

interview/Emir Rodríguez Monegal

As a critic and as a scholar, Emir Rodríguez Monegal has always viewed literary production in Hispanic America within the wider context of Western literature. This perspective has often led to controversy, for jealously guarded provincial reputations rarely stand the test of more ecumenical readings, and nationalism, the continent's weakness, does not take well to an Uruguayan judging the literary merits of a Venezuelan, a Mexican or a Cuban. But this is only one of the polemical grounds where the work of Rodríguez Monegal has taken shape. Provincialism and chauvinism are not self-generated manifestations of a culture, but the symptoms of social and economic underdevelopment. While Rodríguez Monegal's work has been a struggle against these elements, intellectuals of diverse persuasions and writers of the latest *engagé* tendency have attacked him for his defense of literature. In a continent where even scholarship dealing with the classics can touch off very contemporary polemics, the work of Rodríguez Monegal has always been in the fray. His writings on the literature of Hispanic America are not only a commentary, but a part of that literature, even when they take the shape of a scholarly edition of Rodó or an erudite disquisition on Andrés Bello. Perhaps the peculiar conditions of Hispanic America serve to accentuate a fact often forgotten in academic circles in the United States—that scholarly writing is never neutral. In the interview that follows, echoes of those skirmishes may still be heard.

But of all his activities as professor, critic and cultural promoter, Rodríguez Monegal will perhaps be best remembered for his association with Borges. One of the first critics to discover the importance of the Argentine master, Rodríguez Monegal defended Borges when it became fashionable to regard his work as merely escapist, and he was also among the first to find that Borges not only offered an exhilarating practice of literature but also a theory. Borges has paid his critic homage by making him a minor character—an allusion—in one of his stories ("The Other Death," in *The Aleph*), thereby assimilating his commentator into his fictional world. And so, appropriately (and adding to that perhaps excessive game of intertextuality), Rodríguez Monegal is now at work on a biography of Borges, almost as if Borges had created one more of his fictional selves to produce another version of his already fictionalized life. The interview that follows will no doubt nourish such suspicions, for the ironic confessions of Rodríguez Monegal resemble a Borges story more than the account of a conventional critic and professor. Rodríguez Monegal's travels through libraries, his birth in a remote town in Uruguay (that "imagined land," as Wallace Stevens called it), his early fascination with books, the Oriental touch in his novelistic name, will make the reader wonder if he is not faced here with one more of Borges' strategic inventions. But the reader may rest assured that Rodríguez Monegal is real, and alive and well, if not in Argentina or Uruguay, at least at Yale University, where he is professor of Hispanic American literature and Chairman of the Spanish Department.

Roberto González Echevarría: I don't want this to sound like "Comment peut-on être persan?" but how does one become a literary critic in Uruguay? That is, how did you become a critic?

Emir Rodríguez Monegal: Well, I would say that I became a critic without knowing it, by accident. I was born to a family from the provinces, who lived in Melo, a town close to the Brazilian border. At home, everyone liked to read and some even wrote. My grandfather Monegal was a bookseller and owner of the local newspaper. Next to the room where I was born was the bookshop, and one room further on the newspaper offices and the printing shop. So, it could be said that I was born smelling printer's ink and chewing paper. For me, reading was always such a normal activity that it was difficult to realize that not everyone spent the entire day reading. It was even longer before I understood that to speak about books, one of the most common activities of my youth, was also a profession. My parents moved to Montevideo when I was two, and there we also remained surrounded by books. My uncle Pepe returned from Spain with stories about poets and literary magazines, and he brought a volume of *The Peloponnesian Wars* by Thucydides and the three small volumes of the Spanish translation of Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*. I was about ten or twelve years old then, and like a diligent ostrich I devoured them. I also read the books of one of my aunts, who was very romantic. My mother preferred the writings that were strictly non-fictional and of a social nature. It was on a trip to Rio de Janeiro around 1934 (my father is of Spanish origin but was born in Brazil) that I discovered both the new Brazilian novelists (Amado, Lins do Rêgo, Graciliano Ramos) and the contemporary European novel. I read Huxley and Silone at the same time as *O Moeleque Ricardo* and *Jubiaba*.

RGE: But when did you begin to study literature seriously?

ERM: When I entered secondary school I realized that I had read more than any of my classmates and more than some of my professors. This gave me the idea of devoting myself to teaching literature. Literary criticism as a profession practically did not exist at that time in Uruguay. Only the people my age were really interested in criticism. I had a couple of journalist friends who wrote movie or theater reviews for magazines, and they began to urge me: "But why don't you write down what you're always talking about?" I thought that they meant to shut me up once and for all, but actually they wanted to stim-

ulate me. I wrote two things then for a magazine that was devoted to the cinema and the theater but had a book section. The first was a long article on Welles' *Citizen Kane*, which had just premiered in Montevideo and which I had gone to see three times on successive nights. I spoke about Proust and memory, of Dos Passos and simultaneity, and I think that I even inserted something on Borges, because I had already read a brilliant item on his in *Sur* about the movie. The other was a review of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the first book of fantastic stories by Borges. But it wasn't published. In 1941 it was difficult for anyone in Montevideo to believe (as I did) that this was the most important book of fiction of the century. The weekly *Marcha* already existed in Montevideo since 1939, and for a while the literary review section was in the hands of the generation which was then thirty years old or more. Around 1942 and 1943, we younger ones came in. I began to contribute a few notes, very brief and compact because I had great difficulty in writing and also because Borges was my model.

RGE: Then you followed Borges from the start?

ERM: Yes, I had discovered Borges in the same manner, casually. The romantic aunt with the great imagination subscribed to the Argentine weekly *El Hogar* (*The Home*), a magazine for women and the family. Naturally, I always browsed through it, and one day, suddenly, I found a page called "Foreign Books and Authors," signed by someone called Jorge Luis Borges. It must have been around 1936; I was about fifteen years old. Of course I didn't know who Borges was. But since he wrote about authors that stimulated my curiosity, writers that were beginning to be translated into Spanish, some by Borges himself, I immediately became addicted to him. He spoke of Kafka, of Joyce, and of Faulkner. I began to collect his articles. Soon after, while rummaging through bookstores, I discovered that Borges not only wrote the book section of *El Hogar*, but was the author of volumes of criticism, like *Inquisitions* (1925), which I found at a second-hand bookdealer, and that he also wrote stories. In the same store I found *The Universal History of Infamy* (1935) in an uncut, virginal copy. They had been unable to sell it. And I also discovered the Argentine magazine *Sur*, which had been founded by Victoria Ocampo in 1931 and to which Borges had frequently contributed. In discovering Borges, I already had the best possible model for criticism. The first articles that I wrote for *Marcha* were plagiarisms of his format and something of his style. Soon, though, I realized that he was inimitable.

RGE: Eventually you came to edit the literary section of *Marcha*, no?

ERM: I contributed to *Marcha* for years without ever going to the copyroom or meeting the editor, a formidable man by the name of Carlos Quijano. I had such little professionalism then that I didn't have a typewriter and submitted my articles in longhand. Until one day in 1945, when I accepted the editorship of the literary section of *Marcha*, and then I decided to go to the printer and correct the proofs myself. When I entered the room, the smell of the ink and the heat of the presses seemed to me more delicious than Paradise. I got hooked again: the

smell of my early childhood seized me. From that moment on I religiously went to the printer's every Thursday until the end of 1957.

RGE: What critical methodology was in vogue among the critics of your age at that time?

ERM: The people of my age belonged to the group that I later baptized "the generation of '45" in a study that is now included, in expanded form, in a book called *La literatura uruguaya del medio siglo* (1966). It was a hypercritical generation, precisely because there had been no up-to-date criticism in the previous generation. We had to look back to the nineteenth century (to Bauzá, Zorrilla de San Martín) or to the beginnings of the twentieth (to Rodó and Zum Felde) for our models. Up to 1947 there was no Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University, and we had to seek inspiration in foreign critics or in the small numbers of teachers in secondary education who were interested in criticism. Fortunately, in Argentina, on the other side of the River Plate, people like the Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña, the great master of Hispanic historical criticism, were active; and the Spaniard Amado Alonso, translator of Ferdinand de Saussure and Vossler and a specialist in Romance stylistics, had settled in Buenos Aires. Also, Francisco Romero, the Argentine professor of philosophy, who introduced very good contemporary texts in impeccable translations. We also read Alfonso Reyes, the Mexican humanist, and the hallucinatory Martínez Estrada, who already in the thirties made spectral analyses of the Pampa and of monstrous Buenos Aires in a Spenglerian vein. But above all, we read the new literature. We were attracted to everything that was being done in Europe and in the United States since the beginning of the century: the Surrealists, Joyce, Kafka, Proust, Céline, Eliot, Pound. We read French well, but English with difficulty and with the aid of translations. We had also discovered some key Hispanic American writers, who enabled us to put foreign ones in perspective. In poetry, there was Huidobro, Vallejo, and above all the Neruda of *Residence on Earth* (1935). This was the trio that opened our eyes and allowed us to view Spanish poetry, so celebrated in this century, in a broad and polemical context. As far as we were concerned, those poets did not oppose Borges, but instead complemented him. They were the avant garde, modernity, the ones who brought to poetry the same type of revolution that Borges brought to prose fiction and to criticism. We read with a sense of militancy. In addition, we had a local teacher, Juan Carlos Onetti, who had been the first secretary to the editor of *Marcha* and who was then living and writing novels in Buenos Aires. We also discovered, although somewhat later, one Octavio Paz amidst the pages of an excellent Mexican magazine called *El Hijo Pródigo*. But Paz's best books did not appear until the fifties.

RGE: What philosophical influences did you receive during your formative years?

ERM: In the last two years of secondary school we studied philosophy with professors who had been trained in Germany or who had studied German texts. When the liberation of France and the downfall of Germany unleashed French existentialism, we were already prepared for the assault. In the

first place, because in Spain the *Revista de Occidente*, founded by Ortega y Gasset in 1923 and suspended because of the Civil War in 1936, had been translating and commenting on German philosophers for a period of thirteen years. Ortega had talked about and had translated or had others translate Dilthey, Husserl, Spengler, Scheler, Heidegger. Also, in Spain, a translation of the complete works of Freud had appeared. In Argentina, Victoria Ocampo had had Jung translated, and Romero's work had paralleled Ortega's; in Mexico, after Franco's victory, the Fondo de Cultura Económica continued the work of translating and commenting with the same staff from the *Revista de Occidente*.

RGE: What specific teachings did you glean from Borges' criticism?

ERM: The subject is immense, mainly because Borges did not limit himself to bringing together certain ideas in some of his texts, but instead filled his poetry, his essays and his stories with all manner of intuitions and perspectives. For instance, the best example of his poetics of reading can be found in the story, "Pierre Ménard, Author of *Don Quijote*." I think what was most important to us was his conception of fiction as fiction. In times when those on the left spoke only of realistic literature and of literary commitment to politics, Borges insisted on writing fiction and demonstrated in his work that realism was a literary convention which had been developed since the beginning of the sixteenth century and artificially codified in the nineteenth. That the psychological novel was based on arbitrariness and not on profound analysis. That the message of a book does not lie in what it explicitly says, but in how it says it. That the future of the novel depends on the fantastic. That the detective novel is today's most important genre. I am exaggerating his opinions, but in substance, that is how he felt. There are old pieces by Borges that directed me to a new poetics of the narrative: "La fruición literaria" (1927); "El arte narrativo y la magia" (1932); "Elementos de preceptiva" (1933). The second one was translated into French and published in *Tel Quel* in the '60's and started a whole series of critical reactions. But it is, above all, in the prologue of *The Invention of Morel* (1940), the extraordinary novel by Adolfo Bioy Casares, where Borges comes into opposition with critics like Ortega y Gasset, who in *The Dehumanization of Art* and *Ideas on the Novel* had denied the possibility of the continued composition of works with interesting and original plots and declared himself in favor of the psychological novel. Taking advantage of the excesses and psychological arbitrariness of Dostoevski and Proust and praising the imagination of James and Kafka, Borges defends a type of fiction in which causality is magic and the writing itself predicts its own development. Very few studied this text, which remains buried in Bioy's book, since Borges did not bother to include it in *Other Inquisitions*. But in Montevideo, around 1940, we were already applying what Borges had said in those essays as well as in his brilliant fiction. For this reason, when French existentialism burst forth, our reaction was twofold: a feeling of *déjà vu* because of what this movement contained of German existentialism, very familiar to us; and a conviction

that in literary criticism, existentialism meant a reaction to the sociological readings of the nineteenth century. (Borges, on the other hand, proposed a textual reading which anticipated the best of structuralism.)

RGE: Does that mean that your group was in conflict with those who followed existentialism or *engagée* literature?

ERM: Yes and no. To tell the truth, we were also interested in existentialism. We borrowed its philosophical side (for example, the Sartre of *L'Imaginaire* rather than the solemn trivialities of *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*); and as for political compromise, we practiced it in a personal sphere, carefully avoiding all complicity with the state, attacking official culture, and living modestly on our professors' salaries. With a group of people who thought as I did, I founded the magazine *Número* in 1949 to round out in more academic fashion the task of critical diffusion accomplished by *Marcha*. But, because of the atmosphere prevailing in Montevideo at that time, we were regarded as existentialists in the French vein in spite of it all. We dated back to before Sartre or Beauvoir, though; and we were closer to Céline, Faulkner, and Onetti than to Camus; Heidegger and Husserl interested us more than Merleau-Ponty. In French literature, the old Surrealism, as well as some relatively new writers like Raymond Queneau, caught our fancy more than the huge, indigestible novels produced at the *Café des Deux Magots*. That doesn't mean that we did not approve of some canonical existentialist texts. For example, I was very interested in Sartre's *Baudelaire* because it improved on the literal psychoanalysis of Marie Bonaparte's almost demented study of Poe. It is clear that Sartre wanted Baudelaire to fit into the straitjacket of his existentialism, and the poet escaped him; but his book directed me to a type of analysis that rounded out what I had already seen in Freud and Jung. *Saint Genêt* also interested me very much; it was one of the few books I bought during a first brief visit to Paris in 1951. It bored me, certainly, and I had to read it piecemeal, but it did confirm a suspicion awakened by his *Baudelaire*: a new type of literary biography was possible. But since Sartre is a kind of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" in literature, the approval of a book, or part of a book, does not extend to the entire work. In sum, certain things about French existentialism interested us, but we couldn't totally endorse it, as did so many in Latin America and above all in mimetic Buenos Aires.

RGE: How was that reflected in the group's political attitude?

ERM: We always stayed on the left, with a posture that was both anti-imperialistic and socialist. To contribute to *Marcha* meant being automatically excluded from all official enterprises, which in a country as small as Uruguay left one out in the cold. One could repeat what a famous Mexican once said: "To be out of the state budget is to be in error." We always made that error, and it cost us dearly. On the other hand, what distinguished us from the local Communists or the French existentialists was our refusal to read literature exclusively in sociological or political terms. I insist on the word *exclusively*, because we did not refuse to read literature as a

document of an era. In *Número* we published in 1949 what I think was the first translation of Lukács into Spanish: a segment of his book on *Goethe*. But when we did social criticism, we were aware that we were not reading the works as literary texts.

RGE: What was your first book?

ERM: An annotated edition of the *Diary of a Journey to Paris* by Horacio Quiroga, a trip taken precisely in 1900, and a collection of essays on the principal Uruguayan thinker of that time, *José Enrique Rodó en el Novecientos* (1950). Both books were the result of my work in the "Instituto de Investigaciones y Archivos Literarios," which had its seat in the National Library, where I spent two years organizing the papers of Horacio Quiroga and reclassifying those of Herrera y Reissig. I used the time to read as much as I could from those archives, and also devoted a special issue of *Número* to Uruguayan literature of 1900, that is to say, the Modernist period.

RGE: Was it the work on Rodó that led you to writing literary biography?

ERM: Yes, I have always had a passion for history and especially for biography. As a youngster I read all of those ironic biographies by Strachey and by André Maurois, also Zweig's pseudoanalytical ones and the heavily novelistic ones by Emil Ludwig. Then in 1949, I won a scholarship from the British Council for a year's study in Cambridge. One of the most important writers of the past century, the Venezuelan Andrés Bello, lived for nearly twenty years in the Romantic England of 1810 to 1829. I was very interested in Bello; he seemed to be the first Hispano-American to realize that Hispanic American culture was not derived exclusively from the Spanish. Neither did he think of it as an offshoot of French culture (as many during the Romantic and Modernist times believed and still do), but as a culture in which the Spanish, the French, the English and the classical are interwoven with the native strains. Reading his work, so forgotten then, I asked myself: how did that man come to conceive such a synthesis? At what moment in his life? The obvious answer was: in England. Because the England of that time was the first modern nation, a nation which with the Industrial Revolution had taken an incredible leap into the future, and Bello was the first Hispanic traveler to have experienced that modernity. When I was offered a scholarship to complete the project on Bello, I asked to go to Cambridge, where F. R. Leavis was then teaching. I had read some of his books and knew that he was very dedicated to the study of the English novel of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

RGE: What happened with Leavis?

ERM: Well, that is the best part. Leavis was at the height of his reputation as a critic and as a professor. His influence in the United States was already quite great. In England, and especially in Cambridge, he had much opposition. Perhaps his arrogant and insolent attitudes contributed to that polemic. He was extremely aggressive with everyone and fought a war to the death against the Establishment, that is (according to him), the *TLS*, the BBC and last but not least the British Council. I was saved from being included among his enemies because I came from

the far South, and also because I had been recommended by one of his disciples, Dr. Derek Traversi, a specialist on Shakespeare. Before arriving at Cambridge, I had read his latest book, *The Great Tradition*, an extravagant and polemical study on the English novel. What interested me most about Leavis was his courage to define what was really important in a specific literature. The dogmatism with which he wrote and judged was in part compensated by that critical audacity. When I was able to see him in person, I discovered that he had other virtues. He was an extraordinary professor: despotic, arbitrary, but with the fascination that a great actor holds. The critical imagination he put into his classes was outstanding, and he seemed to me an unattainable model. Any lecture of his was a spectacle. I took various courses from him: one about literary analysis, another on English poetry, and a third on Lawrence as a novelist. In this course, I recall, he became incensed against Eliot (Mr. Eliot, as he always said) because of his attacks on Lawrence. For Leavis not only had a feeling of literary solidarity with Lawrence, but also one of class, and he thought that sophisticated critics (like Eliot and Bertrand Russell) hadn't understood Lawrence even if they pretended to sympathize with him. The social and moral context of literature was very important to Leavis. He was a proletarian puritan. Although much less systematic than Lukács or Goldmann, he had studied English reality closely and knew his Marx. Leavis' excesses do not even need to be mentioned, but I will tell you an anecdote. At the end of a very moralistic class on Lawrence, I once conquered my shyness and dared detain Leavis at the door for a moment to ask him: "And what about Proust?" Before answering (he was small, his sparse disheveled hair flying in all directions), he fulminated me with his big, desperate eyes, and then he said one word: "Unhealthy!" I remained silent because (in spite of Borges) I adored Proust. When I finally reacted, Leavis had already disappeared in the black whirlwind of his academic robe. But if Leavis' personality was so extraordinary, no less extraordinary were the many leads in criticism that his classes gave me. He put me in touch with the work of Arnold and of Richards, and also with Empson.

RGE: And the study on Bello?

ERM: That, too, passed through various stages. Upon arriving back in Montevideo in 1951, I was delayed in organizing all the index cards. Then I realized that it would be necessary to spend some time in Chile, where Bello had gone after leaving England, and where he had completed, in thirty-five years of intense work, his encyclopedic *oeuvre*. So I obtained a scholarship to visit Chile for a few months in 1954, and with the material gathered there I sketched a literary biography. Since it was of no interest to me to speak about Bello's many non-literary activities, I decided that the biography would be a study of his intellectual evolution as a critic and as a poet, a biography in which there would be a dialogue of texts, involving not only each of Bello's works, but also those of his contemporaries. Bello's readings seemed to me as important as his own books. I believe I was the first to study in detail the catalogs of the libraries to which Bello had ac-

cess, from the British Museum and Miranda's splendid private library in London to the libraries of Santiago, Chile, and in particular those of his wealthy friends. My distant model was Boswell's classic biography of Johnson. But since I didn't have the opportunity to converse with Bello, as Boswell did with his subject, I had to make the texts speak. The book was ready in 1956, but I continued revising it and took another trip to England (1957-60) to gather more material. The book was published in 1968 with the title *El otro Andrés Bello*.

RGE: What method are you following in the case of Borges?

ERM: Before I answer, let me tell you that between the biographies of Bello and Borges, I wrote two more. The one of Horacio Quiroga was relatively simple. Quiroga, like Poe, had such a tragic life that the main task was to avoid melodrama and instill a certain critical sense in the reading of his symbolically autobiographical texts. The second biography I attempted was completely different. I had promised to write a book on Pablo Neruda's poetry, and while preparing it, I discovered that I first had to reconstruct his life, since Neruda's poetry is unabashedly autobiographical. Contrary to Rodó, Bello and Quiroga, whose private correspondence I was able to use but whom I had never known personally, Pablo Neruda was not only a friend of mine, (I knew him since 1952), but had also jealously guarded his intimate papers. Included among these was an extraordinary collection of letters, written while he lived in the Orient, that I had read in its entirety but which was technically out of my reach: I could only cite those passages which had been included in a previous biography. The biographical part of the book would have turned out very dry had it not occurred to me to apply to this work the concept of *persona* which Ezra Pound had explained so brilliantly and which Hugh Kenner comments on in his first book on the poet. My thesis was that Neruda had created a *persona*, not just a work. The violent hostility which the child finds within the family leads the writer to publish under a pseudonym, and that pseudonym, Pablo Neruda, which conceals Ricardo Neftalí Elicer Reyes, is his first creation: the *persona*. Going on from there, in the second part of my book I study the metamorphoses of the poet's self-constructed *persona*: his obsession to tell his life in both verse and prose, his jealous care to rewrite entire passages of his life clash with the effort of diligent enemies to correct Neruda. And so it is that the biographical part of *El viajero inmóvil* (1966) is like a dialogue of the different versions of Neruda's biography, versions which end harmoniously in the baroque synthesis that is the *persona*, Pablo Neruda. In the end I felt that I did not write the life of a concrete man but a biography of an imaginary *persona* who signs real poetry.

RGE: It is a kind of meta-life.

ERM: Yes, I think so, although I would not use such language. The decision to write the biography of Neruda's *persona*, or *personae*, helped in my next work. In Borges' case I found myself with an even more difficult situation. In the first place, I have known Borges personally since 1945; I know all of his family and especially Leonorcita, his mother.

Secondly, there is no accessible private correspondence, or what there is is so fragmentary that it is of little use. Thirdly, there is much intimate material, but it cannot be used without disturbing many people. Also, Borges has not been as directly autobiographical as Neruda, so that one cannot cite his work to illustrate his life without first making all manner of transpositions. An example: as a youth he dedicates a love poem to a certain young lady whose real name he hides with initials; years later in republishing the poem he changes the initials. On the other hand, there is no official biography of Borges (the one by Alicia Jurado is the best known but is of little interest). In an autobiography originally published in *The New Yorker* in English (Borges has not yet authorized the Spanish version) many episodes of his life are told, but in such a way that their importance is systematically reduced to triviality or their veracity deliberately undermined. In interviews Borges also offers much biographical material, but in a discontinuous and undramatized manner or in the form of tantalizing allusions. Therefore, a life of Borges along the same lines as Neruda's was impossible. On the other hand, Borges had already anticipated that impossibility by maintaining that he never had a life and that his readings are more important than his work. He has gone even further: he has insisted that it is impossible for one person to write the life of another. And he has said this at the start of his biography of Evaristo Carriego (1930), an Argentine poet. This ironically structured book is a practical demonstration of the impossibility of any biography. In a prologue that I wrote for the French translation of the book, I insisted that before Borges, Carriego was a real person, author of known books, but that now he is only another Borges character.

RGE: Then, how have you solved the problem?

ERM: By grabbing the bull by the horns. In his life, Borges (like Edmond Teste) has tried to "kill the puppet": to eliminate the real man who breathes, walks and sleeps, in order to leave only the intra-textual one: the one that exists in his words. Because of this, it was necessary to avoid the temptation to novelize his life, and it was necessary to fend off the temptation of an academic biography in which each of Borges' books would serve as the pillar of a chapter: a biography of the "Life and Works" variety. Something else had to be found. I tried various ways throughout the years because I have been preparing myself to write this book since 1949, at least. I even wrote a long piece in 1955 in which I deliberately mixed life and work, but always from the point of view of literary evolution. That same year I wrote a melodramatically entitled book in which I used Borges as the focal point for a study on the relationship between the young Argentine literary generation and its masters (*El juicio de los parricidas* [*The Judgment of the Parricides*]). The texts of Borges and his contemporaries and those of their young critics were set in counterpoint with a reality that was undergoing an acute political, moral and cultural crisis. But the formula for that book was not viable for a fullblown study. If only five years of Argentine cultural life had taken me two hundred pages, how many volumes would I have needed to tell

of the “life and times” of Borges? I’d rather not think of it. So I discarded the idea and continued searching. Until one day I hit upon a solution: instead of Borges’ *life*, Borges’ *biography* had to be written. I only knew a few things about his life, and half of them were not publishable. On the other hand, I knew much more about Borges’ *biography*, and everything had already been published and was publishable. That is, I knew what he and others had *told* of his life; I knew the *texts* of his life: that’s what I called the *biography*. What had to be done was to systematize and correlate these texts in such a way as to be both intertextual and intratextual—those two terms that are so well-liked by our friend Severo Sarduy. It was necessary to reveal through the readings and the confrontation of texts the explicit or implicit system which constitutes the texts of Borges’ life. The first idea came while organizing in 1969 the material for the small book that I published with Seuil, *Borges par lui-même* (1970). But since the collection adhered to a compact format, I had to limit myself to a presentation of Borges’ texts that was more critical than biographical. Two years ago, when faced with the task of the complete biography of Borges that Dutton had asked me to do, I realized that I had to start not with the parents or grandparents, but with a basic fact of the writer that Borges would become: *Borges learned to read English before Spanish*. That is the first phrase of the book, and with that, I weave my text with the text of Borges’ biography: interviews, his autobiography, Borges’ own literary texts which establish a sort of dialogue among themselves, notes, prologues, epilogues, rectifications, omissions, spurious quotations, all the intra and intertextual material which constitutes the sole and general text of Borges’ work, quoted once and again in each chapter of my biography, to construct a textual labyrinth in the center of which is the word Borges. Which is to say that I was able to write Borges’ biography only from the moment when I realized that what interested me was not his life but the writing of his biography. I make clear that in this sense the stress should be on *graphy*.

RGE: What would you say to the academic critics who claim that what you do in your role as cultural promoter is “tub-thumping”?

ERM: First of all, let me say that as a critic I have written and published books as complicated as, if not more complicated than, those of the majority of my colleagues in this Hispano-American field, and that my scholarly books stand as monuments to academic boredom and as fodder for moths. Now, as to the job of cultural promoter, that is something else. It seems to me perfectly legitimate that an academic critic who respects himself and is protected by centuries of universities, museums, bibliographical indices and scholarly publications should have the right to disregard my work as cultural promoter. Such a person, surely, would not be interested in

anything published after 1895, and perhaps even that date is somewhat recent. To write about new and even very new writers is always to run a very great risk.

RGE: Now that you have been at Yale for several years, what is your opinion of the Anglo-American criticism that studies Hispano-American literature in the universities of this country?

ERM: It is very conservative as a general rule. They are still talking of *Modernismo*, of the vanguard of the twenties, of “magical realism” and other such aberrations. Although they occasionally quote something from Paz or Borges and have their students read García Márquez and even Manuel Puig, the foundations of their criticism date back to Amado Alonso in the best of cases and to Menéndez Pelayo in the worst. Only the younger critics have begun to study the new European currents, and I don’t refer exclusively to French Structuralism, but also to Russian Formalism and to Italian, English, and the more recent North American criticism. This is not only noticeable in academic circles, but also in journalistic reviews of the translations of Hispano-American authors. Books by Paz and Cortázar are systematically misread by gentlemen of very good will and profound ignorance. The case of Borges is the most singular. There have been some fine journalistic studies of his works in this country, such as the one by John Updike in *The New Yorker* or, in a more academic vein, Paul De Man’s in *The New York Review of Books*. But not long ago, *The New York Times Book Review* published a review of a work by García Márquez in which the critic, in passing, compared Borges to Washington Irving (I will not say his name because he is a very charming person). I was dumbfounded. Had that critic seriously read Irving and Borges? Recently, Updike attacked Cabrera Infante in an illiterate review for *The New Yorker* in which he demonstrated that he had failed to understand the very plot of *Three Trapped Tigers*. The worst of it is that he said banalities which he would not have dared pronounce about a book by Robbe-Grillet or Carlo Emilio Gadda or even Heinrich Böll. And I am sure that Cabrera Infante is just as important a writer as any of these three. It is an enormous problem. The critics of Hispanic American literature in translation are either literature professors like us, who naturally are suspected of being partial, or excellent critics of other literatures who, when they write about ours, feel that they are slumming a bit. Those very same critics would not dare improvise on Kafka or Pasternak the bathtub solos that they dedicate to Cortázar or Guimarães Rosa. But, at any rate, one can already feel a certain change. There are critics (like Ronald Christ and Anna Balakian) who write without condescension and with solid documentation about our literature. Soon there will be more, I hope.

(Translated by Isabel C. Gómez)