



THIRTY YEARS LATER
EFRAÍN KRISTAL

Efraín Kristal, born in 1959, is Distinguished Professor and Chair of UCLA's Department of Comparative Literature. At UCLA, he is also a professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and in the Department of French and Francophone Studies. Kristal specializes in Latin American literature and intellectual history in comparative contexts from the 16th century until the present. He is also interested in aesthetics and works on the role of translation in the creative process of writers who translate, as a creative process in its own right, in the transmission of culture, and as a practice with philosophical implications. He is the author of over one hundred scholarly articles and several books including *Temptation of the Word*, *The Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa* and *Invisible Work*, *Borges and Translation*. Kristal is a Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and an honorary professor at the Universidad del Pacífico in his native Lima, Peru. He is currently working on the philosophical dimensions in paintings by Nicolas Poussin. – Address: Department of Comparative Literature, University of California, Los Angeles, 350 Kaplan Building, Los Angeles, CA 90095–1536, USA. E-mail: kristal@ucla.edu.

My year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was transformative thanks to its ideal conditions for research, its extraordinary staff that attended to all of our practical needs, the continuous stream of inspiring interactions with Fellows and partners in formal and informal settings, and Berlin's stimulating cultural life. Even during the corona period, it was a privilege to benefit from the views of a medical authority of the stature of Alastair Buchan, as it was to hear the perspectives of specialists in other areas. And I take my hat off to Thorsten Wilhelmy for keeping us informed in uncertain times with extraordinary

precision, tact, and sensitivity. Once protocols for safer interaction among the Fellows were established, we also found ways to continue some of our main activities by virtual means and to have different kinds of experiences. Thanks to corona, for example, my partner Romy Sutherland and I discovered the wonders of the Grunewald forest, where we took regular bicycle rides on Friday mornings with Nicolas Dodier and Janine Barbot, which was as much of a joy for the experience of woods and lakes as it was for our enriching conversations.

The lion's share of my scholarly attention was directed to my research project on Jorge Luis Borges and war, which has yielded an initial publication based on my Tuesday Colloquium in an edited volume. When I came to Berlin, I had a reasonable idea of the extent to which the two world wars are central to Borges' intellectual biography and to many of his signature tales. By the time my year came to an end, I had gained a comparable sense of the role that Latin American wars play in Borges' literary world, particularly those of the 19th century. My research benefited considerably from the active and effective assistance of the staff in the Wiko library. I also worked on several side projects, including an article on Borges and Philosophy for a book on philosophy and world literature; a piece on the plague paintings by Nicolas Poussin (a draft of which was finished before the corona crisis); an essay on literary ambiguity in Mario Vargas Llosa, William Faulkner, and Thomas Mann; an essay on the impact of the first Spanish translation of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* on the poetry of César Vallejo; a preface for the French translation of a book on Dante by John Freccero. On the suggestion of Andreas Mayer – who invited me to offer a commentary on his keynote address on the history of Freud translation into English and French for the *Symposion zur Geschichte der Psychoanalyse* of the International Psychoanalytic University (IPU Berlin) – I also wrote a piece on the Spanish translations of Freud's *Traumdeutung*. Several other unexpected projects came up during the year. I was invited to offer an overview of my writings on Latin American literature in an interview for the Peruvian literary journal *Espinela*; and a lecture at the Cervantes Institute in Madrid in February (before the corona crisis) has come out in *Antipodas*, an Australian literary journal.

My first impressions of the Wiko, however, are not from the current academic year, but from 1991 when I was a Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, hosted by Freie Universität Professor Dietrich Briesemeister, one of the great German specialists in the Romance languages and at the time Director of the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut. Professor Briesemeister assigned me a comfortable office to work on a research project on

Latin American intellectual history, informed me that the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa was in Berlin as a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg, and kindly arranged for us to meet. We had a coffee at the Café Einstein Stammhaus, and Mr. Vargas Llosa invited me for lunch at the Wiko a week later. What was a regular occurrence for the Fellows was an extraordinary, unforgettable experience for me. We shared a table with the Israeli essayist Amos Elon, who had recently published his celebrated book on Jerusalem, the sociologist Larissa Lomnitz, the political scientist Albert O. Hirschman, and Sarah, his brilliant partner. The lively conversation shifted from the rapid transformation of Berlin that was taking place before our very eyes to literature, music, and painting. At coffee time, we were joined briefly by then Rector and now Permanent Fellow Wolf Lepenies, who was arranging for Mr. Vargas Llosa to visit an archive on George Grosz for an essay the Peruvian novelist was writing about the German artist. As we were saying our goodbyes, Sarah Hirschman asked if I might like to join her and her husband for a rehearsal at the Berlin Philharmonic with Evgeny Kissin in a few days. On our way to the Philharmonic, Professor Hirschman mentioned that his Wiko year was also his first return to the city of his birth after fleeing the Nazi regime in the late 1930s, and this triggered in me an immediate epiphany on the origin of his seminal contributions to migration, which I had previously associated with his work on Latin America. I also saw Larissa Lomnitz several more times at the home of my friend, the literary scholar David Schidlow, son of the Chilean-Israeli composer Leon Schidlow, a good friend of Larissa's. She passed away this past April during my residency at the Wiko, and a month or so after receiving the news, I was invited to write a blurb for a family memoir by her son, the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz. The engaging book begins with a recollection of his own experiences as a Wiko Fellow and offers fascinating insights into his family history, which was revelatory to me for personal reasons as well. The book sheds light on the experience of my parents, who, like Larissa, came from Eastern European Jewish families who immigrated to Latin America before the outbreak of World War Two.

I translated Mr. Vargas Llosa's Wiko colloquium from Spanish to English in 1991, and we spent a brief session making final adjustments to his text in his office at Wallotstr. 19. During the remainder of the year, I saw Mr. Vargas Llosa, his wife Patricia, and their elegant, cultured personal assistant Señora Rosario Bedoya on outings to museums and cultural events. I loaned Vargas Llosa my copies of his books for a public bilingual reading with Bruno Ganz, we even took a trip together to Wittenberg and Weimar to visit sites associated with Luther, Goethe, and Herder, and we visited the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Fast-forwarding almost thirty years later, I saw Mario Vargas Llosa in July of 2019 in Lima for an event in his honor, a few weeks before my arrival at the Wiko. He congratulated me on my appointment as a Fellow and made the casual remark that he'd like to attend my colloquium. I was moved by his intention, but could not imagine he could actually come to Berlin from his home in Madrid, as his impossibly busy agenda had become even busier after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2010. But in October, his personal assistant contacted me to plan his visit, and he attended the colloquium with his partner. During his two-day stay, we returned to the Einstein Café for dinner and heard a concert at the Berlin Philharmonie with a program conducted by the orchestra's new director, Kirill Petrenko. We reminisced that in 1991 we had been in Berlin for Claudio Abbado's inaugural season. Mr. Vargas Llosa wrote an article about his visit to Berlin for the Spanish journal *El País* in which he gave pride of place to the Wissenschaftskolleg, and Wolf Lepenies wrote an article for *Die Welt* inspired by Vargas Llosa's return to the Wiko.

There were many other highlights to my year, the most gratifying of which took place at the Berliner Abend for former Fellows, where I spoke about my project on Borges and war at one of the break-out sessions. The great German actor and intellectual Hanns Zischler honored us with his presence and gave a moving testimony regarding his own personal experiences with Borges. I had mentioned that Borges read Walt Whitman in German before reading him in the original English and that Whitman's first German translator was the poet Ferdinand Freiligrath. This observation inspired Mr. Zischler to mention that he had wanted to interview Borges for a volume on Borges and film, and that he made the request in person to the Argentine writer during one of his visits to Germany. When they met, Borges recited some lines of poetry in German. They happened to be by Freiligrath, Mr. Zischler identified the author and the poem, and Borges granted the interview. Hanns Zischler's generous recollection was the most magical moment of the year for me, encapsulating the kind of inspiring serendipity that can take place at the Wiko because of the splendid people associated with the institution.

Of course, the intellectual stimulation at the Wiko was constant. Towards the beginning of our stay, I had a conversation with Andreas Mayer on translation and philosophy. Andreas invited me to help him put together a daylong seminar on translation with international guests. Unfortunately, the event was cancelled because of the corona crisis. But this initial conversation led to other projects. Andreas and my partner Romy – who is a professor in Film Studies – organized a series of screenings of films inspired by psychoanalysis, which was open to our entire community.

Classical music played an important role in my stay, and it was a special privilege to hear concerts and operas with the knowledgeable and insightful Benedict Taylor, Pamela Recinella, Marietta Auer, Jeanne Kormina, Sergei Shtyrkof, and of course Marco Stroppa, our composer in residence. Marco's understanding of the limits and possibilities of instruments, the human voice, and computer-generated tones to produce sounds and express emotions profoundly transformed my understanding and appreciation of music. Indeed, my greatest regret of the year was that the COVID-19 crisis made it impossible to have the envisioned concert of Marco Stroppa's music at the Wiko, which, I'm sure, would have been a highlight of our year. I spent several weeks listening to recordings of Marco's music, starting with those available at the Wiko library, and my admiration for his brilliance, creativity, and ability to invent new means of musical expression grew considerably with every new piece of music I heard. Another regret is that Balázs Trencsényi and Oksana Sarkisova arrived at the Wiko just days before the corona lockdown was about to begin, which limited the number of conversations we could have with them. One of the unexpected benefits for me at the Wiko was gaining a sense of the state of the art in a wide range of disciplines, from new ways of understanding ancient Mesopotamia thanks to Nicole Brisch, to the changing role of Islamic theology in the academic world in the work of Felix Körner and Ulrich Rudolph, to the cutting-edge research on diversity in the work of David Stark.

Over the year, Romy and I had meaningful interactions with most if not all of the Fellows and partners, and it was also a privilege to have conversations with our Rector Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, Daniel Schönplflug, and Thorsten Wilhelmy. We are also grateful to our wonderful, devoted language teachers, Ursula Kohler and Eva von Kügelgen.

As a literary scholar, I took special pleasure in meeting and discovering the rich and variegated work of Georgi Gospodinov, who received several richly deserved literary prizes during our stay for his novels, poetry, and essayistic work. It was also wonderful to meet his wise and perceptive partner Bilyana Kourtasheva, a professor of literature and a translator with whom Romy and I had many conversations. I'm also grateful to Zhiyi Yang, who took the generous trouble to go over with me, in minute detail, a number of Chinese references in Borges's short stories and poems. It was a privilege to meet and have conversations with Achille Varzi, whose trained philosophical mind goes hand in hand with an acute, refined sensibility and human warmth. He has a remarkable ability to explain complex philosophical problems with lucidity, even when the solutions to those problems are far from settled. Romy and I also had some memorable outings with Achille

and Friederike Oursin, whose artistic sense is infallible. She recommended we visit an art exhibition in Halle, with modernist works that had left Germany in the 1930s and were returning to the museum that housed them until the Nazi regime banned them. This visit was another highlight of our year. I also profited from conversations with Tijana Krstić and Derin Terzioğlu on the Ottoman Empire, a topic that is central to one of my future projects on the ways in which views of the Ottoman Empire in 17th-century Spain informed historical epics set in Spanish America.

Another unexpected intellectual treat was learning about spiders, bees, butterflies, fishes, and birds from our natural scientists, and it was illuminating to hear Luca Giuliani's discussion of the Laocoön at an exhibition at the Humboldt-Universität. His was both a trailblazing, persuasive reinterpretation of a momentous work of art in the Western tradition and a master class in the history of cultural reception.

Because of COVID-19, I could not deliver several lectures that had been set in my calendar, but I did manage to give a keynote address over Zoom for a conference I was supposed to have attended in Stockholm. The pandemic also prevented us from traveling to Finland to see Krystian Lada's production of *King Roger*, an opera by Szymanowski that Johanna Mappes was going to attend as well. It was clear to Romy and me, however, that we had been fortunate to be at the Wiko during the crisis, where we were treated so well, and we were always keenly aware of the suffering and hardship the pandemic was causing around the world. Romy and I returned to Los Angeles with a sense of gratitude to the Wiko and to the magnificent constellation of people with whom we had the privilege to share so many meaningful experiences.