

***“Beatriz Viterbo c’est moi” :***  
**Angular Vision in Estela Canto’s *Borges a contraluz***

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**I**n one of the letters that form the magical center of *Borges a contraluz*, Borges writes to Estela Canto :

“Nunca, Estela, me he sentido más cerca de ti, te imagino y te pienso continuamente, pero siempre de espaldas o de perfil” (125).

In the following letter, Borges writes from rural Uruguay :

“Vagamente he visto unas casas, bruscamente anuladas por casi intolerables memorias de un ángulo de tu sonrisa” (127).

Angular vision marks *Borges a contraluz*, the very title of which suggests that Canto’s theme is an unexpected lateral view of the great Argentine writer. And because the view is from an unusual angle, the position of the observer is as important as what is seen. I here propose to examine the ways in which the biography that is *Borges a contraluz* masks the autobiographical impulse that is also very strong in the book.

*“A mode of truth, not of truth coherent and central, but angular and splintered”*: this phrase of De Quincey’s is used by Borges as the epigraph to *Evaristo Carriego*.<sup>1</sup> Canto recalls the phrase once (14),<sup>2</sup> with-

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase comes from De Quincey’s essay “The Poetry of Pope”, the same essay in which De Quincey makes his famous distinction between the “literature of knowledge” and the “literature of power.” The passage from which this quotation comes, a commentary on “The Essay on Man,” notes the lack of coherence or of organizing principles in Pope’s thought, then goes on to the argument that the very fragmentary nature of the writing is the source of its brilliance and its truth.

out insisting on its importance for her book. However, the “angular and splintered” truth about one of the central events of Borges’s emotional life is the *raison d’être* of Canto’s book, and it is fitting that the quotation from De Quincey should stand at the beginning of Borges’s own try at biography, his book on Evaristo Carriego. And if *Evaristo Carriego* is exceedingly unorthodox as a biography, so too is *Borges a contraluz*. The merits of Canto’s book are many, and her play with the conventions of biography is not the least of them.<sup>3</sup>

Of their first encounter, Canto writes with delightful irony :

“Yo había oído que Borges no era exactamente buen mozo, que ni siquiera tenía un físico agradable. Sin embargo, estaba por debajo de lo que yo había esperado” (24).

At the time of her meeting with Borges, Canto was the author of a few stories in *Sur*, and partway through their relationship she won the *Premio Municipal de Literatura* for her first novel *El muro de mármol*. Most of her fiction comes in the years subsequent to their relationship, however, and Canto is at pains to remind the reader of its existence.<sup>4</sup>

One of the more curious sections of the book begins with a discussion between Canto and Borges about the merits of going to the beach, a place defined by Borges as “*un terreno baldío donde la gente se pone en paños menores*” (50). Canto comments : “*Imagino que no aprobaba mi entusiasmo o sentía celos por la vida que suponía que yo llevaba en esas playas*” (50), then goes on to speculate on Borges’s dislike for vacant lots, a dislike that for her borders on a phobia. She clearly insinuates that Borges as a boy was the victim of something like a rape in a vacant lot (51-52), though the explanation she gives later in the book (with the help of Dr.

<sup>2</sup> One of the many books that Borges gave Canto was the eleventh volume of the Masson edition of De Quincey’s works, the volume comprising De Quincey’s critical writings and writings on literary theory, which includes the essay on the poetry of Pope. When I visited Canto for the last time, on 25 May 1995, nine days before her death, she gave the eleventh volume to me.

<sup>3</sup> The book is structured in three parts : the first telling the story of her relationship with Borges, the second (much briefer) section consisting of his letters to her at the time of his infatuation, the third consisting of a sort of critical approach to a number of his most famous texts, emphasizing their autobiographical content.

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Moreiras has argued in two articles that there are significant echoes of “El Aleph” in *El muro de mármol*. Both texts were first published in 1945.

Cohen-Miller) of Borges's sexual problems does not return to this hypothesis.<sup>5</sup>

The most moving portions of *Borges a contraluz* are when Canto finds herself at fault for being too flippant with Borges, whose interest in her was clearly sincere and intense. Her casual remark in Adrogué, in response to his (to her taste) rather Victorian proposal of marriage, that she would only consider marry him after going to bed with him, leads to the explosive center of the book, the revelation that Borges, seeking to keep his part of the bargain, sought the help of a psychiatrist, Dr. Cohen-Miller. While this episode of the book had much to do with its success, especially when coupled with the revelations that Julio Woscoboinik subsequently extracted from the by now rather aged Dr. Cohen-Miller, what has been less noticed is the pathetic tone that Canto reserves for narrating her own behavior throughout this period. For her part, she had little intention of marrying Borges—the remark was spontaneous, even perhaps rather cruel. She felt no physical attraction to Borges, she says repeatedly, and so there was no real incentive for her to keep her part of the bargain. Indeed, marriage to Borges was more or less out of the question because of his mother's antipathy to Canto.

Canto's account of Borges's obsession with her is moving partly because it is so self-deprecating. She defines the relationship as a friendship (at least on her side) :

"Digo 'amistad' porque para mí no fue otra cosa. Sobre mí él proyectó sus sueños o, mejor dicho, sus anhelos no conscientes de rebelión y de cambio" (77).

When she comes to the point in the book where she must tell her story, she writes :

"Al llegar a este punto debo disculparme. Tengo que hablar de mí misma. Éste es un estudio sobre Borges y mi vida personal sólo debe intervenir cuando entra en contacto con él. Para aclarar la situación a la que me estoy refiriendo, tengo que hablar ahora de mí. Sólo repetiré esto cuando sea imprescindible" (81).

Yet she writes of herself throughout the book, and indeed it would be a much poorer text without her self-conscious reflections.

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<sup>5</sup> She does, however, suggest on several occasions that Borges was perhaps latently homosexual (114-15, 230-31).

One leitmotiv of the relationship, to culminate in Canto's transformation into the Beatriz Viterbo of "El Aleph," is Borges's insistent nicknaming of her as Beatrice :

"Me repetía que él era Dante, que yo era Beatrice y que habría de liberarlo del infierno, aunque yo no conociera la naturaleza de ese infierno. Cuando me apretaba entre sus brazos, yo podía sentir su virilidad, pero nunca fue más allá de unos cuantos besos." (95)

Though Canto clarifies that Borges's impotence was mental rather than physical - "*se excitaba como cualquier hombre normal*" (98)- she notes that their relationship never acquired an adequate physical dimension :

"La actitud de Borges hacia mí me conmovía. Me gustaba lo que yo era para él, lo que él veía en mí. Sexualmente me era indiferente. (...) ni siquiera me desagradaba. Gozaba de su conversación, pero su convencionalismo me agobiaba. Sus besos, torpes, bruscos, siempre a destiempo, eran aceptados condescendentemente. Nunca pretendí sentir lo que no sentía." (83)

In fact, the moment she defines as the most physical contact she ever had with Borges is the experience of shaving him when he was convalescing from an eye operation :

"Éste fue el contacto físico mas íntimo que iba a haber entre Jorge Luis Borges y Estela Canto" (238).

Canto does not claim to have behaved well with Borges. When he is getting ready to ask her to visit Dr. Cohen-Miller, for instance, it does not occur to her that that is what he is driving at :

"El hecho de que yo haya creído tan fácil lo que supuse muestra hasta qué punto estaba alejada de los problemas reales de él, hasta qué punto era yo egoísta e insensible" (111).

She portrays her desire to help him as essentially self-involved :

"Tengo curiosidad y quería ayudar a Georgie. En mí hay algo de Sherlock Holmes ; me gusta indagar los motivos del prójimo. Me gusta la aventura y esta indagación del alma de los demás es una aventura grande y peligrosa. Además, quería serle útil, darle lo que podía darle" (112).

And when Dr. Cohen-Miller asks her to marry Borges even without the evidence in advance that there will be a physical relationship, he does so with a strange variation of the Victorian adage to wives ("open your legs and think of England") : "*Piense en su patria, piense en la literatura argentina. Se lo aseguro : no tendrá que arrepentirse*" (120).

She clarifies, too, that she had a life independent of Borges, free of his designs on her :

"A todo esto, hubo cambios en mi vida. Conocí a un hombre. Durante tres años me alejé de mis amigos, de mi medio. Me porté mal con Borges" (120).

One thing that served to distance them in the fifties and sixties was politics, as Canto became an active Communist, and then a non-Communist leftist, while Borges went from an anti-Peronist liberal position to one of extreme conservatism (perhaps under the influence of his mother, never Canto's favorite person). Canto tells of the denial by the U.S. government of a visa for her to visit this country, and comments: "Esa furia iba a llevarme al campo opuesto" (240). Of their common opposition to Perón, Canto writes:

"La Revolución Libertadora, que debió habernos acercado, nos alejó. Yo me acerqué a la izquierda, una izquierda que, a decir verdad, sobrenadaba sobre la realidad del país" (245).

Eventually they were reconciled, and began meeting again: "*Yo no disponía de las noches; pero nos veíamos de mañana o de tarde*" (257): by then married to her Belgian husband Georges Moentack, Canto narrates with some indignation the final machinations she attributes to Borges's mother, especially what she considers an arranged marriage to Elsa Astete. And she tells of the end:

"Pero quedaban 'cosas', como se vio cuando personas allegadas vendieron papeles de él en la casa Sotheby's de Nueva York, donde yo misma había vendido en mayo de 1985 el manuscrito de *El Aleph*" (278).

Near the end of her book, Canto writes:

"He llegado al final de estos recuerdos. Podría prolongarlos. Pero a Borges le gustaba la brevedad y abrevio en su honor. Hay anécdotas que no cuento, personas que no nombro. Sé que hay mujeres que fueron más o menos importantes en su vida. Alguna, en un exceso de recato, no ha querido ser nombrada en estas páginas; otras tienen los instrumentos literarios requeridos para contar ellas mismas su relación con él" (285).

By the art of omission she preserves the uniqueness of her own perspective. The book's fragmentary nature—part biography, part literary criticism, part intimate letters—assures the "angular and splintered" nature of its truth.

Emir Rodríguez Monegal writes in his *Literary Biography* of Borges:

"Even the person to whom Borges dedicates the story, a young Argentine writer named Estela Canto, has the right Dantesque name: Estela (Stella) was the word Dante chose to end each of the three Cantiche of the *Divine Comedy*; Canto was the name of each division in each Cantica. But the name "Estela Canto" also means, in Spanish,

"I sing to Estela." At the time Borges wrote the story, he was more than ready to sing to that particular Estela. As homage, he gave her the manuscript, in his own miniscule handwriting, of "The Aleph."<sup>6</sup> (414)

Monegal adds in the next paragraph: "*Some critics have attempted to identify Beatriz Viterbo; it is a pointless task*" (414-15). His declaration is curious in that he has just identified Beatriz Viterbo, though perhaps he could not know that Estela Canto would later revel in that identification. In any case, Canto is swift to respond to Monegal:

"Un crítico uruguayo, que iba a escribir un libro mal informado y farragoso sobre Borges, vino a verme y me pidió que le prestara el manuscrito de *El Aleph*, según él, para ver la "escritura" de Borges. Escarmentada por lo que me había ocurrido con Milleret,<sup>6</sup> le di unas fotocopias del principio y del fin del cuento. Esas fotocopias fueron publicadas en revistas universitarias de Estados Unidos." (248)

Canto does not need to belittle Monegal. Her own book will without question be seen in the future as a much more significant contribution to the understanding of Borges than Monegal's. In one of the letters, Borges writes:

"Vagamente he visto unas casas, bruscamente anuladas por casi intolerables memorias de un ángulo de tu sonrisa, de la inflexión de tu voz diciendo Georgie, de una esquina de Lomas o de La Plata, de mi reloj en tu cartera, de tus dedos rasgando papel" (127).

Her hands tearing paper: the image is haunting, as if Borges were watching her tear at his pages, tearing at her own. A relationship always mediated through paper. A shattered, angular mode of truth.

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<sup>6</sup> Jean de Milleret, the author of a book of interviews with Borges, "borrowed" the manuscript of "El Aleph," but then would not return it until threatened by Canto's husband, Georges Moentack (Canto 247-48).

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