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Jorge Borges

INTERVIEWED BY
ALESSANDRO MANARA

This dialogue took place in the Biblioteca Nacional, of which Borges was then the Director. The setting reminded him of how he had once created a Library of Babel.

"Once, in a shabby library in Almagro Sur, where I used to spend five or six hours a day, I remembered a joke of Bertrand Russell's about a land of immortal apes. Provided with typewriters these apes kept playing with them and at the end of eternity they had written all the books in the world. Bearing this in mind I invented a library, an awful place, a kind of mathematical nightmare where all possible combinations of books could be found. Of course, the library was enormous and most of the books quite meaningless, the sort of place you'd find a telephone directory with all the wrong numbers."

He had dealt with immortality again and again in his work. Did he think that El Inmortal was the most direct and fully-developed story he had written on this issue?

"If a man is deathless, many things—most things—will happen to him. He will act in many different ways. For example, at one time he might be a saint, then four or five hundred years later he might be a traitor, and so on. I played with that idea, but it was often overlaid by fine writing—or what I thought of as fine writing! Unfortunately, as a young man I liked purple passages and allusions to classical literature and I tried to avoid straightforward writing. Anyway, I wrote a story about a man, like the Wandering Jew, who lived for many centuries. During this man's lifetime he might have written the works of Homer, but as time passed he would forget his Greek and then even forget that he'd been Homer. I was simply playing with the idea of immortality. But when I wrote this story, as I say, it was full of purple passages, fine writing and all those curses of literature. If I wrote it now it would be in a much simpler style. Then the reader would be in no doubt about what I was trying to say".

He had raised a most interesting theological question in Ficciones—Tres Versiones de Judas.

"I think Judas was needed by Christ. In order to be crucified, he needed a traitor. When Christ said : 'I know that I shall be betrayed', perhaps he was looking at Judas, and Judas understood that he had been given an order".

What was his attitude towards English Literature?

"My father had a fine English library. His mother was English, you know, though married to an Argentinian officer, who was eventually killed in the 1874 revolution. She lived for some years close to the border, near Junin, and knew many of the Indian Chieftains. Anyway, my father gave me his library and I have done most of my reading in English. I think of myself essentially as a reader of English Literature. If I think of the *Arabian Nights,* I am thinking of Lade's(?) or Captain Burton's versions of the book. If I think of the Bible, I am thinking of the King James' Bible. So I feel that all the reading in English must have left something in my writing. I was once talking about this with Bioy Casares(?), who said :

'There is an essential difference, I think, between us and most other Argentinian writers'.

I answered back, saying :

'Yes, the difference is that they go to Hachette or the Ateneo and we go to Mitchell's Bookstore'."

Was there any period of English Literature he was particularly fond of?

"Well, Dr. Johnson is one of my heroes. When I went to England, I went on pilgrimage to Lichfield in Staffordshire. One of my treasures at home is his Dictionary and I think I know Boswell's *Life of Johnson* by heart—or at least I should! I have also read Shaw, Chesterton and Wells many times. Since 1965 I have been a student of Anglo-Saxon, Old English, and now I am working on Old Norse. The words are almost the same."

What did he think of Shaw's St. Joan?

"I don't think it's his finest work. I prefer *Three Plays for Puritans.* I have to say, though, and this is something usually overlooked, that most writers dwell on the weariness of man and the manly sins, while Shaw is the only contemporary writer who can show an heroic character. St. Joan is one of them, and Major Barbara another, also Caesar in

Caesar and Cleopatra. I think Shaw is morally superior to other writers. Other writers dwell on sin, crime, madness, treason and so on".

What did he think of Kipps by H. G. Wells?

"Wells has many sides to him and I much prefer his 'nightmares', such the *The Time Machine, The Invisible Man* and *The First Man in the Moon.* When he went in for being Charles Dickens I don't think he succeeded too well. And then he became a socialist and thought that mankind could be saved by education, so he wrote encyclopaedias and those very boring universal histories."

Why did violence play such an important role in his work?

"I've often asked myself that question. I suppose it's because, apart from my grandmother's side of the family, who came from Northumberland and lived quiet lives, I have many military ancestors. I was brought up in that atmosphere. My grandfather, Coronel(?) Borges, fought at the battle of Caseros when he was fourteen years old and then he fought the Paraguayans and the Montoneros of Lopez Jordan. Of course, in the last century we had a very stirring history. We don't have that kind of thing nowadays."

Why was there such a strong Christian element in Informe de Brodie?

"I wonder if I am a Christian? If I were, I think that I'd rather belong to some Protestant sect. There's something I dislike about Catholicism. It's all Bishops and Archbishops and Popes. If I could find some quiet Protestant sect, with no trappings about it, I think I'd feel happier. My mother was a good Catholic. So is my sister. My grandmother was Church of England and knew her Bible by heart. My father was a Free Thinker and a student of Herbert Spencer. We were all very fond of each other even if of different views. When I was made Doctor Honoris Causa of the University of Oxford my mother, in a sentimental mood, said :

'What a pity your father isn't alive, because this would give him such pleasure.'

My sister said, in amazement :

'Father knows everything about it. He knows everything that's happening to us. He's watching us all the time.'

She was astonished that my mother was in any doubt about it!

As for the story of Brodie, it was a kind of exercise. I'm an old man and always trying to clutch at something new. It was intended to be a kind of Gulliver's story after the manner of Jonathan Swift. I don't think of it as an important story at all. It was undertaken as a sort of eighteenth century exercise. Well, it was different from most things I'd written because it was about time-cycles and juggling with time, and I began the story at the end and then worked my way back. After reading Kipling I wanted to write simple, straight-forward stories—and then I wrote that book! But in that book the best story I ever wrote can be found. It's called *La Intrusa* and it's very simple. It's about two hooligans. You're meant to foresee the ending and when it comes—at last, if I'm successful—it's inevitable. You feel that it *had* to come. The only thing these two ruffians had was their friendship and the woman had to be sacrificed for that friendship. But you mustn't think of it as a kind of cruelty, because their link of brotherhood *had* to be saved somehow. There is one thing in the story I'd like to point out : only one character in it is allowed to speak, the older brother. All the decisions are taken by him, because the younger brother and the woman are merely passive, they accept his decisions."

Should the relationship of the brothers be interpreted as abnormal?

"No, on the contrary. And if you think that, you're soiling my story. Besides, from the beginning, you think of them as being very manly men."

Was the "musicality" of his writing intentional?

"If you say that, it means that my stories are well-written! Apart from books on philosophy or theology, if one finds something well-written one tends to read it aloud, especially in the case of verse. I don't think anyone can read good verse without wanting to *hear* it. Of course there is a music to be found in harshness, too. Here is a line as a good example :

'Here comes Bonaparte the Bastard, kicking heels with his throat in a rope.'

I think that 'throat in a rope' is intentional harshness. Many verses in Browning are meant to be harsh, and in Old English, too".

How could he explain the National element(?) in his work?

"I come from old Argentinian and Uruguayan stock. My ancestors have lived many centuries here. I am not *professionally* Argentinian but if I wrote as a Spaniard I would be disguising myself."

Did he think of himself as universal, then?

"No, perhaps universal is too large a word. But I think that in the future national differences won't be as important as they are today. We will be citizens of the world, cosmopolitans. But I do think of myself as an Argentinian—and a good Argentinian."

William Goldman

THE SIMPLE PLEASURES OF THE RICH

When his buzzer rang out—at half past four in the morning—even Peckham was surprised. Being Mr. Churchill's man for fifty-one years now, going on fifty-two, had prepared him for many things; but not for having his buzzer ring out, piercing sharp above his head, at half past four in the morning.

So he buzzed back quickly, one-two, fast presses of his thumb, and then sat up, rubbing his eyes gently, whisking sleep away. Later he stood, draped his robe about him, left his room, padding down the carpeted corridor toward the elevator.

It was awaiting him so he did not vex it, but moved inside, pushing the second floor button, again rubbing sleep from the weary corners of his eyes. But almost before he had begun, the second floor was evening out with the elevator, so he left and walked—almost tiptoed—along the hall, past Miss Agatha's room, past the blue guest room, past the sewing room, and so on and on, until the light from Mr. Churchill's lamp splashed out ahead, smooth on the oriental hall carpet.

He walked into that light, Peckham did, turning, blinking slowly, following it to its source. A few paces from the end of the white canopied four poster he stopped, his hands clasped firm behind his back. Mr. Churchill was wiggling his feet beneath the soft wool blankets, cackling soft, his thin back braced upright by a small mountain of blue pillows. Peckham waited, watching the wiggling feet as they continued to treadmill up-down, up-down. Placid, Peckham waited, understanding, for it was not an easy thing to try to phrase at half past four in the morning. So the minutes ticked by, as they usually do, with not a word thrown out to alter their progress. Until finally, Mr. Churchill spoke out.

"I was thinking," he said, "of building a road."

"Yes, sir."

"With your assistance, of course." Peckham nodded. "It wouldn't necessarily have to lead anywhere," Mr. C. went on, rustling white percale. "But perhaps behind the guest lodge, out of sight, would be a likely spot. We could check it tomorrow. You and I, Peckham. We could just tramp around until we find it, someplace right for a road. And then we'd build one. What do you say?"

Peckham clapped his hands. "What a splendid gesture. That's what I say."

"I thought so." Mr. C. cackled. "You can go." Peckham turned. "But not a word to Agatha."

Peckham turned back. "A word about what, sir?" he said, whereupon he turned for the third time and without another pause he moved into the lamplight, then out of it again, disappearing in the darkness of the hall . . .

At breakfast the next morning, Mr. Churchill was so nervous he could not down his oatmeal. He fiddled with it rather, played with it, made mountains of it and patted it smooth with his spoon. Peckham meanwhile sat alongside, calmly sipping his lemon tinted tea. After a while, they heard the squeaking of Agatha's chair emerging from the elevator. As the squeaking grew, Mr. C. wiped his hands hurriedly, turned toward the main door, fixed a smile on, and prepared to greet his sister.

"My pillow was as lumpy as a stone," she announced, rolling in, Miss Bergen doing the pushing, as usual. Raising a freckled hand, Agatha signaled a halt, after which she leaned, nipped Mr. C. on the cheek, nodded to Peckham, and dug into the bacon. "I have a cold coming on," she said, taking a bacon strip from the silver tray, snapping it in two and stuffing it in. "There's no end to it," she chewed. "The bacon's tepid. If it isn't one thing, it's another."

"Cheerio," Mr. C. said jocular, and with that he motioned to Peckham and they rose.

"Where are you off to?" she returned.

"To the club," Mr. C. told her quick. "To the card room. Where else?"

"You will be back for lunch."

Though it wasn't a question, he answered it as such. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. Who knows? Goodbye," and he slid out of the room Peckham pursuing.

The white Rolls was waiting them beneath the Corinthian arch, purring soft. "To the club," Mr. C. said, very loud to Peckham at the wheel, but mostly for the benefit of the footman standing by. "And don't spare the horses."