



A BORGESIAN LIBRARY IN GRUNEWALD'S  
*LOCUS AMOENUS*  
BEATRIZ SARLO

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I teach literature and culture at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, where I arrived after many years of military dictatorship. If my career were scrutinized closely, it would seem rather strange that I left the university in 1966 as a very young assistant and returned there as a professor in 1984, with no institutional affiliation in between. During the almost two decades I was kept out of the university, I trained myself as a literary critic and cultural analyst. Raymond Williams, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, and Walter Benjamin could be named as the main intellectual influences that guide my work. I have written on the history of Argentine intellectuals, on literary avant-garde, on urban culture, and on modernism and postmodernism. If I had to name one of my books that I feel it would not be a painful obligation to re-read, I would say it is *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*. It resulted from lectures delivered as Simon Bolivar Professor in Cambridge, England. But if I had to name what I consider my most important contribution to date, I would not hesitate to mention *Punto de Vista*, the cultural journal I have edited since 1978. – Address: Hildago 140, 1405 Buenos Aires, Argentina.

I arrived at the Wiko the first day in February 2003. I had lived for short periods in the United States and Europe, but it was my first time in Berlin.

Indeed, living in Berlin was quite an experience. The Kolleg can be an obstacle to Berlin, but it is also its condition. Both are cosmopolitan spaces that replicate and echo one another as if the secluded houses in Grunewald were a sort of pastoral model of the modern and post-modern city. Berlin would have been only half real without the Kolleg, although sometimes I had the impression that our privileged headquarters was a fortress that not

only protected us from the surrounding city but also secretly strove to replace it. Perhaps that is the whole point: to force the doors of the Kolleg in order to get to the city; to feel that Berlin is not just around the corner but that it must be attained after something has been accomplished in Grunewald.

I will not waive my right to say that the weather was bitter, snowy, and windy during two months. I thought that, to stay on the safe side and avoid desperation, winter would not be a topic. That proved impossible because winter is a topic for Berliners and trying to avoid it would only push it to the forefront. So, it was winter and we had to talk about it. I decided to go to the opera the day after I arrived, just to make sure that I would be able to face February's flurries from the very beginning. From that day on, I did not stop.

The first thing I discovered took me by surprise. I wanted to play tennis and discovered that this was not so easy as it is in my home city. You can swim, you can jog, and you can walk in the woods, but believe me: it is very difficult to find a decent court to rent at a decent price. This was my first bit of Berliner sociological knowledge.

However, in five months this bit of knowledge lost all importance in the image that I was building of the city. I am not sure that *knowledge* is the word to describe my relation with Berlin. Perhaps it would be better to say: *acquaintanceship* and *friendship*. I was learning German rather quickly (against my rather pessimistic expectations), thanks to the intense mornings I spent with Fellows, spouses, and Eva von Kügelgen, our teacher at the Kolleg. I came to think that if I could learn German everything else would be possible: going to the theater, reading newspapers and books, understanding lectures. I knew I would not be able to have a proper intellectual conversation in German. But I very quickly decided that, except with German colleagues in the Kolleg, I would only speak German.

Of course, I had arrived with a project. As everybody who has had the opportunity of working at the Kolleg knows, its Library is an incredible Borgesian space that includes Germany, Europe, who knows, maybe the whole world. And the Library is the obstacle that can wreck any project, especially if you are coming, as I was, from a country where libraries are far from Borgesian. I must confess that I read much more than I wrote. I read in a sort of adolescent mood, feeling free to forget my research and to follow different paths without having to make up an explanation to placate a troublesome institution.

My project focused on recent Argentine intellectual history, this time written as a sort of collective biography of a generation that was very young in the sixties. I was to rethink the relationship between Borges and Argentine leftist culture, which is full of misunder-

standings and conflicts. And, doing so, I was to rethink, once more, Borges's oeuvre, especially what could be read there as violence and passion, exactly the opposite of his critical appraisal as a universal writer of fantastic literature. I was to read Borges, once more, as a national writer, because he was refuted, loved, and hated under this guise by young intellectuals in the sixties and early seventies.

My work did not only include Borges. I had the intention to deal with political violence (as public passion) in the seventies, to which Borges himself could give some allegorical clues. That meant the opportunity to do some comparative work. Being in Europe, in Berlin, and last but not least at the Wiko, I could afford some luxuries that are not to be expected in the libraries of my country. During my first weeks at the Wiko, I met over lunch a former Fellow, Luisa Passerini, and later I read her books, which overlapped exactly with my project. This meeting was the sort of thing that can typically happen at the Wiko: you get even what you do not expect to get, through a sort of benevolent fate that rules over the Fellows' lives.

Wiko, as every former Fellow knows, has established wise, slightly constraining, but at the same time very agreeable traditions. Of course it is full of ghosts and remembrances: Ligeti, who had been a Fellow, was mentioned the moment I arrived. That was really a privilege, I thought, some of his traces should be found here. At the end of my period, *Le Grand Macabre*, Ligeti's opera was sung at the Komische Oper. Thus a circle began to close and I knew I was ready to return to my country. At the same time, I knew very well what I was going to miss. Let me write down a list of those items:

- The principle of uncertainty that rules lunches and Thursday evenings: every table is different, every day one can manage to open new lines of dialog; things that are not looked for can happen and the unexpected is part of every gathering.
- Discussions about music with Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, who also lured me into reading Jünger; fabulous anecdotes by Wolf Lepenies: every Wiko Fellow should ask him for the complete story of his first lunch with Canguilhem.
- Intense apprenticeship in biological sciences, thanks to helpful and patient colleagues who were immediately aware that I needed special tuition.
- Meeting people from countries, some of which reminded me of my own (like Hungary and Poland) while others were an unknown world (Congo, Zimbabwe, India, the North of Africa).
- During the war in Iraq, the fact of being in contact with Fellows who spoke and read Arabic, who could provide a deeper understanding of the conflict.

I could go on and on. Just jogging around the lakes in Grunewald made me believe in the real existence of the classical *locus amoenus*. And coming back home from a concert or the theater, walking across Wallotstraße, I felt that Wiko's stately *wilhelminische Haus*, with its yellow lights shining through the windows, because the Wiko is a sort of non-stop institution, was an intellectual home for the apparently very distant Argentinean that was living and working there.