

Kafka and Borges on Postcards

Jorge Luis Borges read Kafka in German and also translated several of his stories. Kafka died in 1924 without ever having heard about his distant South American colleague. Between 1920 and 1923 Kafka was in love with Milena Jesenska-Pollak. The letters he wrote to her would not be published until thirty years later; 1952 is the date of *Briefe an Milena*. Between 1944 and 1949, Borges, in love with Estela Canto (and, of course, without having read the Czech writer's correspondence), wrote her letters astonishingly similar in style and concept to those of Kafka.

A Kafkaesque Borges, then? Is it that men in love all say the same things? Do writers always express their feelings in a gifted way, creating great literature?

Here are several instances of impassioned if pathetic similarities:

It occurs to me that I really can't remember your face in any precise detail. Only the way you walked away through the tables in the café, your figure, your dress, that I still see (Kafka 4);

and

Never, Estela have I felt closer to you; I imagine you and think of you constantly but always with you facing away or in profile. (Canto 125)

What do you think? Can I still get a letter by Sunday? It should be possible. But this passion for letters is senseless. Isn't one letter enough, isn't one knowing enough? (Kafka 18);

and

It's a little gloomy in Prague. I haven't received any letters my heart is a little heavy. Of course it's impossible that a letter could be here already but explain that to my heart (Kafka 72);

and

only please, Milena don't listen to me and write me every day anyway it can be very brief. briefer than today's letters, just two lines,

just one just one word but if I had to go without them I would suffer terribly (Kafka 100)

find their echo in the Forties:

I have not received a line from you. I imagine some sort of unlikely postal mishandling; I don't know in what tone to write to you; I don't know who I am now for you. (Canto 152)

I don't consider the reproaches senseless; obviously when one is in distress one makes reproaches all around (although not in the utmost distress when no reproaches are made). I can also understand that such reproaches are taken to heart in a time of agitation and turmoil. (Kafka 180)

find a resonance in

But... why deal in reproaches, which are the merchandise of Hell? (Canto 154)

Yet one more parallel, not the last to be sure, that can be revealed by consulting these sources:

There's no law preventing me from writing you again - and thanking you for the letter. which contains perhaps the most beautiful thing that you have written, that "I know that you..." (Kafka 195)

and

There is no reason we should cease to be friends. I owe you the best and maybe the worst hours of my life and that is a bond that cannot be broken. Besides, I love you very much. (Canto 154)

One additional coincidence: the recipients of these letters outlived their lovers. Milena, Catholic, compatriot of Kafka, author and translator into Czechoslovakian of his work, died on May 17, 1944 in the concentration camp at Ravensbruck. Also a writer and translator, Estela Canto has fortunately preserved Borges's letters to her and has reprinted them in facsimile in her book.



It is evident that in each passionate relationship the love that one gives is irreplaceable and unique. Nevertheless, in the reading of the letters of these two writers, the women who received them seem somehow intermingled -Milena Canto, Estela Jesenska-Pollack- as well as the places- Prague, Buenos Aires, Vienna, Mar del Plata, Merano, Salto in Uruguay, Gmund...

And no less remarkable than the textual similarities is the identical medium of communication: Kafka, the same as Borges (such was the

custom of the time), penned these words on the typically casual and frivolous picture postcard. A quaint vehicle for such passions!

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Bibliography

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