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1 July 1996

Letters Editor
THE NEW YORKER

I met Jorge Louis Borges on what was perhaps one of his last U.S. lecture tours, when he spoke to an overflow audience at UCLA, offering one of his *charlas*, as Alastair Reid calls the setpiece interview. Borges spoke in English, answering in fascinating, ironic and allusive detail the list of topics proposed by his interlocutor, Professor Jaime Alazraki. That was in late January of 1976. He was quite au courant with the ideological paradigms of the hour.

It was an extraordinary evening, not least of all because of its conclusion. There was the usual question period arranged, but it seemed to be going to be only challenges and attack from a number of Latinomilitants, not all of them from the local chapter of MECHA Irredentists (who claim most of the Southwest for some once and future empery they call Aztlan).

Borges handled one such outburst concerning literary relevance (his) from a fiery, young, black leather-jacketed man with his usual complex indirection; but it did not satisfy. The fellow stood and turned half around to take in the hall as well as Borges in his armchair at right center stage, and shouted, "Señor Borges, you should go home! You have nothing to say to us! You never had anything to say to us! You are a disgrace to the people of Argentina and to the Spanish language! You are a dead bourgeois! You are a dodo! You are worthless! You have always been worthless! No one in Latin America reads you! Now, what have you to say to that!"

He flashed a triumphant grin at the 600 and more people listening and nodded self-approval at his tirade as he folded his arms over his chest.

Borges calmly lifted his blind face and smiled sweetly at this wouldbe tormentor. Then, for the first time he spoke in Spanish, these brief sentences: "*I am not a socialist. I am not a Catholic. I am not...an anti-semite. I am a writer.*"

Profound silence. The young firebrand looked round, mouth open, opened his hands in a gesture of bafflement, and seeing he understood nothing of his own time's

politics, sat abruptly.

The burst of applause began with one the standees at the rear — myself. And that began the ovation to Borges with which the seance ended.

Sincerely, yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jasda Kessler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'J' and 'K'.

Professor of English & Modern Literature, UCLA



THE STATE OF FICTION

The argument in the fiction issue over the value, danger, and insignificance of the novel ("In Defense of the Novel, Yet Again," by Salman Rushdie; June 24th and July 1st) is perhaps best refuted by Jane Austen, who has a character in "Northanger Abbey" say, "Oh! it is only a novel! . . . Or, in short, only some work in which . . . the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language."

LEAH JESSE
Simpsonville, S.C.

The letters between Ernest Hemingway and Maxwell Perkins ("Three Words") recall a similar incident, which occurred some thirty years later, concerning John Cheever's "The Wapshot Chronicle." In 1957, I was editing Cheever's book at Harper and received a call from Ralph Thompson, the chief editor of the Book-of-the-Month Club. He informed me that the club had chosen "The Wapshot Chronicle" as a main selection, and I was thrilled, since this was Cheever's first novel after twenty-seven years of short stories. The club, however, insisted that Cheever remove the word "fuck" from a bedroom scene in the novel, as it had never sent its members a book containing that word. I told Thompson that I was quite sure Cheever would say no, and that I'd agree with him. When I asked Cheever, he said, "Oh, no, that's the only word for that scene." I passed this on to Thompson. Shortly thereafter, he called to tell me that for the first time in history a Book-of-the-Month Club selec-

I met Jorge Luis Borges when he spoke to an overflow audience at U.C.L.A., offering one of his *charlas*, as Alastair Reid calls his set-piece interviews (Personal History, "Neruda and Borges"). Borges spoke in English, addressing in fascinating, ironic, and allusive detail the list of topics proposed by his interlocutor. This was in the mid-nineteen-seventies, a decade or so before he died. It was an extraordinary evening, not least of all because of its conclusion. The usual question period had been arranged, but attacks came from a number of Latino militants. One young man stood and shouted, "Señor Borges, you should go home! You have nothing to say to us! You never had anything to say to us! You are a disgrace to the people of Argentina and to the Spanish language! You are a dead bourgeois! You are a dodo! You are worthless! You have always been worthless! No one in Latin America reads you! Now, what have you to say to that?" The man flashed a triumphant grin as people listened and nodded approval at his tirade.

Borges calmly lifted his blind face and smiled sweetly at this would-be tormentor. Then, for the first time, he spoke in Spanish, three brief sentences: "I am not a socialist. I am not a Catholic. I am a writer." Profound silence. The young firebrand looked around with his mouth open, spread his hands in a gesture of bafflement, and sat abruptly. The burst of applause that followed soon developed into an overwhelming ovation for Borges.

JASCHA KESSLER
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Modern Literature, U.C.L.A.
Santa Monica, Calif.

Letters should be as brief as possible, and sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime

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9 August 1996

Henrik Hertzberg, Executive Editor
THE NEW YORKER

Dear Mr. Hertzberg:

I have just received by FAX a copy of the letter I wrote to the New Yorker on 1 July 1996, about J.L.Borges' talk at UCLA about 20 years ago. While I quite understand that there is only little space available in "In The Mail," and that letters are edited down, I do not understand garbling of meaning, and an inexcusable cut that eviscerates the point of my communication to you, which was meant for the historical record. What you printed is distressing to me.

Here is the pertinent portion of my screed:
...He flashed a triumphant grin at the 600 and more people listening and nodded self-approval at his tirade as he folded his arms over his chest.

Borges calmly lifted his blind face and smiled sweetly at this wouldbe tormentor. Then, for the first time he spoke in Spanish, these brief sentences: "I am not a socialist. I am not a Catholic. I am not...an anti-semite. I am a writer."

Your editor altered my sentence to say that *the audience nodded approval at his tirade*; whereas I said clearly that protestor was *self-approving*. (The audience was silent and somewhat amazed at his temerity.) But, far worse — your editor has removed the key sentence Borges uttered: viz., "I am not...an anti-semite."

Given the politics of Argentina and Latin America, given Borges' implicit separation of himself from the "Liberation Theology" of that time, and times before and after, that amounts to a cut unkindier than any I have ever been subjected to. It cannot be inadvertent. If it was deliberate, it seems dishonest to me, and perhaps even

sinister.

I hope to have your editorial review of this matter, and, though I fear it may not be forthcoming, a publication of the sentences that Borges actually spoke.” (I suppose it might be too much to expect a rendering of my depiction of the militant’s political complacency?) As it is the opposite of “clarity” has been introduced into the record. In Argentina, as you must be aware, “they” bomb the hell out of Jewry — then and today.

Thanks for your attention.

Yours, truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jasda Fewler". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Professor of English & Modern Literature, UCLA

PS: Hard copy of this letter goes out to you by tomorrow’s post.

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26 August 1996

Henrick Hertzberg, Executive Editor
THE NEW YORKER

Dear Mr. Hertzberg:

Although I must assume you are not in Chicago for the Democratic Convention, I write in the expectation that this note will be brought to your attention, and before that to the attention of the responsible section, In the Mail.

On Monday morning, 15 August, I was called (and unfortunately in the course of the conversation I neglected to write down her name) by the woman in charge of Letters, who, in your absence in San Diego, undertook to see what could be done to remedy a most unfortunate pair of errors in the letter I wrote about Borges, which appeared in the 12 August issue. Not having heard back since then, I don't know if any action was taken, but I want to remind you that the matter is of great concern, especially since THE NEW YORKER prides itself on accuracy. To reiterate what I wrote when I sent my first query to you, I wrote as a matter of establishing a very important fact about Borges' political stance in the unfortunate and violent vicissitudes of life in Argentina since 1945, an opinion of his that says a lot about his country, Latin America, and should be said to the world, permanently. Alastair Reid's memoir of his relations with the great writer and Nobelist *manqué* was what afforded me the opportunity to establish that for the record, and the omission of the key sentence, of four short declaratives, simply kills the matter.

I trust that THE NEW YORKER will maintain its standards of accuracy, for accuracy matters, especially during an epoch in world history when the very idea of stating and recording a fact as such is considered (by some literary theorists) nugatory if not piffling.

Again, thanks for your care and attention.



Professor of English & Modern Literature, UCLA