all over—to the Basque country, to Andalusia, to Gibraltar and Morocco, to Portugal—looking and listening a lot, and I wrote the first of a series of chronicles on Spain for *The New Yorker*. Soon after it appeared, I had my Spanish press credentials withdrawn, but that made little difference, for Spain existed then on rumor and speculation. Living there felt like belonging to an extensive whispered conspiracy against the Franco regime. Spain was at something of a standstill, still in shock from the Civil War and the long isolation that followed it, threadbare compared to the rest of Europe. Censorship, both moral and political, hung heavy over the press, over the universities, and over writers and publishers, and the police had sharp antennae out for any sign of dissidence. The writers I knew complained that years of censorship had instilled in Spaniards the habit of censoring themselves. Newspapers were gray and evasive, written opinion was sparse and guarded, and literature was thin and spare.

Among my friends in Barcelona was a young poet and publisher named Carlos Barral, lean, birdlike, throaty-voiced, and given to infectious enthusiasms. Carlos's imprint, Seix Barral, published the work of new Spanish writers and of European writers in translation, and consequently was always battling the censor. Carlos's enthusiasm at that time, however, was for the writing that was beginning to appear from the countries of Spanish America. In 1962, he published Mario Vargas Llosa's novel "La Ciudad y los Perros," later translated as "The Time of the Hero." The book was received in Spain with an excitement hardly ever generated by the Spanish novels of the day, and it led Carlos to proclaim, with remarkable prescience, that it was from the countries of Spanish America that we should expect not just the next literary flowering but the renewing of the Spanish language.

In those days, the attitude of Spaniards toward Spanish America most resembled the way the English used to regard the United States, with an insufferable condescension. Europe was much more immediate to them than the South American continent, and their knowledge of it was vague. So was mine. I had in my head a mixture of school geography, Hollywood epics, Carmen Miranda with fruit on her head, peons asleep under huge sombreros, the bossa nova, and the cha-cha. It may have had something to do with the stasis of Spain at the time, but, through the books and manuscripts that Carlos passed on to me—books like Juan Rulfo's "Pedro Páramo" and Alejo Carpentier's "The Lost Steps"—I began to take an impassioned interest in South America, and to read its turbulent history with some amazement. More than that, I found in the literature a loosening of Spanish from its Castilian restraints, an intense verbal energy. I noticed the same thing in the few Spanish Americans I came across in Barcelona: they had more exuberance than we were used to in Spain and, given the occasion, they turned conversation on its ear, making a playground of the language.

When Mario Vargas Llosa came to Barcelona, Carlos introduced me. Mario had left Peru behind and lived in Paris, working for the French radio network: he broadcast to Latin America at night and wrote by day. He had a kind of flashing intensity to him, and a single, burning ambition: to live by his writing. It was nearly impossible, he said, to make a living as a writer in Latin America: editions were small, readers were sparse, and few writers were read beyond their own borders, since tariff barriers in many countries made books hard to come by. While the separate countries of Latin America all had their writers, it made little sense, Mario said, to speak of a "Latin American" literature. As yet, there was no body of writing that had found its way through translation into other literatures and so achieved international recognition. Within a decade, that was to change utterly, with the surge of memorable novels, popularly referred to as the Boom, that appeared in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and received great acclaim in many languages: novels by Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, José Donoso, Alejo Carpentier, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Prior to that eruption, however, very few writers from Spanish America had earned international attention. Foremost among them were the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and the Argentine master Jorge Luis Borges. They were, each in a quite separate way, the forerunners of the writers of the Boom.

I had been introduced to Borges's writing a few years earlier, by Pipina Prieto, a vivacious Argentine who had known him in Buenos Aires and who spoke of him with such fervor that when she pressed his "Ficciones" on me I would not have dared not read it. The effect on an unsuspecting reader of encountering a work of Borges' can be alarming enough almost to justify a publisher's warning on the book jacket. His stories induce a kind of vertigo in his readers, an eerie after-effect that can invest small happenings, like breaking a glass or missing a train, with ominous significance. Pipina was a bewitching talker, and could practically perform Borges's stories. We talked them over, endlessly, and before long I kept the half-dozen slender books that contained most of his writing then—poems and essays as well as stories—always at hand.

I had been coming across the poetry of Neruda piecemeal, mostly in the

LUIS POIROT

*Neruda in Isla Negra, 1969. His friend was sought out and shot, and everywhere about him Neruda saw Spain broken. The war brought about in him a deep political conversion.*

houses of friends, for Neruda's books were then proscribed in Spain as Communist literature. There is an extraordinary lift that comes from reading Neruda's poetry for the first time: both from its sheer beauty on the ear and from its great tumble of images. But I found not one but many Nerudas. I read his fierce elegies on the Spanish Civil War, and his tender, whimsical "Ode to My Socks," his sensual love poems, and the high incantatory pitch of his "Heights of Machu Picchu," and I wondered at their accomplished variety but had no sense, yet, of who the poet was among so many incarnations.

That these two writers should be acclaimed as the quintessential Spanish-American writers of their time was particularly intriguing to me, for the more I read them the more I felt them to be about as different from each other, as writers and as human souls, as it is possible to be. Borges's work is as spare as Neruda's is ebullient, as dubious and ironic as Neruda's is passionately affirmative, as reticent as Neruda's is voluble. Where Neruda is open, even naïve, Borges is oblique and skeptical; where Neruda is a sensualist, a poet of physical love, a man of appetites, Borges is an ascetic; where Neruda is rooted in what he has experienced, Borges seems to have lived almost entirely in literature, in the mind-travel of his reading. Borges accepted being Argentine as his destiny, Buenos Aires as his locality, but his preoccupations were wholly metaphysical. Where Neruda in his poems addressed the realities of the Latin-American present and lived on intimate terms with the physical world, Borges's writings often cast doubt on the very existence of that world, except as a mental projection, a fiction.

*Borges in Buenos Aires, 1971. The effect on an unsuspecting reader of encountering a work of Borges' can be alarming enough almost to justify a publisher's warning on the jacket.*

ARCHIVE PHOTOS

BORGES was born in 1899, in the Buenos Aires suburb of Palermo, into a middle-class professional family: his father was a lawyer and a teacher of psychology with literary aspirations, his mother a descendant of military heroes and Argentine patriots. From an early age, the son was seen by the family as destined to become a writer, fulfilling the ambitions of his father, whose literary career had been stayed by encroaching blindness—a hereditary blindness, which was to descend on Borges gradually from his late twenties. In 1914, the whole family moved to Europe, where they lived for the next seven years—first in Geneva, where Borges studied and read French and German, and then in Spain, where he began to write in earnest. When he returned to Argentina, in 1921, fired by a new enthusiasm for his country, he began a literary career—as a poet, an essayist, and a reviewer, in the world of salons, *tertulias*, and small magazines—that continued all his life.

Neruda had his beginnings in 1904, in Parral, in the rainy south of Chile, where his father worked on the railroad, on the frontier of the great forests. He has recreated his solitary, awestruck childhood, his discovery of the secret life of words, in a number of enchanted poems. Luck seemed to attend him early. His first poems were brought to the attention of the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, and she helped him gain a scholarship to study French in Santiago when he was seventeen. In the capital, he moved from the absorbed solitude of adolescence into an artist's underworld of close friendships, nightlong conversations, sexual love, and the poems of Rimbaud and Baudelaire. It was a heady transformation. Neruda's "Twenty Love Poems and a Song of

Despair," published in 1924 (written in that flush of late adolescence), became, and still are, a kind of touchstone for first love, learned by heart everywhere in the Spanish-speaking world. "I have been marking the blank chart of your body," Neruda writes in one of them, "with crosses of fire / My mouth was a spider that scuttles into hiding / In you, behind you, tremulous and thirsty." These poems are remarkable in their erotic intensity, in their startling sensual directness.

Such early fame led to Neruda's being appointed, in that most enlightened of Latin-American traditions, to the Chilean Consular Service, and between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-eight he was posted in turn to Rangoon, Ceylon, Java, and Singapore. The five years Neruda was away from Chile were a difficult time for him, separated from his language and his roots; yet out of his loneliness and alienation came the cumulative volumes of "Residencia en la Tierra" ("Sojourn on Earth")—hallucinatory poems in which, deprived of his own country, he creates wildly surreal landscapes out of his own private obsessions, with a poetic density quite startlingly new to poetry in Spanish. When he returned to Chile, his fame as a poet had spread so widely that, posted to Spain in 1934, he was acclaimed by the community of Spanish poets, Federico García Lorca and Miguel Hernández among them. But these were the last euphoric days of the Republic. When the Civil War broke out, Neruda remained in Spain, but the experience marked him forever. His friend García Lorca was sought out and shot, and everywhere about him Neruda saw Spain broken. The war brought about in him a deep political conversion. He was asked to resign his consulship because of his outspoken sympathy for the Republic. The poems he wrote at that time are bitter in their anger.

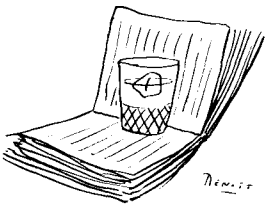
> Generals,
> traitors,
> look at my dead house,
> look at broken Spain:
> out of every dead house comes burning
> metal
> instead of flowers,
> out of every crater in Spain
> Spain reappears,
> out of every dead child comes a rifle
> with eyes,
> every crime breeds bullets
> that will one day find their way
> to your heart.

> You will ask why don't his poems
> tell us of dreams, of leaves,
> of the great volcanoes of his homeland?
>
> Come and see the blood in the streets.
> come and see
> the blood in the streets,
> come and see the blood
> in the streets!

Back in Chile, Neruda, still haunted by his Spanish experience, joined the Chilean Communist Party, and in 1945 was elected to the Chilean Senate, plunging into an active political life. After he published, in 1947, an open letter criticizing President Gabriel González Videla, he was forced into hiding for an extended period to avoid arrest, and was sheltered in different houses until he could escape over the Andes to Argentina. Out of that came his "Canto General," an enormous hymn to Latin America—its exotic geography, its cruel history, its brutal politics, and its present human wrongs—in a sprawling mass of poems. The book, published in 1950, had an immense impact, more political than poetic. Besides the overtly political poems, however, it contained a sequence of visionary cantos he called "Alturas de Macchu Picchu" ("The Heights of Machu Picchu"). He had visited the Inca shrine in 1943, and these impassioned invocations contain Neruda's poetic creed. He sees Machu Picchu as built on the bones of centuries of oppressed Indians, and he vows to become a voice for all things that have no voice, to speak out for the oppressed of the past and against the oppressions of the present. In this new writing, Neruda abandoned the surreal extravagance of his earlier work, and thenceforth deliberately simplified his poetry, to make it accessible to the people of Chile who gave him shelter in their houses as a fugitive. In Chile, he was now a national possession.

ALONGSIDE such a crowded existence, Borges's life appears singularly static. On his return to Buenos Aires from Europe, he set about rediscovering his native city, first in poems and then in a series of incisive essays on Argentine themes. His world was a purely literary one; he regularly reviewed foreign literature, and translated works of Virginia Woolf, Kafka, Joyce, and Faulkner into Spanish. But his brief literary essays were often oblique and unconventional: with

time, a certain playful element showed itself—in quotations ascribed to nonexistent originals, citations of imaginary authors. Although Borges was not writing fiction, he began to intrude fictional elements into his other writings. He used to say that he considered scholarship merely a branch of fantastic literature. He told me once that as a young man he had contemplated writing a long dynastic novel encompassing the history of Argentina since independence, until he realized that he could write, in the span of a few pages, a descriptive review of just such a work by an invented author, adding his reflections on the genre. It was not until 1939, following first the death of his father and then a long convalescence after a near-fatal accident, that he began to write the disquieting stories that were published in 1944 as "Ficciones"—the stories that brought him fame far beyond Argentina.



It is somewhat deceptive to talk of Borges as a storyteller, as a poet, or as an essayist, however, for he blurred these divisions by exploring the same paradoxes in the varying forms of story, poem, and essay. To him they are all "fictions"—words on a page, constructs of the mind. Borges concludes his epilogue to "El Hacedor," a collection he published in 1960, with the following:

> A man sets himself the task of drawing the world.
>
> As the years pass, he fills the empty space with images of provinces and kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fish, houses, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Just before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face.

Such fictions are Borges's trademark. From the sixties on, Borges's reputation spread with the speed of a virus through the reading world, infecting it with a sly, humorous skepticism about language, about all matters literary. His writings are deeply subversive—by implication, they call into question all linguistic versions of everything. In whatever Borges writes he never lets his readers forget that what they hold in their hands is a text, a fiction made of words, from a fallible mind. The natural world remains fearful and incomprehensible to us; to contend with it, to give it order and purpose, the mind creates fictions—fables, histories, rules, codes of law, theories, social systems, predictions, even divinities. However "perfect" these fictions might be, reality defies them by remaining chaotic and unpredictable. Yet the making of fictions is essential to our nature: literature, Borges insists, is our solace.

In 1961, Borges shared with Samuel Beckett the Prix International des Éditeurs, which led to immediate translation of his stories into the main European languages. Anthony Kerrigan, who was editing "Ficciones" in English, asked me to translate the story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." By then, I had come to know and appreciate Borges's uncharacteristic prose style—a style that is spare, restrained, and carefully formal, and uses something like understatement, not exactly a characteristic of written Spanish. While I worked I had the curious feeling that I was retranslating something back into English that had previously been translated into Spanish. Most crucial to me was to catch the tone—tentative, wary, uncertain—in which Borges writes, a manner that constantly questions what it is telling, sometimes by tone alone.

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" begins with Borges's discovery, through a chance remark by a friend, of an item in a corrupt encyclopedia about an enigmatic region called Uqbar. The region is apparently fictitious. "Reading it over," Borges says characteristically, "we discovered, beneath the superficial authority of the prose, a fundamental vagueness." Some time later, in a remote hotel, chance puts into Borges's hands a volume of another encyclopedia, devoted to a vast planet called Tlön. A trail of further clues reveals that a group of seventeenth-century sages originally conceived the idea of creating an entirely rational planet—one that would be wholly comprehensible to its inhabitants—and of disseminating knowledge of it by way of a secret encyclopedia. A postscript to the story, set at a future date, describes how the human race eventually embraces the world of Tlön as though it were reality. Objects from Tlön begin to turn up in the real world, and, as in many of Borges's stories, reality gives way to a wished-for fiction.

For Borges, rational systems that are extended to the extreme limits of their rationality turn into nightmare. In his "The Library of Babel," a "total" library is obliged to contain not only all actual books but all possible books as well. The entire world becomes a library. In "The Babylon Lottery," set in an imagined past of Babylon, an apparently rational society elects to introduce some element of chance into its existence by starting a lottery. Bit by bit, to increase the excitement, the numbers of the lottery are made to signify not just prizes but punishments—fines, imprisonment, even execution. The mysterious company administering the lottery is eventually suspected of being a fiction. Babylon gives itself over completely to chance, and order yields irresistibly to chaos.

NERUDA and Borges met only once, in July of 1927, in Buenos Aires. Following the success of "Twenty Love Poems," Neruda, then turning twenty-three, was on his way to take up his first diplomatic appointment, as Chilean consul in Rangoon. Borges, at twenty-seven, had published two volumes of poems and was an active reviewer in the literary magazines of the day. The meeting was one that each of them described in later life: they recalled that they had talked about the unsatisfactory nature of Spanish, and the resignation they both felt at having to write in it. The one enthusiasm they shared was for the poems of Walt Whitman, whose work both of them had translated. The meeting appears to have been more diplomatic than intimate, and they went to some trouble to avoid meeting again. It seems to have occurred to each of them that they had little in common as writers except the Spanish language; as time went on, they were often asked about each other, and in their responses they were most of the time polite and respectful, no more. Borges regarded their meeting as essentially nonserious. Neruda was more specific. In a letter to an Argentine friend he wrote:

> Borges, whom you mention, seems to me over-preoccupied with those problems of culture and society which do not attract me, which are not *human*. I prefer the great wines, love, suffering, and books as a consolation for the inevitable solitude. I even feel a certain scorn for culture as a way of interpreting things. I prefer sure awareness without precedent, a physical absorption in the world. . . . History, the problems of "knowledge," as they are called, seem to me lacking in dimension. How much of it would it take to fill the void? I see around me always fewer ideas, always more bodies, sunshine and sweat. I am exhausted.

For all their youthful excess, Neruda's

observations, about himself in particular, are remarkably clear. He remained entirely a poet of the physical world, a materialist, actually as well as politically: he had no interest in metaphysical questions, and disliked literary talk. He did not write his poems for literary circles: he wanted them out in the street, read by everyday inhabitants of the language. He achieved just that, in his own time, as has no other poet I can think of. He accomplished what Whitman only aspired to; he became what Whitman had hoped to be.

Borges, on the other hand, remained remote, indecipherable to many: it requires a certain nerve even to try to follow the quirks of his mind. In a celebrated essay, "Kafka and His Precursors," he makes the point that after reading Kafka we recognize foreshadowings of him in the work of writers who preceded him in time, and we refer to them as Kafkaesque. As Borges wrote, "The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future." This is precisely what has happened in Borges's case. Certain intrusions of disquiet that undermine a believed reality are so much a mark of his mind and manner that when we find the same dismaying twists in writers who preceded him in time we refer to these twists as Borgesian.

It may well have been the intense appeal of Borges's writings to academics in all languages that made him such an intrusive literary figure. Books about him abound, theses and critical studies multiply: unravelling Borges is something of an industry. Neruda, to the contrary, has attracted comparatively little critical study: the great mass of his poetry is simply there, always accessible, like the ocean.

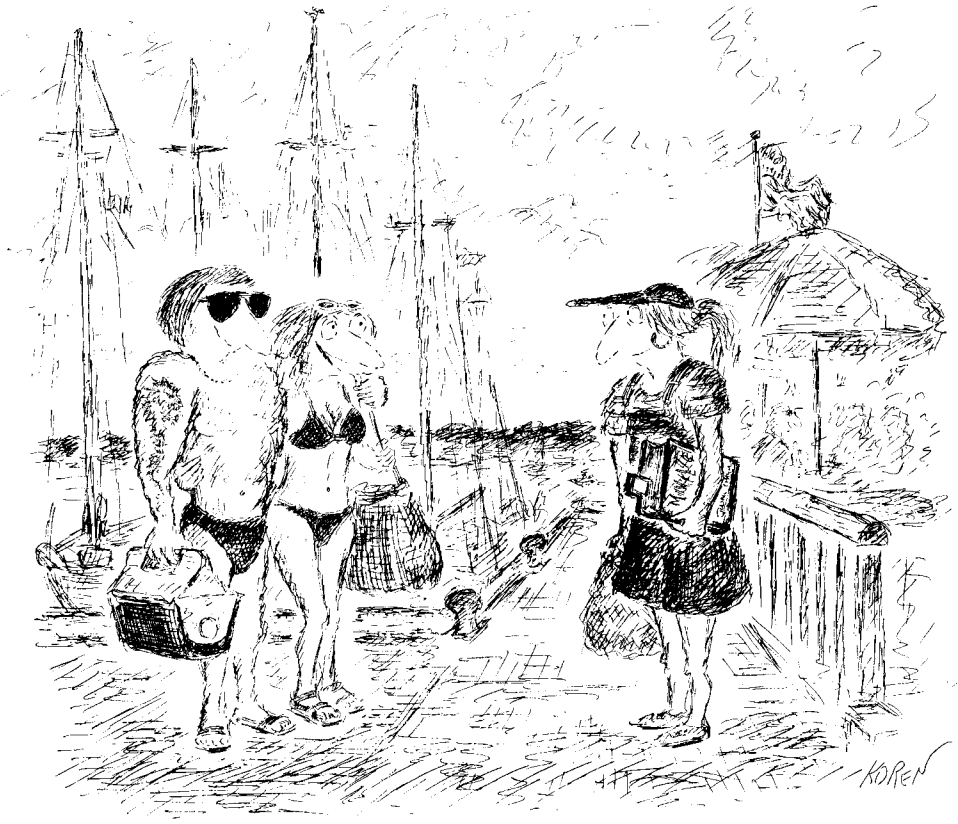
THE more I read my way into Spanish America, the more I felt my ignorance of it as a living place. When a piece of time suddenly opened for me in early 1964, I bought a round-trip ticket from New York to Buenos Aires that allowed me an unlimited number of linear stops. I made many. I met a whole web of writers, and they passed me on from one country to friends in the next. I made solitary pilgrimages to shrines like Chichén Itzá and Machu Picchu, but otherwise, wherever I went, I found myself in the middle of a seemingly endless conversation that ranged all the way from pure play to high art. I asked a lot of questions, but mostly I listened.

In mid-February, I landed into a golden summer in Chile. Someone had given me a letter to Jorge Elliot, a painter and art critic in Santiago, and I called on him soon after arriving. He welcomed me as though I had been expected, and invited me to a summer house he had in Isla Negra, the village on the Pacific Coast where Neruda then lived.

Isla Negra was little more than a string of houses built along a low cliff above a broad beach where the Pacific thundered incessantly. The families who lived there knew each other well, and the place had a well-worn, easygoing air. Neruda had settled there in the fifties, in a house perched on the cliff, and he had added to it eccentrically as money came in, book by book. Beside the house stood a ship's yardarm, and as we approached it Jorge pointed out a small blue flag flying from it. "Pablo's at home," he said.

Neruda's garden was dominated by a steamroller that he had rescued, painted, and installed as a shrine. Under the yardarm, a boat was grounded, geraniums growing from its stem, and beyond it lay an anchor, all of them like props from Neruda's poems. We went inside, and into a high-ceilinged living room with stone walls, a fireplace framed by granite boulders from the beach, and a wooden gallery with stairs descending. Objects were everywhere: ships' figureheads leaning out of the corners; driftwood; shells; tackle; books. On a long, heavy table under a wide window that framed the Pacific lay more objects: a ship under glass; a sextant; a telescope; odd-shaped bottles; agates gathered from the beach. The light in the room wavered with the white of the breaking waves below. The house might have been afloat. Suddenly, Neruda called out, and came down from the gallery, a captain descending from his bridge.

He was a large man—portly, even—but majestic and deliberate in his movement. His eyes were large and hooded, rather like those of a bemused lizard, and seemed to take in everything, but slowly. He moved slowly, turned his head slowly, blinked slowly; and when he spoke his voice, mellowly resonant, was close to languid. His words had the weight of stones. I noticed, then and whenever I later met him, that, since he was generally the center of attention, he had a way of slowing down everything around him, pacing the conversation. As he talked, he




*"Jason is my summer reading."*

moved about the room, touching a surface here, picking up an agate from the table and gazing into it, entranced. The objects were a kind of vocabulary: the collections of shells, of ships in bottles, of French postcards, of clocks and hats and walking sticks; a huge wooden shoe he had badgered from a bootmaker; a full-sized papier-mâché horse.

Thinking of Neruda, I still see him in that house: it was an externalization of his whole being. He used to say that he had a secondary profession, as a surreal architect, a transformer of houses. He required of his houses that they be in remarkable places, that they have space for all the multifarious objects he brought back from his travels, that they have a workroom for his writing, and that they be comfortable, humorous, and accessible to his friends. Each house was his private theatre, where he had designed the sets and always played the lead.

Neruda was then in his sixtieth year, and, in anticipation of his birthday, he had written "Memorial de Isla Negra," an autobiography in the form of more than a hundred poems, divided into five sections, each covering a stage of his life. The galley proofs were draped along the back of a sofa. He was also translating "Romeo and Juliet" for performance later that year, and he asked me several questions about the text. Neruda was glum about his translation; English and Spanish did such different things, he said, they were really misfits. After some translation tinkering, we moved outside, to a long table adjoining the kitchen, where Neruda's wife, Matilde Urrutia, came to join us.

In the presence of food and drink, Neruda always expanded visibly. On this occasion, he brought the sheaf of galleys to the table, and at a replete pause he read to us, in that mesmerizing voice, carefully phrased, that seemed to float the poem in the air. I had no inkling of it then, but seventeen years later I was to translate that book in its entirety, poem by poem.

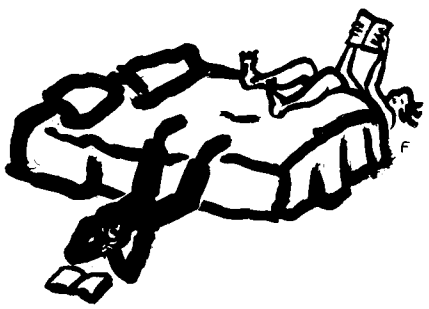
Later that night, I talked with Jorge about Neruda. He found for me a copy of Neruda's brief prose manifesto "On Impure Poetry":

> It is very appropriate, at certain times of the day or night, to look deeply into objects at rest: wheels which have traversed vast dusty spaces, bearing great cargoes of vegetables or minerals, sacks from the coal yards, barrels, baskets, the handles and grips of the carpenter's tools. They exude the touch of man and the earth as a lesson to the tormented poet. Worn surfaces, the mark hands have left on things, the aura, sometimes tragic and always wistful, of these objects lend to reality a fascination not to be taken lightly.
>
> The flawed confusion of human beings shows in them, the proliferation, materials used and discarded, the prints of feet and fingers, the permanent mark of humanity on the inside and outside of all objects.
>
> That is the kind of poetry we should be after, poetry worn away as if by acid by the labor of hands, impregnated with sweat and smoke, smelling of lilies and of urine, splashed by the variety of what we do, legally or illegally.
>
> A poetry as impure as old clothes, as a body, with its foodstains and its shame, with wrinkles, observations, dreams, wakefulness, prophecies, declarations of love and hate, stupidities, shocks, idylls, political beliefs, negations, doubts, affirmations, taxes.

I went back along the sand path to Neruda's house several times. He and I combed the beach for agates at the ebb, laughed a lot, talked a lot, ate and drank exuberantly well. Since I wore no shoes, Pablo and Matilde called me, then and ever after, Patapelá (Barefoot), and when I said my farewells Pablo gave me a volume of his, "Estravagario." We made promises to meet again, somewhere, sometime. Such a meeting seemed to me improbable; but then so did being in Chile, that long, thin, bountiful country.

When I left, I flew to Mendoza, at the foot of the Andes on the Argentine side, and, with two days to wait for the train across the pampas to Buenos Aires, I made notes and read, Isla Negra still vivid in my head. The trees in Mendoza's elegant small squares were shedding their leaves, and under a limpid blue sky the dark wall of the Andes towered in the piercing clarity of the air. It felt to me like Shangri-La.

BUENOS AIRES has always struck me as the most sumptuous of cities: the abundance of its shops and restaurants made Madrid and Barcelona then seem frugal by comparison, and in its well-stocked bookstores I bought the books forbidden us in Spain—principally Neruda's "Collected Poems," a Losada volume, on India paper, of a thousand nine hundred and thirty-two pages. Very little of Buenos Aires seemed Spanish. Listening to conversations in that assured *porteño* accent, I felt that the Spanish language had now detached itself from Spain, and had taken on many different modes. After a day or two of exploring, I telephoned Borges at the National Library where he had been director since 1955. Pipina had written ahead to him, and had given me his number.



He came on the line, and, on identifying me, he changed to his very courteous English and asked me to call on him in the library that afternoon. When I arrived, I was directed by a guard to Borges's office. I must have misheard, for I found myself in the deeper twilit recesses of the library, lost. I might almost have expected it. An assistant rescued me and led me to where Borges sat, at the end of a long library table, a pile of books at hand, in a pool of light cast by the lamp. He rose to greet me, his face upturned toward the sound of my voice.

That meeting, the first of many, so imprinted itself on me that each time I met Borges I felt I was reënacting it. It came in part from his blindness, which meant that one had to find one's way to him, a presence, waiting patiently. To exist for him, people had to come within his earshot, into the pool of his attention, a pool that encompassed a library of blind volumes, all of Borges's memory, all he had read and thought, all he had written and would write. To meet him was to be admitted to the universe of his blindness, to the crowded solitude he inhabited, to the still pool of his attention.

There was something frail about his company—the soft, quiet voice, the conceded vulnerability of his blindness. He mostly spoke to me in English, which he had learned as a child from his paternal grandmother, an Englishwoman of Northumbrian stock—Borges's English had a faint northern cast to it. As he explained once in an interview, "When I was talking to my paternal grandmother I had to speak in a manner that I afterwards discovered was called English, and when I was talking to my mother or her

parents I had to talk a language that afterwards turned out to be Spanish." It was in English that he read first, in his father's library. He thought of English ever after as the language of culture, Spanish as the language his mother spoke in the kitchen to the servants, the language of the street and the outside world. He spoke English with the respect due a language he knew well but did not live in: he spoke in the careful cadence of books. On other occasions, in Spanish-speaking company, he would become much more mischievous, less solemn. Yet I think it was the very fact of his bilingual upbringing that gave him his acute sense of the arbitrary and deceptive nature of language: a bilingual is much more aware of the gulf between word and thing than someone confined to a single language.

Irony accompanied Borges like a familiar, present not only in everything he wrote but also in so many of the circumstances of his life: in the family's understanding that he would become a writer and yet would probably succumb to the congenital blindness that had afflicted his father and five preceding generations; in his appointment as director of the National Library just when he was no longer able to read the volumes he presided over. When we left the library for a walk on the Southside, the Buenos Aires of many of his poems, his one hand lightly in the crook of my arm, his stick ever present in the other, it was I who was seeing the city and reading the street signs, but it was Borges who provided the footnotes and the anecdotes. Sometimes, invoking a text, he paused as if leafing through a library in his head before finding the book and the page and haltingly bringing back the sentence or the line.

Around Borges in Buenos Aires I sensed a host of attendant spirits—waiters and taxi-drivers who knew his ways, friends ready to read to him or take his dictation, assistants in the library who watched over him—for now that his fame had spread to Europe and the United States he had become a national treasure. Passersby in the street murmured his name as a kind of salutation. I returned him to the library, to the guard who stood by the door. We said our goodbyes, and I moved out of the circle of his attention into the labyrinth of that inexhaustible city, of which he once wrote:

> Hard to believe Buenos Aires had
> any beginning.
> I feel it to be as eternal as air and water.

Although I then spent some days in Brazil, I realized that I had reached a kind of saturation, that I had enough to occupy my mind for a foreseeable time. So I made my way, by stages, back to Spain, where I unpacked my book hoard. In the late seventies, I was to do the reverse: pack and send books from the newly democratic Spain to friends in Chile and Argentina, both then in political darkness.

But at this time it was Spain that had become politically uncomfortable, and in late 1966 I returned to Britain, moving to London with my son, Jasper, to live for the next three years on a houseboat on the Thames at Chelsea Reach. Fastened to London only by our mooring, we felt ourselves to be something of an offshore island. We found many Latin-American friends in London at that time, Mario Vargas Llosa and Guillermo Cabrera Infante among them. Sometimes the boat sounded like a Spanish-American outpost moored to the Chelsea embankment.

Earlier that year, I had met Emir Rodríguez Monegal, a longtime friend and chronicler of both Borges and Neruda. Emir—dark, sharp-faced, incisive, and with great charm—had just been appointed director of a new cultural review called *Mundo Nuevo*, which he edited from Paris. Emir came to England once a week to give a seminar at Cambridge, and regularly stopped off at the houseboat on the way. A prodigious and perceptive reader, he had realized that, at that particular moment in the countries of Spanish America, a number of extraordinary writers were surfacing, and that all at once a Latin-American literature was coming into being, more than fulfilling the prediction that Carlos Barral had made in Barcelona. *Mundo Nuevo*, which, under Monegal, ran to just twenty-five issues, is often credited with having launched the Boom. Emir published the work of Cabrera Infante, the brilliant Cuban writer who had just then sought political asylum in London, as well as the first fragment

of García Márquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude." García Márquez was politically in sympathy with Neruda, and revered him as a poet, yet his book also shows everywhere the influence of Borges—in how it regards odd and magical happenings as natural events, and sees everywhere the collisions between private fictions and an unyielding reality.

The shadows of Neruda and Borges hung over the whole generation of writers that followed them—not so much as direct literary influences but as forerunners. Neruda held out his vision of a South American *continent*, sharing a turbulent history, a singular humanity, and a common plight. Borges swept away the previous restraints of realism by demonstrating that fiction creates a separate world, where a writer can make his own laws and create his own appropriate language. While Spanish America's younger writers mostly took their passion and politics from Neruda, it was Borges who reminded them of the magical nature of their craft. Emir once suggested to me that, just as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, seen as sides of the same person, reflect the contradictions of the Spanish character, so the Spanish-American psyche could be thought of as embracing the sensual immediacy of Neruda and the labyrinthine questionings of Borges.

Borges and Neruda gave extensive interviews to Rita Guibert for a book she published in 1973 on Latin American writers. Of Borges's politics Neruda had this to say:

> If he thinks like a dinosaur, that has nothing to do with my thinking. He doesn't understand a thing about what's happening in the modern world, and he thinks that I don't either. Therefore, we are in agreement.

When Borges was questioned on his politics, he answered this way:

> My only commitment is to literature and my own sincerity. As for my political attitude, I've always made it perfectly clear: I've been anti-communist, anti-Hitler, anti-Peronist, and anti-nationalist. . . . If a story or a poem of mine is successful, its success springs from a deeper source than my political views, which may be erroneous and are dictated by circumstances. In my case, my knowledge of what is called political reality is very incomplete. My life is really spent among books, many of them from a past age.

For Borges, an intellectual anarchist, politics took place in the street, not in his mind, yet he was not untouched by them.

His family, professional and middle class, traditionally voted conservative, and when the Second World War broke out they were emphatically pro-British. In 1946, Borges had made known in print his opposition to Juan Perón's dictatorship, which he saw as pro-Axis. He was dismissed from his post in a municipal library and appointed poultry inspector in a public market, a post he never filled but a humiliation he never forgot. The military government that succeeded Perón, in 1955, made amends by appointing Borges the director of the National Library, which was tantamount to appointing him the national touchstone he became.

## TO WHOEVER IS READING ME

You are invulnerable. Have they not granted you,
those powers that preordain your destiny,
the certainty of dust? Is not your time
as irreversible as that same river
where Heraclitus, mirrored, saw the symbol
of fleeting life? A marble slab awaits you
which you will not read—on it, already written,
the date, the city, and the epitaph.
Other men, too, are only dreams of time,
not indestructible bronze or burnished gold;
the universe is, like you, a Proteus.
Dark, you will enter the darkness that expects you,
doomed to the limits of your travelled time.
Know that in some sense you are already dead.

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

(*Translated, from the Spanish, by Alastair Reid.*)

FROM the sixties on, I translated a fair part of Borges's poetry for various selections of his work; and I collaborated in an edition of Neruda's "Selected Poems," going on later to translate several single volumes of his. Translating someone's work, poetry in particular, has something about it akin to being possessed, haunted. Translating a poem means not only reading it deeply and deciphering it but clambering about backstage among the props and the scaffolding. I found I could no longer read a poem of Neruda's simply as words on a page without hearing behind them that languid, caressing voice. Most important to me in translating these two writers was the sound of their voices in my memory, for it very much helped in finding the English appropriate to those voices. I found that if I learned poems of Neruda's by heart I could replay them at odd moments, on buses, at wakeful times in the night, until, at a certain point, the translation would somehow set. The voice was the clue: I felt that all Neruda's poems were fundamentally vocative—spoken poems, poems of direct address—and that Neruda's voice was in a sense the instrument for which he wrote. He once made a tape for me, reading pieces of different poems, in different tones and rhythms. I played it over so many times that I can hear it in my head at will. Two lines of his I used to repeat like a Zen koan, for they seemed to apply particularly to translating:

in this net it's not just the strings
that count
but also the air that escapes through
the meshes.

He often wrote of himself as having many selves, just as he had left behind him several very different poetic manners and voices. In talking to Rita Guibert, he explained his protean nature thus: "If my poetry has any virtue it's that it's an organism, it's organic and emanates from my own body. When I was a child, my poetry was childish, it was youthful when I was young, despairing when I was suffering, aggressive when I had to take part in the social struggle, and there is still a mixture of all these different tendencies in the poetry I write now, which may perhaps be at the same time childish, aggressive, and despairing. . . . I have always written from some inner necessity. . . . I'm an anti-intellectual, I don't much care for analysis or for examining literary currents, and I'm not a writer who subsists on books, although books are necessary to my life." His dutiful political poems are mainly forgettable, but occasionally the politics and the poetry come together, as in his meditation on food and hunger, "The Great Tablecloth," which concludes:

Let us sit down soon to eat
with all those who haven't eaten,
let us spread great tablecloths,
put salt in the lakes of the world,
set up planetary bakeries,
tables with strawberries in snow,
and a plate like the moon itself
from which we will all eat.

For now I ask no more
than the justice of eating.

There is so much of Neruda in that single last couplet.

Then I would turn to the universe of Borges. Bringing his poetry into English was much more straightforward. Borges made constant use of certain English verse forms—rhymed quatrains and sonnets in particular—so that translating them required mainly a good ear and a certain prosodic agility in English. In the case of his sonnets, I was careful not to torture them into matching form in English—ingenuity at the expense of poetry. While Neruda's poems are wide-ranging, in their subject matter, their manner, their gesture, their tone, so that they must be taken singly, as separate events, Borges's poems are related to one another, not just in their formal manner and their heraldry of recurring symbols—chessboards, maps, knives, mirrors, coins, labyrinths, tigers, libraries—but in their skeptical, questioning undertone. They let you in on a secret, as observer, as eavesdropper. Translating Borges felt to me like learning a private language: the exact cast of certain favorite words of his, like the noun *olvido*, which he uses to mean either death or sleep or forgetting, and of certain of his vertiginous adjectives, has to be intuited every time. Borges is a much less adventurous or original poet than Neruda: for him, poetry is one of the several dimensions of language he explored, and his poems are mainly parts of a larger whole. He did, however, write a handful of very memorable single poems, like his "Matthew, 25:30," in

which he imagines a voice confronting him with the vocabulary of his own existence:

> "Stars, bread, libraries of East and West,
> playing cards, chessboards, galleries, skylights, cellars,
> a human body to walk with on the earth,
> fingernails, growing at nighttime and in death,
> shadows for forgetting, mirrors that endlessly multiply,
> falls in music, gentlest of all time's shapes,
> borders of Brazil, Uruguay, horses and mornings,
> a bronze weight, a copy of Grettir Saga,
> algebra and fire, the charge at Junín in your blood,
> days more crowded than Balzac, scent of the honeysuckle,
> love, and the imminence of love, and intolerable remembering,
> dreams like buried treasure, generous luck,
> and memory itself, where a glance can make men dizzy—
>
> all this was given to you and, with it,
> the ancient nourishment of heroes—
> treachery, defeat, humiliation.
> In vain have oceans been squandered on you, in vain
> the sun, wonderfully seen through Whitman's eyes.
> You have used up the years and they have used up you,
> and still, and still, you have not written the poem."

PABLO and Matilde turned up in London in 1967, and when Pablo heard that I lived on a houseboat he came straight to inspect it. He decided he must hold his birthday fiesta there, an evening brimming with Chileans, in the course of which a Ukrainian poet had to be rescued from the Thames mud. I accompanied Pablo to the street market in Petticoat Lane and to a ship's chandler by the docks in a vain search for a ship's figurehead. He was anxious to have me translate the whole of "Estravagario," a favorite book of his, and I agreed with pleasure. In England, wrapped in a Chilean poncho, Pablo looked unnaturally cold, but when we gave a reading together in the Queen Elizabeth Hall I listened to his voice spreading itself like a balm over the English audience—a magical sound, even without the string of sense. After the reading, he was courtesy itself, while regularly casting a side glance in my direction, dinner on his mind.

After being closeted for a spell with the still photographs of his poems, I found it a relief to spend time with the moving original. I knew Neruda much better now, by way of his poems. He was always ready to answer any questions I had about them, even to talk about them, fondly, as about lost friends, but he was not much interested in the mechanics of translation. Once, in Paris, while I was explaining some liberty I had taken, he stopped me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Alastair, don't just translate my poems. I want you to improve them."

In 1969, Neruda stood as Communist candidate for the Presidency of Chile, but after a brief campaign he dropped out and threw his support behind his friend Salvador Allende; and Allende, once elected, in 1970, appointed Neruda Chilean Ambassador to France. From then on, Pablo and I saw each other frequently, for he came to London every so often. We had an easy friendship: in his eyes, I, as translator, had joined his cast, and, although he became very much a public poet again, especially following his Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1971, he would shed his official self in the company of friends, as at a backstage party. In the vast Chilean Embassy in Paris, he ignored the voluminous public rooms and furnished a room in his own suite as a French café, with tables, wire chairs, and a zinc bar: it was there that diplomacy, politics, literature, and friendships were all enacted. I had been in Chile in his absence, and, having stayed in his house in Isla Negra, I brought him a full report on the state of the garden and on an extension being built while he was away. Then, late in 1972, he wrote me, saying that he was resigning and returning to Chile. His health had been failing, he explained, and he wanted to be attended to at home. The day of his homecoming was celebrated as a national holiday in Chile, but already, as he had hinted, ominous signs were in the air—not only of Neruda's deteriorating health but of a menacing opposition emerging in Chilean politics. Then, on September 11, 1973, the military coup savaged Chile, and twelve days later Neruda died of cancer in a clinic in Santiago. Now only the poems remained. The tape he had made me became, suddenly, like a precious relic, except that I had long since transferred it to my memory, where it never needed rewinding:

> It is time, love, to break off that sombre rose,
> shut up the stars and bury the ash in the earth;

and, in the rising of the light, wake
with those awaking
or go on in the dream, reaching the
other shore of the sea which has
no other shore.

WHILE Neruda was running for President in Chile, my son and I were living by the sea on the outskirts of St. Andrews in Scotland, and there we received a letter from Borges announcing a forthcoming stop on his way to receive an honorary degree at Oxford. He arrived with María Kodama, a graceful, gentle Argentine woman of Japanese ancestry, who acted as his travelling companion, and whom he married, to the gratification of his friends, shortly before he died. He was much affected by being in Scotland, as though his reading had suddenly come to life. He took walks with my son beside the North Sea and pulled Border ballads from his memory. In those few unplanned days, he laid aside the obligation to be Borges, the public self to which his writings bound him, as he described it in his short fiction "Borges and I":

I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can unwind his writings, and these writings justify me. . . . Years ago, I tried to free myself from him and I went from writing down the myths of my district to devising games with time and infinity, but these games have become part of Borges by now, and I will have to think up something else. . . . I don't know which of us is writing this page.

By now, Borges was regularly accepting some of the many invitations that came his way—to lecture, to receive honorary degrees and cultural decorations, in Europe and the United States. Reverential audiences came to hear him, as if to confirm that he existed. Once, visiting him in Buenos Aires in 1978, I asked him about his sudden appetite for travel. "When I am at home in Buenos Aires," he told me, "one day is much like another. But when I travel—and you must realize that for me, since I am blind, travelling means merely changing armchairs—friendly ghosts materialize one by one and talk to me about literature, and about my own writings, most generously. For a writer, that is great luxury. I feel blessed by it, I feel lucky."

Borges had grown tired of lecturing, and when he visited New York, in the late seventies, he would sometimes telephone me and invite me to join him in giving a *charla*—a conversation onstage in which I would ask him questions inviting to his mind. He loved to talk of the hazards of translation: as he once wrote, "Nothing is as consubstantial with literature and its modest mystery as the questions raised by a translation." On these occasions, I would sometimes try to surprise him with a question, and as often as not he would surprise me back. I grew to know well a certain movement of his mind, in which he would first make a straightforward statement about a book or a writer and then, after a gravid pause, abruptly undermine it with an ironic afterthought, a subversive aside, mischievous, mocking, desolemnizing.

In 1985, in New York, Borges gave me a copy of a recent poem. It had no title, and after some deliberation he decided to call it "The Web." It began:

Which of my cities
am I doomed to die in?
Geneva,
where revelation reached me
from Virgil and Tacitus?

My translation of the poem lay patiently in *The New Yorker* files until June of 1986, when it saw the light: I received a copy of the magazine while I was in Mexico City. Soon after, coming in from a walk, I switched on the television to find the Mexican poet Octavio Paz talking about Borges in the past tense. He had died earlier that day, in Geneva.

All that time, of occasional meetings interspersed with long periods of immersion in their texts, gave me a curious and complex connection to both of these men. Rereading them, I see always more clearly the interweaving of their writings and their lives—their poems as incarnations. I find nothing at all contradictory in accommodating them both. Borges used to say that when writers die they become books—a quite satisfactory incarnation in his view. With luck, however, I think they become voices. In many conversations with Borges, from the formal to the fanciful, I realized sharply that to him I existed only as a voice. That may have led to my deep conviction that voice is perhaps the most essential and lasting incarnation of any existence. More than that, it is in voices, far beyond photographs, that the dead continue to live. In the case of Neruda and Borges, their voices were for me the crucial, guiding element in my translating them. I think of their writings as encapsulations of their voices, and I hear them often in my head always with awe, and with enduring affection. ♦