

## LITERARY BIOGRAPHY IN ARGENTINA

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JORGE LUIS BORGES. *A LITERARY BIOGRAPHY*. By EMIR RODRÍGUEZ MONEGAL. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978.)

VICTORIA OCAMPO. *AGAINST THE WIND AND THE TIDE*. By DORIS MEYER. (New York: George Braziller, 1979. Pp. 314. \$15.00.)

"As I had the honour and happiness of enjoying his friendship for upwards of twenty years; as I had the scheme of writing his life constantly in view; as he was well apprised of this circumstance and from time to time obligingly satisfied my enquiries, by communicating to me the incidents of his early years . . . I flatter myself that few biographers have entered upon such a work as this with more advantages." Boswell's opening page of his *Life of Johnson* could equally preface Emir Rodríguez Monegal's biography of Borges. Both stress the intimacy between author and subject: indeed ERM's account could be subtitled, without much exaggeration, "Borges y Yo." ERM traces the life of Borges from his childhood and youthful experiences—and readings (using the name Georgie)—to his maturity as a writer, recognized and appreciated by only a few initiates in the River Plate area (Borges), to the cult figure lionized by university professors and the new French critics ("Borges"). At the same time, we are given insights into the life of the biographer, which we could chart in a similar fashion. We move from the fifteen year old who first read Borges in October 1936 and became an "addict" (Emir), to the literary critic and editor in Montevideo: "I was young and fanatic" (p. 386); "I published it [the poem "the Dagger"] in *Marcha*" (p. 427) (Rodríguez Monegal), to the distinguished literary editor and university professor in the United States: ". . . he accepted an invitation to go to Yale University for 'an Evening with Jorge Luis Borges'. I was then chairman of Yale's Spanish and Portuguese department" (p. 453) ("Rodríguez Monegal"). Just as the two personal histories run parallel and overlap, so fiction and reality begin to blend. ERM appears in the Borges short story "El otro muerto" and he in turn dedicates this biography to "all the sisters of Clementina Villar and Beatriz Viterbo," a reference to the "belles dames sans merci" of the stories "El Zahir" and "El Aleph." A photograph of Borges and ERM taken by Susan Jill Levine in Buenos Aires captures the mood of the book: "A mirror was on the wall next to

our table, and Jill could not resist the temptation of having our double images recorded forever" (p. 473).

The work is also intimate insofar as it deals mainly with the period when only a few readers shared the Borges cult. "For yet a while the number of Borges' readers and admirers did not seem destined to increase" (p. 364). The critic was therefore part of a secret sect which would open up only when Europe and North America discovered this deliberately eccentric writer, and readership increased in Latin America in the 1960s. ERM's role was to help promote "el mundo nuevo" and encourage Latin American writers, for "in the desolate vastness of the pampas, a friend is the most important person in the world" (p. 214). The text moves from "desolation" to acceptance (in particular in the United States—the book is aware of its major market), from isolation to stardom, from elite to mass consumption. One way ERM uses to chart this progress is to examine the number of books Borges sold throughout his career. He used to slip the first editions of his work into critics' pockets, and one book, the *History of Eternity*, sold exactly thirty-seven copies when it was first published in 1936. The "boom" in literary consumption was to occur some twenty-five years later. The critic could thus build up a rare and splendid collection many years before universities fought for editions of books that Borges would rather forget: "Then, there were many unsold copies of *Universal History of Infamy and Inquisiciones*. In 1936 or '37 those books were not the collectors items they are today" (p. 288). *Then* and *now*: the critic occupies both times and can often supply a personal anecdote to illuminate those years, or the rare edition which helps to locate Borges as a reader and a writer.

ERM's library offers many interesting insights not only into Borges' world of books, but also into the social and cultural context in which his work developed. As such it helps—perhaps unwittingly—to break with the dominant school of formalist criticism which sees its critical practice mirrored in, and supported by, the poetics of Borges. Borges' attitude to literature and life has caused a bitter polemic in Argentina. The two opposing camps can be seen, rather crudely, as "universalist" and "nationalist." The universalist case is set out in Borges' justly famous essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición," which states that the writer's only allegiance is to literature, and that literature is not confined to national boundaries. The idea that Argentine writers should solely adopt national themes, or, as an important corollary, that literature should reflect historical or geographical determinants, is a nonsense. Value, taste, and decorum lie outside such crude debate. The nationalists answer that "universal" criticism is either Eurocentric or class-based (or both) and that it hides indigenous cultures from their own sense of origin. Critics of Borges dismiss him as *europeizante*, concerned with

upholding traditional dependency links. The nationalist critique often fuses with a class analysis. Borges is seen to defend aristocratic and/or bourgeois interests. The debate has been fierce and ERM has always been involved in it. One of the earliest attempts to “contextualize” Borges was made by the group which formed the magazine *Contorno* in the 1950s (Ismael and David Viñas, Noé Jitrik, Adelaida Gigli, Leon Rozitchner, and Adolfo Prieto). Rodríguez Monegal published *El juicio de los parricidas* as a defence of Borges at that time and deals with this *marxisant* group in summary fashion in the biography.<sup>1</sup> The debate is seen as “useless”: “The arguments were repeated and the level of critical enquiry constantly lowered” (p. 424. This reviewer would disagree. Noé Jitrik’s essay on Borges published in *El Fuego de las especie* is a model of its kind).<sup>2</sup> ERM sees Borges’ essay on the Argentine writer and tradition as a “final statement about a subject that had misled and would continue to mislead Argentine criticism for decades” (p. 425). He therefore occupies a critical position which denies certain historical and ideological readings (see the debate over the literary pages of *Marcha* outlined in Angel Rama’s *La generación crítica, 1939–69* or over *Mundo Nuevo*, stated in polemical terms by a Yale old boy, Roberto Fernández Retamar, in his essay “Calibán”).<sup>3</sup> What then is the relationship between history and biography in this text? Disraeli once wrote: “Read no history: nothing but biography, for that is life without theory.” This would also seem to be ERM’s attitude: a literary critic has no time for theories of history, these have to be subsumed under theories of literature. However interesting the historical background or the biographical details (which are seen to occur in a number of stories) they are not the real business of criticism, and it is “useless” to try to read the work of Borges as a product of its time: its value and worth lie somewhere else.

Within this general framework, ERM organizes his biography of Borges around the texts that Borges read or wrote, or that the critic himself finds relevant. Borges’ “precursors” are deliberately quirky. His method of selection is reminiscent of the scrapbook, that approved Victorian hobby where a boy can make his own choice of material, cut it out, and paste it up in his book, in whatever order he likes. If Borges is on occasion eccentric and old fashioned in his choices, ERM is very contemporary. The childhood of Borges is dealt with in psychoanalytic terms. Texts of Freud and Lacan are used to illustrate Georgie’s acquisition of language, and these recur to explain the traumatic effects of his father’s death and his own nearly fatal accident in 1938. Lacan has been taken up by Marxist critics as offering a materialist theory of language, a general theory of the acquisition of language, and gendered subjectivity. ERM points out interestingly that Borges was under the influence of two linguistic codes, that of his mother (Spanish) and of his grandmother (English), a code which would also be shared by his father. He men-

tions—but does not develop—the argument that these two codes refer to a historically and culturally specific conflict, between barbarism (the mother, Spanish) and civilization (the father, culture, English), and that Borges from childhood would bear an ambiguous relationship to his own language and his own history: a librarian dreaming of his “American destiny.” Language, according to Lacan, is based on a desire to overcome one’s lack and be the center of the laws of human culture. Yet it is always the structure of language itself which decrees the position from which one may speak. ERM hints that Borges is positioned by language in a very contradictory way, yet does not develop the possible ideological consequences of his insights. Literary critics now reach for Lacan every time they go through the “mirror stage” of shaving in the bathroom and often mis-appropriate his writing. In this case, however, ERM points criticism in an interesting direction.

The psychoanalytic “prop” returns to help explain the flowering of Borges’ talent in the late 1930s. He is seen as finally overcoming his “castration complex” with regard to his father, who occupies a symbolic position of power and control. A neat, but rather fanciful idea, in which the father also represents the “psychological” novel, the twin symbols of social and literary control. In this scheme, Borges’ near fatal accident, which occurred just after his father’s death, is seen as a form of death (by suicide) and a rebirth into the author of the stories which were later assembled in the volume *Ficciones*. The new literature produced by Borges is seen to be like a desired mother, for the law of control is embodied in what Lacan calls “The-Name-of-the-Father.” To write a text is therefore to depose the father in an act of liberation. Biography is here being shaped to the dictates of new critical theory. Psychoanalysis also returns fleetingly in ERM’s speculation about Borges’ relationship with his mother and with other women. He refers to the fears of “copulation” expressed in several texts and Borges’ reticence in dealing with sex in literature, but is himself wary of the subject and avoids falling into the crude analysis offered by Blas Matamoro in *Borges o el juego trascendente*.<sup>4</sup> Psychoanalysis is one “reading” which is used with variable success.

The “intertextual” approach is more revealing since it enables ERM to gloss the books that Borges read at each stage in his life and speculate on their influence. Borges declares himself to be “a greater reader than a writer” and this allows ERM to quote another contemporary French critic, Gérard Genette, who states that “the time of a book is not the limited time of its writing, but the limitless time of reading and memory” (p. 331). The “writer as reader” is explored in stories such as “Pierre Menard” or by considering the list of precursors that Borges claims as his influences. We move from his father’s Anglo-Saxon library to readings in Geneva (the French circulating library, Zola, Hugo, Maupassant, Flaubert, Barbusse, Rimbaud, Verlaine). Booksellers

in Geneva put him in touch with English writers such as De Quincey, Carlyle, and G. K. Chesterton, and ERM talks about Borges in relation to each writer. The insights are fairly traditional, except when ERM slides back into psychoanalysis: "Georgie must have found De Quincey's autobiographical writings a key to some of the most obscure experiences of his adolescence" (p. 129). The family's move to Lugano meant for Borges a new language, German, and a new set of literary references: Meyrink's *Der Golem*, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Rilke and the expressionist poets.

When Borges returns to Buenos Aires via Spain, the text moves from "intertextuality" to straightforward biography and an examination of Borges' writing. This is the most valuable part of the book, since it concentrates on Borges' pre-*Ficciones* writing and is a sustained bibliographical exercise. One of the problems that besets Borges criticism is that there is no genuine "obra completa" available. We need to have access to everything that Borges has ever written, which can only be done by combing all the little magazines that he contributed to in the 1920s and 1930s. ERM has done a lot of this work and his readings, especially of Borges' contributions in the 1930s to *El Hogar*—"an illustrated magazine that was tailored to the interests of Argentina's upper and middle classes and that also had some literary and cultural aspirations" (p. 286)—are very illuminating. ERM first read Borges in *El Hogar* and he asserts that "the page he published every two weeks in *El Hogar* was, and still is, the best possible introduction to his mind and work" (p. 288). We look forward to the day when these articles are readily available, but ERM offers enough to whet the appetite. He also makes intelligent use of the index of the literary magazine *Sur*, run by Victoria Ocampo, to which Borges contributed regularly. As I have argued elsewhere little magazines do not just amplify our bibliography of Borges, but also suggest that we read his work in its literary and social context.<sup>5</sup>

ERM also offers insights into this elite literary world of close friendships and rivalries. What emerges is a fascinating portrait of the writer and his milieu. Attention is given to the much underrated writer, Adolfo Bioy Casares, the lifelong friend and collaborator of Borges ("Biorges" as ERM would have it) whose own work provided a stimulus to Borges, as well as being influenced by the older man. We see the interest in fantastic literature and detective fiction developing as a group practice in the 1930s not just as the result of the work of an isolated genius. Adolfo Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo, and José Bianco shared in these experiments, but tend to be forgotten in the adulation of Borges. ERM has moved them from the footnotes into the main text and it is hoped that other critics will develop this work.

This biography, therefore, says a lot and leaves a lot unsaid: it adopts a critical stance which emphasizes certain readings and con-

demns others as useless. Others will “write on the interstices and margins left by his own account” (p. 478), but even if their views are contradictory, they will be helped by the scholarship and detail of this book. It is an impressive achievement.

One character who occurs frequently in the biography is Victoria (“as everybody has always called her,” p. 233) Ocampo, the founder of the literary magazine *Sur* and a formidable woman of letters. She has received, like Borges, the adulation or the abuse of critics, mainly for the same ideological reasons. As writers, however, they are very different, as Borges has pointed out: “Yo juzgaba a los escritores por su retórica o por su facultad de invención, Victoria por su índole o por su contexto biográfico. Detrás del libro, que es la máscara, indagaba el rostro secreto.”<sup>6</sup>

A biography of Borges would be structured around the books he had read, a biography of Victoria Ocampo around the people she had met. This is the main emphasis of Doris Meyer’s book, which stresses encounters with famous men and, in particular, with famous women. Victoria Ocampo is seen as the most important *woman* of letters in twentieth-century Latin America, and a great deal of space is given to analyzing her feminist role in politics and literature. Two points of comparison are made with Virginia Woolf and Eva Perón.

VO spent a lot of time pursuing Virginia Woolf. She succeeded in “capturing” her (much to Woolf’s annoyance) only in several impressive photographs taken by Gisèl Freund and reprinted in the book. In the main, Virginia Woolf remained elusive, occasionally intrigued by the wealthy Argentine who showered gifts and attention on her, at times using this enthusiasm as a means of teasing Vita Sackville-West, but always receiving, rather than giving. Woolf could be a model for VO, not a companion, however much she hungered for attention: “Please Virginia, don’t think for an instant I am trying to flatter you. I *hate* it. . . . I don’t like to eat and not be nourished. I am a very *voracious* person. And I believe hunger is all” (p. 126). Virginia Woolf’s letters in reply reveal the gap between them, as Nigel Nicholson, the editor of her letters, wrote to this reviewer: “Clearly Madame Ocampo was less of an intimate friend than I’d imagined” (13 October 1976).

Yet VO could learn a lot from Virginia Woolf: she obtained the rights for translations of much of her work, was encouraged in her career as a woman writer, and made good use of “a room of one’s own,” having the financial independence to develop her interests. VO’s rather excessive hero worship—she was something of a cultural head-hunter—should not detract from her very real achievements, the most important of which was *Sur*, a magazine which influenced several generations in Latin America. Her vitality had its positive and negative aspects, but never waned, as José Bianco points out: “Recuerdo un periodista italiano



que fue conmigo a Mar del Plata y que Victoria dejó casi muerto a fuerza de llevarlo de estancia en estancia y de hacerlo caminar y caminar. Decía 'Ché attività di donna! Si, ché attività di donna! Se le ocurrían constantemente cosas.'"<sup>7</sup>

In the social field, a comparison is made with Eva Perón. "There is no question that they have been the two most influential Latin American women of this century, one in the political and the other in the cultural sphere" (p. 130). The picture is Manichean. Meyer shares the black myth of Eva Perón (with occasional references to her indisputable popularity) whose role as a woman and whose action in giving women the franchise was motivated by lust for power and controlled by the supreme "macho" Perón. VO, on the other hand, is seen as a constant campaigner for women's rights (a member of the middle, upper-middle class Argentine's Woman's Union) and a saintly victim of the Peronist regime (twenty-six days in the Buen Pastor prison). Interestingly enough, no reference is made to J. J. Sebrelí's book: *Eva Perón—¿aventurero o militante?*, in which the same comparison is made, but in reverse.<sup>8</sup> VO is analyzed as a woman who could not transcend her class position and become an effective militant. Both views do not function critically, but are acts of faith made by each author. Meyer shares most of VO's prejudices and assumptions and thus makes a number of conscious and unconscious value judgements against Perón, cultural nationalists, and those who labelled VO an *extranjerizante*. To counter this accusation, she paraphrases VO's essay on cultural colonialism: "Unlike her ancestors, however, she returned from her journeys laden with treasure, a treasure she knew would never diminish by being shared with her countrymen" (p. 5). Much of VO's writings seek to maintain the standards of an embattled, civilizing minority threatened by "barbarian" movements such as Peronism. Meyer gives little sense of the conflict in Argentine history of this time, since she is more concerned with individuals than with social processes.

VO's encounters with famous men had often to struggle towards spirituality since her enthusiasm was often (mistakenly) read as sexual interest. She thus had to suffer the excessive imagination and appetites of Keyserling, the mystical, antifeminist Ortega (who called her "a Mona Lisa of the Southern Hemisphere"), and the rather more inscrutable Tagore, who was nonetheless spiritually seduced, as is seen from his writing: "How I wish I could once again find my way to that foreign land where waits for me the message of love" (p. 72). The main interest of this chapter, apart from its amusing anecdotes, is its brief examination of the "tellurian" essays written by travellers to Latin America at that time. Keyserling's *South American Meditations* and Ortega's *La Pampa Promesas* were very influential, even though their "psychological-mystical" approach had little to do with the country in question. Ortega

points out his own blindness: "La Pampa no puede ser vista sin ser vivida. . . . Como yo no le he vivido no puedo decir que lo he visto y lo subsecuente va dicho como a ciegas."<sup>9</sup> This did not prevent him, however, from writing a long essay. Despite these vague, patronizing effusions, in the main, VO was accepted into a man's world and significantly influenced the development of Argentine culture.

The biography ends with a few comments on VO's prose style and several translations of her "testimonios." More attention should be given to this uncommon "common reader," whose readings are usually triggered by personal reminiscences ("What I write is not exactly literary criticism: it is something that mixes life and reading" [p. 190]). Meyer's comments provide a foundation on which other writers can build. VO's autobiography is beginning to appear in short volumes (why the autobiography is subdivided in this way and is appearing so slowly can only be explained by its publisher's marketing strategy: it makes no intellectual sense). This work, together with her testimonios, will offer a solid corpus of writing to be considered. VO is widely recognized as an important cultural Maecenas; similar claims might also be made for her as a writer. She was a polemical and influential figure all her life and we await other biographical accounts by her friends and rivals. There is a danger with such a personality that biography becomes hagiography and Meyer cannot be exempted from this criticism. Her book is sometimes critical, often hagiographic. It should be read with interest by scholars of Latin American cultural history, even if its claims for illuminating an exemplary feminist consciousness are somewhat exaggerated.

## NOTES

1. E. Rodríguez Monegal, *El juicio de los parricidas: la nueva generación y sus maestros* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Deucalion, 1956).
2. The Jitrik article was first published as "Estructura y significado en 'Ficciones' de Jorge Luis Borges," *Casa de las Americas* 53 (marzo-abril 1969).
3. Angel Rama, *La generación crítica, 1939-69* (Montevideo: Ediciones Arca, 1972); Roberto Fernández Retamar, "Calibán," *Casa de las Americas* 68 (set.-oct. 1971).
4. Blas Matamoro, *Jorge Luis Borges o el juego trascendente* (Buenos Aires: A Peña Lillo, 1971).
5. "Towards a Reading of the Argentine Literary Magazine *Sur*," *LARR* 16, no. 2 (1981):57-78.
6. *La Prensa* suplemento, 8 abril 1979.
7. Daniel Balderston and John King, "Las revistas y Buenos Aires. Una pequeña entrevista con José Bianco," *Escandalar* (New York) (jul.-set. 1980), p. 86.
8. Juan José Sebreli, *Eva Perón—¿aventurera o militante?* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Siglo Veinte, 1966).
9. José Ortega y Gasset, *Obras Completas 2*, *Revista de Occidental* (Madrid, 1946), p. 631.