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A letter from *Richard Barnes*

Borges y Nosotros ¹

Dear Variaciones Borges,

*A well-known Borges scholar has told Robert Mezey and me about you and suggested that we send a copy of our translation of Borges's *Obra Poética*. It would seem desirable to make these translations available to lovers of Borges, and they cannot be published. Why not will be seen in this account I prepared for a lawyer, who told us we can do nothing: 'Borges y Nosotros'. Yours,*

Richard Barnes

In early 1985 Jorge Luis Borges dined in Santa Barbara with a young poet, Rian Cooney. There he convivially granted permission for translations of his work to be published in a review Rian was editing out of Cambridge University. At Rian's invitation Robert Mezey and I produced some translations that were published along with a few others in *Poetry Now* 5 (autumn 1985).

These were the first translations of mine Bob had seen. I already knew and admired those of his that were published in Hardie St Martin's anthology *Roots and Wings* -the most faithful to the Spanish, I thought, and at the same time among the best as poems in English- so I felt honored when Bob proposed that we work together on a little book of Borges translations, and quickly agreed. With no idea what lay ahead, we lightheartedly started work. Robert Mezey has written:

We discovered, Richard and I, that we shared a real affinity with the poems we were translating, and that we both brought compatible but contrasting skills and kinds of learning to the work, among them my lifelong practice in metrical and rhymed verse, his fluency in Spanish, our many years of translating both prose and poetry from that

¹ Like every letter sent to the Subscriber Forum, this one is published under the entire responsibility of its autor. The only comment *Variaciones Borges* wishes to add is that Mezey & Barnes's excellent translations of Borges's poems constitute a real masterpiece. (Editor)

language, and his scholarly speciality in Anglo-Saxon as well as Icelandic history and literature, a Borgesian passion treated directly in 25 or 30 poems and alluded to in scores of others. As we worked on and showed each other our versions, it became clear that if we wished to do Borges justice, the many poems in meter and rhyme, which comprise considerably more than half of his poetry, had to be rendered in verse as formally elegant as we could make it without sacrificing accuracy. Very few of the earlier translators had attempted to do Borges in verse as careful and elegant as his own; only two or three, in a handful of poems, had succeeded.

A memoir of mine about how scary but exhilarating our work was has been published in *Artful Dodge* 22/23, "Translating Borges: or, Playing the Bells." Jew and Saxon, we shared the primordial ancestry of Borges's imagination. Finding a voice in the tension between our two separate voices, sparing no effort in our search through dozens of revisions not only for the right meaning and diction but also for an equivalent meter and rhyme---a way of prolonging our dissatisfaction with our version until something better came along---we often ended experiencing what Borges called "*el thrill*"; and from time to time we felt ourselves in the presence of a third voice which we thought sounded like Borges himself. Later on two good judges independently came to a similar conclusion, viz. the Argentine writer and actress Estela Canto, who was intimate with Borges from the 1940s and is the author of the study *Borges a Contra Luz* (Colección Austral, 1989):

I tell you my impression: it is as if Borges had been thinking his poems in English, and then, afterwards, he had to translate these words into Spanish. But you have recovered the first movement, that in the English words;

and the poet, translator and critic John Hollander,

The absolutely staggering translation of "La luna" accompanied by other splendid Englishings arrived and have been glowing ever since. They make me realize that translating Borges is a unique task, which I can only describe in inevitably Borgesian fashion by suggesting that it seeks to discover in every one of his poems the English original from which he himself did his Spanish translation. So that it's like what the French call "thème" rather than "version"---in Latin verse composition, putting the English translation into Martial's Latin (only one attempt will be precisely right, as opposed to translating Martial's Latin into English, for which there could be many different good versions).

By 1989 we had selected and translated about one hundred poems, and we began thinking about publishing them in a limited edition; we approached Borges's then US publisher, E. P. Dutton, his publisher and literary executor in Argentina, Emecé, and his widow, María Kodama (RM letters of March & May 1990). An editor at Dutton, Paul de Angelis, told us that Dutton was about to produce a collected poems, to which we were invited to contribute; Emecé referred us to Smith/Skolnik and Nikki Smith told us the same thing; Ms. Kodama did not reply. A letter from Nikki Smith (2 January 1990) denied us permission to publish a selected poems, adding "It is, however, our understanding that Viking will seek English translators of certain works; in which event, you may wish to contact Ms. Kathryn Court regarding translations you have in hand." She told me on the phone, approvingly, "Kathryn Court is in the publishing business not the poetry business." We understood from Nikki Smith, Kathryn Court and (later Michael) Millman that Viking had acquired a contract with Borges more or less by accident, as a result of their takeover of Dutton. A distinguished writer and translator who has been involved in these events has written

I have to say that, having gone through the hoops with over twenty publishers in this country, I've never known one as incompetent or indecisive as Viking have been over their Borges project. There is no one there competent to supervise a new edition of Borges, and they frittered away years in a series of false starts.

Over these years Robert Mezey had sent out some of our translations to various periodicals, explaining the rights situation as we understood it. Various editors, including those of the *New York Review of Books*, *New Criterion*, *Hudson Review*, *Tikkun*, *Paris Review*, *Grand Street*, *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, *Raritan*, and *American Poetry Review*, went ahead and published about 100 of our translations. For us, this was mainly a way of getting the attention of Viking Penguin.

In March of 1991 we went to Buenos Aires to visit Borges' old haunts, learn what we could about the places mentioned in his poetry, and talk with María Kodama if possible. Our first day there we went to her residence in the Barrio Norte, leaving a note with the *portera*; that same afternoon María Kodama came to our hotel where we had a pleasant conversation about our plans (at that time still the limited edition of 100 or so poems)

and about certain points of interpretation in the poems; we didn't discuss the question of rights directly, but she showed an interest in our work and was both helpful and encouraging. We were quite charmed. My poem about this encounter was published in the *Paris Review* and I sent her a copy (with a letter I didn't record) asking some more questions about the poems, but she didn't answer. My letter of April 1, 1992, inquiring about rights, is the only one to which we have ever received any reply at all from her: this was a letter not from her but from her attorney, Mario R. Orlando (4 May 1992). Mr Orlando told us she wanted us to know that "she is very pleased by your hard work translating poems," but that "on 4 October 1992 [*sic*] Jorge Luis Borges' estate (Mrs. Kodama) signed an agreement with Viking Penguin granting all translation and publishing rights [*sic*] for Jorge Luis Borges' Complete Works." We were referred to Smith/Skolnik, "Jorge Luis Borges and Emecé Editores' literary agents."

During the years that followed we were told by Viking Penguin that some firm contract (either this one or the one originally acquired by Dutton), which neither we nor our agents were ever allowed to see, constrained Viking Penguin to publish a Collected Poems before publishing any volume of selected poems. A letter to me from Caroline J. White at Viking Penguin (2 January 1991) tells us that "the poetry part of our Borges publishing program is still quite a long way away, but when we are ready to undertake it we will be interested in seeing your and Mr. Mezey's work." A letter from Michael Millman at Viking Penguin to Robert E. Brown at Princeton UP who had inquired about publishing our book declares that "Viking has fairly recently contracted with the Borges Estate for a multi-volume edition of his *Collected Works*...The initial volume, *Complete Poems*, is currently in the works—and we hope to bring out the cloth edition in 1994 (fairly 'imminent,' by our standards)... We do in fact now control exclusive World English rights... please feel free to pass my name on to Messrs Barnes and Mezey, as we are still assembling lists of possible translators." This was our introduction to Michael Millman.

In Buenos Aires we had introductions from one of our former students, the novelist (and literary historian of Argentina) Christopher Leland; we were lucky to meet several of Borges'

friends and associates, including: Estela Canto; the novelist Luisa Valenzuela, a friend of Borges since her childhood; his literary friend Alicia Jurado, whom we visited at her estancia near Las Flores, author of two books on Borges and with him co-author of a book on Buddhism; Adolfo Bioy Casares, his most intimate friend who had collaborated with Borges on a number of books; and Rolando Costa-Picazo, the head of the Fullbright commission in Buenos Aires, who put us in touch with a Borges scholar living in northern California, Donald Yates. All of them have been helpful to us, and Alicia Jurado, whose English is perfect, took an active part in our revisions. In a voluminous correspondence, she went over every line of our translations and made many valuable suggestions. After we got back to California we visited Donald Yates in Napa Valley where, surrounded by his marvellous library, we spent days at a time over four visits, correcting and improving. Meanwhile Donald Justice and Hardie St. Martin, both fine poets and translators, likewise went over every line, commenting by mail.

Later we heard that María Kodama was annoyed with us for having produced a manuscript of selected poems (which she saw at Rolando Costa-Picazo's office) and for having dedicated our translations to these four experts. Through Michael Millman at Viking Penguin we were provided with some xeroxes of a few manuscript pages on which she had made annotations, apparently in pencil and not very legible, but we never saw the annotations themselves and our repeated requests to her for helpful criticism (e.g. my letters of 14 July and October 11, 1995) were never answered. What we could read of her annotations was completely useless because she didn't understand that we were writing in meter and because her knowledge of English is apparently rather limited.

When we first approached Viking Penguin we were told that Nicholas Shumway, of Yale University, was editing the *Collected Poems*, and we began a correspondence with him; after a year or so Viking relieved him of his duties without bothering to tell him, and we were the ones who had to let him know. The poet, translator, and friend of Borges Alastair Reid had the job for a while but didn't want to take on the several hundred untranslated poems himself. As early as August 1993 Robert Mezey discussed with Michael Millman the possibility of our

taking over the editing and the translation of the entire Collected Poems. We hesitated because it was a formidable task, more than half of Borges's 700-page *Obra Poética*, and because the poems we had passed over seemed either less interesting than the others or too difficult to translate; but in Robert Mezey's letter of 11 October 1993 we indicated to Viking Penguin our willingness to go ahead with the project. It had taken us seven years to do what we had so far; it was to take us nearly three years to finish the rest, putting aside everything but our teaching duties and working overtime translating, revising every poem numerous times, and compiling a glossary of proper names, foreign words, allusions and quotations that came to 24 single-spaced pages. During all this time we still had continual detailed and generous help from Donald Yates, Alicia Jurado, Donald Justice, and Hardie St Martin. We undertook this labor on the assurance that María Kodama had signed a contract selling all the English language rights to Penguin, and that Penguin had accepted us as translators of the poetry.

Once our editorship had been verbally agreed upon, we contacted an agency, Writers' Representatives Inc, that beginning in January of 1994 worked out a detailed agreement as to rights, royalties, an advance to be paid on the signing of the contract and another on completion of the MS, and a Selected Poems to be done under our editorship two years after publication of the Collected. The agreement called for an amnesty regarding our past publication of poems in various journals and for a moratorium on our sending out any more until the Collected Poems had been published. Our agent got a warning letter from one Alan Kaufman at Viking Penguin (8/9/94) formally notifying us about this moratorium, to which she replied gently but firmly that we had been observing it (8/11/94). And there the matter stood for a couple of years.

We have been told that María Kodama believed she had been badly served by Nikki Smith of Smith/Skolnik, and had hired Andrew Wylie as her agent. He is said to have re-negotiated several contracts including the Spanish rights. Michael Millman told us that an initial meeting between Mr Wylie and Viking Penguin was very cordial and that it was agreed "in principle" that our translations, now complete, would be used for the Collected Poems. He told us though that Mr. Wylie had alleged

various mistakes or imperfections in our work and had commissioned a critique. We asked to see it, but were not shown it for fear we might guess who had made it. The few examples quoted to us by Michael Millman were feeble in the extreme; in response to them, Bob Mezey provided Mr. Millman with a detailed explanation of what we had done with two or three poems and why (letter of 12/22/95). We were told that, according to Mr. Wylie, María Kodama was not satisfied with the encomia our work had already received (see xerox attached); through Wylie she requested that more experts be asked for their opinions. Either she or Wylie named Willis Barnstone, Richard Wilbur, and W. S. Merwin. All of them, themselves published translators of Borges's verse who might be regarded as rivals, responded with warm praise leaving no doubt that they regarded ours as the best translation. Mr. Merwin further wrote:

If Mr. Wylie's prime interest is in the quality of these translations perhaps he would be willing to forward his criticisms to the translators point by point. Is he a Spanish scholar? A Borges scholar? If that is *not* his principal consideration is there some other translation that he prefers and what is his relation to it? Is María Kodama aware of the opinions of the set of poets you name? And if not what has kept them from her?

We started hearing that "the Borges estate" objected to our translations, but we know better because four people who have known María Kodama for a long time have approached her about our book: Luisa Valenzuela, Alicia Jurado, Rolando Costa-Picazo, and Donald Yates. She told all of them that her whole faith is with Mr. Wylie, her *tiburón* ["shark"] as she calls him, who had rescued her from Nikki Smith. Luisa Valenzuela wrote that "Wylie the Jackal is the person who decides about the translations." Alicia Jurado wrote:

I finally got hold of María Kodama after a very crowded concert that took place at the [Borges] Foundation, pressed her as well as I could and spoke to her about you. She seemed to remember your visit very well, but she flatly told me it had been decided (by her and whatever advisors she has) that the translation would not be published...

We still hear nothing from Viking Penguin. Alice Quinn, poetry editor of the *New Yorker*, told us that Viking had apparently abandoned the Collected Poems that they had insisted upon all these years and had misled us into doing, and was going ahead with a selected poems to translated by various hands and ed-

ited by Alastair Reid and a client of Mr Wylie's; this would presumably be another retread of the old Dutton Selected Poems, unsatisfactory in many ways, something that in any case could not present a single and coherent, let alone complete, Borges. I wrote to Mr Wylie and heard (11/20/96) from Sarah Chalfant at the Wylie Agency that such a book (to which we were invited to submit our contribution) was being edited by Alastair Reid and John Coleman. Having apparently received a copy of that letter, Alastair Reid wrote to me to correct it:

I am taking no part at all in editing or preparing the volume of Borges' poems, nor am I even in touch with Viking/Penguin. I wanted that to be clear. Best wishes.

Very many poets and scholars who have endorsed our translations believe that preventing their publication would be a cynical act of cultural vandalism. Three of the best early translators of Borges's poetry, Richard Wilbur, W. S. Merwin, and John Hollander, have already refused to allow Penguin to reprint any of their translations. Our agent has advised us to accept the situation and humbly do nothing, but that would seem to us a dereliction of our responsibility, not only to our own talent and effort but to the many generous experts who have helped us, to the English-speaking literary world, and indeed to the memory and reputation of Borges himself.

Richard Barnes
January 1997

Appendix: the poem from the Paris Review:

María Kodama

Into Miami at night then out over gulf island and jungle
 We had travelled so fast that we arrived
 on the right bank of the Río de la Plata
 where much known to fame had taken place
 A slender woman, pale face, fine eyes, her hair nearly all turned
 white:
 she might have been the ghost of some great lady in a Noh drama,
 Aoi no Uye come back in passionate serenity;
 we half thought she would rise, dance, and as the chorus spoke her
 lines, explain:
My father came from Japan, my mother from "the Orient"
as we here call Uruguay

*With an old blind poet I studied a dead language
and I cared for him*

When deep in her age his mother died

I became his bride, companion and nurse

My beauty that has not withered

has never been beheld by a husband

*He left no son nor daughter, only his poems and prose
to share my widowhood*

*And because of all this many feel for me
great envy and hatred*

A flower as fair as any,

I am removed from the scheme of generation

*Like the sleepy graceful flowers of the Recoleta, fit
not to offend the dead, having no pride of life...*

Instead,

smiling shyly, she recited verses she had learned,
how the old warrior bade the young turn loose their horses,
drive them away, how he let his dear falcon
fly off into the forest

leofne fleogan

hafoc with thæs holtes and to thære hilde stop

he stepped forward toward the fight

Mezey and I like wakis by our pillar, there

in Buenos Aires at the Hotel Presidente bar.