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THE BOOM: A RETROSPECTIVE

Interview by Alfred J. Mac Adam

Emir, if you had to define the phenomenon we call the Boom, how would you do it? And if you think that it can be defined, can we then conclude that it is in fact over, that we are definitely "after the Boom"?

Let me answer those questions one at a time or, as we say in the Río de la Plata, *pian piano si va lontano*. As I see it, the Boom was a publishing phenomenon, the result of an industry's decision to market a product it thought it could sell, namely, the new prose fiction of Latin America. The other genres, poetry or theater, for example, are not really part of it. Furthermore, the Boom was limited to a few writers and did not encompass all the authors of the period. As a phenomenon in Latin American literary history, the Boom had more to do with the publication and selling—or marketing if you like—of those few authors than it did with anything like a cultural renaissance. Historically speaking, the Boom started in the sixties and ended—yes, it's definitely over—in the seventies. It coincided with the expansion of the publishing industry in Latin America which also began in the mid-sixties and ended in the seventies, when the publishing industry went into a decline. The Boom declined along with it.

Was the Boom the first period in Latin American history when writers were sold as "properties," as we think of them in the United States?

Yes. Treating writers as commodities was something that had been practiced in the United States and Europe but had just never taken place in Latin America, where writers tended to deal directly with publishing companies.

Then it would also seem logical that the Boom saw the birth of the literary agent in Latin America.

Right. Carlos Fuentes was the first Latin American writer I can think of to have an agent, and an American one at that. Now everybody does. The economic factor, again, is paramount: When writers could not make a living by their writings, as was the case before the Boom, there was no need for agents. But now, although this applies only to a few people, books by Latin American writers sell throughout Latin America and around the world, so agents are a necessity.

This distinction between the Boom and the post-Boom makes me think about the pre-Boom writers of the 1940s, especially the writers in the Río de la Plata. Their writerly vocation seems so ironic, although some were, I suppose, helped by the Boom.

I assume you are thinking about people like Adolfo Bioy Casares, Juan Carlos Onetti and, of course, Borges himself. Well, it's true that there was something ironic in the act of writing in the forties and even the fifties because those writers must have wondered if they would ever have readers. Nevertheless, they were paving the way for the Boom. These pre-Boom writers, and we could add Felisberto Hernández and José Bianco to the list, really began the process of creating a readership for Latin American literature, a cadre of devoted and highly sophisticated readers who were convinced that Latin America could produce great literature.

Fortune has not been kind to all of them.

Not at all. After 1961, the year he shared the

Formentor Prize with Samuel Beckett, Borges was recognized everywhere as a master. Bioy Casares, on the other hand, demands great devotion from his readers and is all too easily dismissed as a minor talent. Onetti is a superb writer, but his tortured characters tend to repel readers. Bianco and Felisberto Hernández are also usually thought of as minor writers, although their contribution to the shaping of a literary tradition was considerable.

I find the case of Onetti the most pathetic of all.

Let's not give up hope. After all, when Faulkner won the Nobel Prize most of his books were out of print. And when American readers realized that Faulkner was more than a regional writer—it took people like Sartre to convince them—they began to take him seriously. I'm not saying Onetti is going to get a Nobel, but there is still a chance that with proper handling and good translation Onetti may find the wider international audience he deserves.

Speaking of "wider international audiences," did you ever imagine you would end up as a professor of Latin American literature at an American university? Isn't this your fifteenth year at Yale?

It is my fifteenth year, but while the Boom may be over, I hope you don't think I'm "ending up." I began teaching in Uruguay, back in 1945. I started as a secondary-school teacher and finished as a university lecturer—a 20-year stint. So I have been teaching all my life. The only surprise is that I find myself here in the United States.

How is your life teaching here in the United States different from what it was in Montevideo?

In Montevideo I participated in many more aspects of cultural life than I do here. I translated plays for theater groups and saw them put on, I was a film critic (a friend and I actually wrote a book on Ingmar Bergman in 1964) and I was deeply involved with literature. I started working on the literary section of a newspaper, *Marcha*, in 1943 and two years later took over the job of literary editor, which Juan Carlos Onetti had held until he went to Buenos Aires. I worked on *Marcha* until 1960. And in the meantime, I edited my own magazine, *Número*, from 1949 until 1955 (and again between 1962 and 1963). I wrote a good deal on the Generation of 1945, which includes Mario Benedetti, and did lots of biographical work on José Enrique Rodó, Horacio Quiroga, and Andrés Bello. Rodó and Quiroga are important River Plate figures: Rodó was one of the first Latin American intellectuals to speak out against U.S. domination (at the time of the Spanish-American War), and Quiroga is one of our great short-story writers as well as a tortured soul. I was fascinated by Bello (a Venezuelan)

because of my interest in Romanticism. So you see I was a busy man and enjoying it, but that is not the kind of life you lead as an academic in the United States, where you tend to limit yourself to your own area of research.

I can see why you were an ideal candidate for being editor of Mundo Nuevo. How did you happen to get that job?

The Ford Foundation decided it wanted to publish a Latin American literary magazine, and even though I have never driven a car, I still think it was the best of Ford's "better ideas." They approached me, and I suggested that the magazine be published in Paris—my only real demand.

Why Paris?

Do you remember Walter Benjamin's essay "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century"? Well, Paris is really the international capital of Latin America even today. It has lost some ground to New York, but it has the advantage of being a great city where you can still live cheaply. Latin American writers, especially during the sixties, always made their sentimental journey to Paris, and I knew that I could always find talent just outside the door. Besides, if you publish a magazine in any Latin American city, it inevitably takes on a local air. This was just what I wanted to avoid. And the French postal service enabled us to reach the entire New World.

I can remember when you published an article of mine how fantastic it felt to imagine that it would be read all over Latin America. Mundo Nuevo was ubiquitous, at least during your tenure.

And being published in Paris helped us achieve that ubiquity. Our aim was simple: to publish the best literary material we could find and to assemble the best staff we could muster. We intended the magazine to be a guide for anyone seriously interested in following the development of the latest Latin American literature. And not only the prose fiction writers of the Boom: anything that was interesting, from poetry to essay, regardless of political inclination.

The last point would seem to be the main difference between Mundo Nuevo and the Cuban magazine Casa de las Américas.

The magazines could not have been more different. *Mundo Nuevo* set out to introduce the latest literature of Latin America, while *Casa de las Américas* tried to present the unified views of the Latin American left. Which it did until the time of the Padilla affair (1971). Of course, I had left *Mundo Nuevo* long before then—the last issue I directed was the twenty-fifth (July 1968).

Emir, you know that at the time you left Mundo Nuevo there were many rumors circulating about the magazine and the CIA. Could you

clear up the matter of your departure, once and for all?

Let me warn you first: It's a long story. You have to remember that *Mundo Nuevo* was launched at the hottest moment of the Cold War, the period immortalized in the early (and better) James Bond movies. Fidel Castro's success had raised Latin American hopes that the long domination of the United States over our continent had come to an end. At the same time, you have to remember that politics was such a part of Latin American intellectual life that the predominant mode of literary criticism was also political. I personally had very little use for that approach, probably because my own politics allowed me to pursue nonpolitical interpretations of literature.

Just what were your politics?

I was a socialist—and had been one for many years—but a socialist of the English Labour Party type, a socialist in the Scandinavian tradition or in the style of François Mitterand. I had nothing to do with what they call socialism in the Soviet Union. I'll tell you why. My ancestors came from Spain, so I followed the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War quite closely: I was 15 when it broke out, and those three years shook me to my very core. One of the consequences of my vicarious but deeply felt participation in the Civil War was that I always distrusted Stalin and the Stalinists.

Why should that experience, which you shared with so many Latin Americans, have influenced your vision of Fidel Castro?

When Fidel took over, I (along with millions of other Latin Americans) applauded. I even signed an open letter to President Kennedy at the time of the Bay of Pigs fiasco in which we begged him, respectfully but firmly, to leave Cuba alone. That letter was printed in *Marcha* and echoed the doctrine of nonintervention the OAS was trumpeting at the time. Problems arose because of Fidel's devotion to the Soviet cause, which in turn fostered a neo-Stalinism among left-wing intellectuals both in and out of Cuba. I felt I had to take an independent course. By 1963, if I was not anti-Fidel, I was certainly not emphatically pro.

How did your independence affect your editorship of Mundo Nuevo?

When I discussed *Mundo Nuevo* with the Ford Foundation, I demanded and got full editorial control of the magazine. That meant that I had to okay everything, even advertising copy. I conceived *Mundo Nuevo* as an open forum and invited writers of all political persuasions to contribute to it. Only the Cubans refused, in one of their typical collective statements. Before printing a line, I visited all the major Latin American capitals, but for some reason I just could not get a visa to enter Cuba. For all I know my applica-

tion may still be gathering dust in some corner of the Cuban consulate in Paris.

And did this cold-shoulder technique continue even after the magazine came out?

Actually the shoulder became quite hot even before the first issue appeared: The Cubans circulated a manifesto boycotting it. I was ready for that because I had learned years before in Montevideo that sectarians cannot tolerate independent minds. Fortunately, the boycott did not work, and right in the first year I was able to publish very well known left-wing writers such as Pablo Neruda, Nicanor Parra, García Márquez, and Carlos Fuentes. I also published critical analyses of the Vietnam War, of President Johnson's occupation of Santo Domingo, of Latin American guerrilla movements, of military takeovers in Brazil and Argentina, and of the decadence of Spanish culture under Franco. Because I published uncensored material, the magazine was banned in Brazil, Argentina, Spain, and, of course, Cuba. At the same time, *Mundo Nuevo* was barraged by anonymous poison-pen letters from the anti-Castro exiles in Miami.

It's wonderful to be popular. Did you ever try to answer your critics?

Yes. In 1966, I took part (as editor-in-chief of *Mundo Nuevo*) in the Pen Club Congress in New York. I chaired a Latin American round-table discussion in which Neruda, Parra, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, Haroldo de Campos and Victoria Ocampo all spoke. (The text is in the November 1966 issue of *Mundo Nuevo*.) Alejo Carpentier, the Cuban novelist, had promised to attend, but at the very last minute the Cubans boycotted the meeting because they were trying to "isolate" the United States culturally. In any case, any Latin American who visited the United States in the sixties was immediately branded a traitor. In an "Open Letter to Pablo Neruda," dutifully signed by some 30 Cuban writers, Neruda was denounced as a traitor to the cause. Carlos Fuentes and I also caught some flak. So I published an article in the November 1966 issue called "The Pen Club Against the Cold War" in which I attempted to set the record straight. It was useless. The Cubans and their associates just went on with their boycott and called anyone who disagreed with them a traitor.

Were you distressed by these attacks?

I didn't mind them very much because they were so hysterical. Besides, the anti-Castro crowd was just as hysterical. But in 1967, things got really nasty. I was putting the finishing touches on the July issue—we printed two months in advance to compensate for slow mail delivery to and in Latin America—when the *New York Times* (April 27) exposed connections between the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF

and the CIA. Even though at the time *Mundo Nuevo* was launched the CCF had severed its ties with the CIA and was being funded exclusively by the Ford Foundation, *Mundo Nuevo* was attacked because of its association with the Instituto Latinoamericano de Relaciones Internacionales (ILARI). You see, the Ford Foundation money came to us through ILARI and ILARI was linked to the CCF.

What could you do about scotching those rumors?

I immediately wrote an editorial for the July issue in which I denounced the CIA in the strongest possible terms. Here is a quotation from the last two paragraphs:

Mundo Nuevo condemns this action most energetically. It is not only that the CIA has tricked so many independent writers, but that it has tricked precisely those who have shown their independence in the face of fascism and Stalinism in times when it seemed almost impossible to utter a word. People like Silone, Spender, Malraux, or Oppenheimer, who have rejected the seduction of one dogma have been the involuntary victims of the maneuvers of the other.

These revelations are painful, and they merely confirm the obvious: how difficult it is to win and keep your independence. The situation of the independent intellectual in the modern world is fraught with risk and misery. The writer or artist unwilling to say Amen or Heil, to sign where, when, and what he is told, to recite the catechism or the latest party line, is for that very reason exposed to the cruellest hoaxes. On one hand he is the victim of calumnies of the organized reactionaries—McCarthyite or Stalinist; on the other he is tricked by the CIA. Fortunately, while lies or dirty tricks can shape current opinion of a work of art or someone's behavior, this is an ephemeral victory, because calumny cannot alter the quality and independence of the work of art itself. The CIA or the corruptors from other groups can pay independent intellectuals as long as the intellectuals don't know about it. What they can never do is buy them outright.

In the August 1967 issue, I published a 20-page article, "The CIA and the Intellectuals," in which I quoted all the published documents relevant to the case. The article condemns the CIA and exonerates *Mundo Nuevo* of any connection with it.

Any results this time?

My statement did not amuse the Congress for Cultural Freedom or the Instituto Latinoamericano de Relaciones Internacionales. We had a confrontation, ugly words were exchanged (mine, I suppose, the ugliest because I seem to have inherited the Spanish gift for abuse), and it was decided that I was free to ask the Ford Foundation for a direct grant to finance *Mundo Nuevo*. From then on, I decided not to discuss the magazine's future with either of those two

groups. But the Ford Foundation had another "better idea" that ruined the magazine.

What was that?

They were against giving money directly to an individual and suggested that instead of disengaging *Mundo Nuevo* from ILARI, we move the editorship to a Latin American country. I was opposed to the idea for two reasons: first, it was a bit like the cuckolded husband who sells the sofa he finds his wife making love on instead of dealing directly with her—a cosmetic change that didn't alter the basic situation; second, to edit the magazine anywhere in Latin America after the CIA rumors would only have made matters worse. I resigned and severed all connections with ILARI.

Is that when you moved to Yale?

Unfortunately, I could not leave immediately because I had signed a five-year contract to edit the magazine. I had to stay in Paris for a few more months editing the magazine while they searched for a new editor. They found one, and my resignation went through. In the last issue I edited (July 1968), I reproduced an interview I had given to France Presse about my resignation and wrote a farewell editorial in which I declared that I had accomplished my task as editor. Then I went back to Montevideo before going to Yale. ILARI published

Mundo Nuevo in Buenos Aires, where it became just one more anti-Communist journal. It died of exhaustion in the early seventies. Oddly enough, the Cubans stopped attacking it as soon as I left—I guess because they only objected to it as long as it was independent. I took that as a kind of involuntary homage to my editorship.

We sorely miss Mundo Nuevo today. Why is it that despite the fact that there are several high-quality magazines being published in Latin America today there is no Mundo Nuevo?

Conditions have changed so radically that to publish such a magazine today would cost a fortune. We never made any money with *Mundo Nuevo*, but at least we recouped some of our costs through our Latin American subscribers.



We had to charge just to break even, while a government-subsidized magazine like *Casa de las Américas* was distributed free.

Wasn't there some advertising in *Mundo Nuevo*?

Yes, but never enough to make us into a profitable enterprise. The whole thing was really one of the Ford Foundation's great adventures.

The mission of the magazine was to introduce new writers. This would explain why so many Boom novels became best-sellers: You published chapters in *Mundo Nuevo* and whetted the appetites of readers all over the New World. Even García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* made its first public appearance in *Mundo Nuevo*, isn't that so?

Yes, we published two chapters of the novel and Luis Harss's long interview with García Márquez, which later appeared in his book *Into the Mainstream*. After all, at the time very few readers knew anything about García Márquez, except in Mexico. His short stories, *Big Mama's Funeral*, had been published by the University of Vera Cruz press, and two short novels, *Nobody Writes to the Colonel* and *In Evil Hour* were published by a company in Mexico City, Era, which at that time was still quite small. His first books, published in Colombia, were printed in small editions and did not circulate at all. In the second issue of *Mundo Nuevo*, in 1966, I published a chapter of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and in the same year I published Harss's interview. Then I published another chapter. I wanted to prepare the ground for the book, which came out in 1967. Mind you, García Márquez was no special case in this regard, because this was what I had been doing for other writers, Reinaldo Arenas, Manuel Puig, Severo Sarduy, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante among them.

This all stopped after you left *Mundo Nuevo*.

Not exactly. When I came to the United States, I became involved with the Center for Inter-American Relations because of its promotion of Latin American Literature and was the

first editor of *Review*. The magazine was originally a yearly collection of reviews on Latin American writers. I did the first issue; the second was done by Alexander Coleman. By the third issue, *Review* had become more of a magazine and was directed by Ronald Christ. I remained as an advisor for several years. *Review* continued certain aspects of *Mundo Nuevo* but was directed to an English-speaking audience.

Was there any time when you were running *Mundo Nuevo* that you were tempted to become a publisher yourself?

I had toyed with the idea even before I took over *Mundo Nuevo*, way back when I edited *Número*, in Uruguay. At that time we did publish a few books, among them a collection of Onetti's short stories and an essay by Borges on *poesía gauchesca* that later became quite famous. But the very quality of the books we published made me realize just how hard it is to keep a publishing company going. My grandfather had a publishing company and a small newspaper in my hometown, so I guess I was born with printer's ink in my veins, but I never thought of myself as a book publisher.

Instead of talking about imaginary books, let's talk about one of yours. I refer to your book, *The Boom of the Latin American Novel*, published by *Tiempo Nuevo* in Caracas (1972). What made you decide to publish that book at that time?

First I should say that the book began as a series of articles in Octavio Paz's magazine *Plural*. I don't remember now if Octavio asked me to write the articles or if I suggested the idea to him; the point is that it seemed a good moment for a settling of accounts with the Boom. The decline I mentioned before in the Latin American publishing industry as well as the political turmoil that is still with us had already slowed the Boom down. So I decided to take the bull by the horns: I wrote four articles, added a fifth and published the lot as a book. My main point in the book was to demonstrate that the Boom was a publicity venture more than a literary event, but that despite the publicity, the Boom was based on a literary event, which I called the "new novel." I tried to point out that the origins of the new novel could be found in the 1940s, in the essays and stories of Borges and in the novels of Adolfo Bioy Casares, particularly his *The Invention of Morel*, which came out in 1940 with an important preface by Borges. So the book is really more about the new novel than about this publishing phenomenon called the Boom.

And yet the book is dotted with the word boom, with all the meanings it has ever had in English.

One of my attempts at irony. You see, I have never liked the word *boom*, which comes out "boun" when pronounced by Spanish speakers,



so I thought I would be playful and quote choice morsels from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. These jokes invariably backfire: People thought I was defending the Boom when all I wanted to do was bury it. So for some I was eulogizing the Boom, while for myself I was execrating it. This confusion may have arisen from my having published so many Boom writers in *Mundo Nuevo*. You know, I have even been accused of inventing the Boom. No one invented the Boom, and, as far as I know, the first person to use the word in a Latin American context was Luis Harss in an Argentine magazine, *Primera Plana*. I suppose this proves that people in Latin America, and elsewhere, read the titles of books but penetrate no further. My book is, to dispel all doubts, about the new novel.

So you would say that now, in 1984, we are definitely "after the Boom."

Absolutely. The Boom faded quickly and was killed totally by politics, the series of military coups that destroyed the entire Southern Cone—Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile—and put Brazil in jeopardy. But the economic depression created by the 1973 oil crisis left very little money in those economies for the promotion of literature. This depression has engulfed the publishing industries of all the major world economies: publishers are hard-pressed to go on with their work. I was recently in Italy, where I was shocked to learn that Rizzoli has disappeared, and similar things have happened in Spain. I think it is clear now just how much a function of the publishing industry the Boom was and how much of a vacuum the collapse of that industry has created in the literary world.

Do you find that this collapse has changed the way the writers we associate with the Boom—García Márquez, Cortázar or Donoso, for example—write?

Exile is even more important than the decline of the publishing industry as far as a writer's style is concerned. Before, let's say, 1973, if a Latin American writer wanted to go to Europe or the United States, he did so because he was unhappy with his life in his homeland—this would include people like Fernando Alegría, who came to the United States in the forties, Mario Benedetti, who went to Paris in the sixties, or Julio Cortázar, who went to work for UNESCO in 1952. They were not exiles then. But with the collapse of Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil many writers were forced to leave, and they did not have any time to adjust to a new reality. They had to write to live, but for whom were they writing? They could not pretend they were writing for their usual audience.

What about the audience?

A tremendous paradox. The writers escaped, but the audience was kept hostage. Don't

forget, novelists, especially those of the new novel, use the language of their milieu, where they live, the language of their readers. The possibility of dialogue with the reader or critic ceases to exist. You mentioned Donoso before. He left Chile in the sixties, long before Pinochet seized power: First he went to Mexico, then to Spain, all in order to find a wider audience, and then he returned despite the Chilean military regime. García Márquez was exiled for political and economic reasons long before the current crises and now lives in Mexico. Fuentes left Mexico and now lives mainly in the United States. These three writers, Donoso, García Márquez and Fuentes, have had the time to adapt themselves to new situations. Fuentes chose to live in the United States and make regular visits to Mexico. Donoso and García Márquez chose to live in Spanish-speaking countries, which if not their native lands at least speak their native tongue. What about Cabrera Infante living in London? When asked how he maintains contact with Cuban Spanish, he points to his wife and says, "Miriam Gómez is my Cuban language."

But not all the writers of the new novel use the spoken language.

Quite right. García Márquez for example writes only about the past in a language that is quite artificial and that has grown even more artificial over the years. Donoso is a different case: His characters speak the language of Chile, and by going back he has recovered that Chilean language. The really dramatic case is Manuel Puig. He had to leave Argentina because of the Peronists: He went to Mexico, but couldn't work there, then to New York, where he again couldn't work, and then on to Rio de Janeiro, where he lives today. But he is far from his native soil. His Spanish has become quite artificial, which is not bad in literature, but it has meant quite a change for a writer who always reproduced the way people spoke in Argentina.

So the difference between the expatriate and the exile is critical in the case of the writers of the new novel.

Absolutely. I remember when I was a young man in Uruguay, talking to the Spaniards who were exiles from Franco's Spain. They were always complaining: The food was different, the wine, the air—everything. I always thought they were complaining too much. Now I see that what they were missing was something undefinable, something the prose writer in particular needs.

Emir, given the hideous reality of exile, the economic collapse of Latin America we see written up every day in the newspaper, is there any reason why we should be optimistic about the future of Latin American culture?

Well, cultures are very sturdy. Things will

change no doubt, but unless we are all wiped out by the bomb, cultures will survive. But what is disappearing rapidly is the kind of literature we got used to with the new novel. That writing was possible because there was an understanding, a kind of contract, between writers, readers and critics. This invisible contract allowed writers to go as far as they liked with their writing. Even though that community, which came into existence during the forties, was small compared to the total population, it was quite strong. And since that readership existed throughout Latin America, it provided an audience which for ten years justified a most complex literature. But with the exile of writers and the eradication of some cultures by military coups, the kind of writing we associate with the new novel is simply no

longer possible. This does not mean we won't have either literature or culture but that it will be different.

So the Boom was viable as a business venture because there existed in Latin America a highly sophisticated group of writers and a highly sophisticated readership.

And the existence of that community is at risk in many countries. In Argentina and Brazil it's coming back; in Mexico it's strong; but in Uruguay or Chile, it's gone. When the military men dismantled the university system, they also dismantled the culture. It happened in Cuba too, let's not be naive. Education there has been redirected to

the elementary level, while the higher levels have been sacrificed to propaganda.

Not a very encouraging picture. But what about you, Emir? Despite the fact that you are cut off from Latin American culture as a day-to-day experience, do you think you have a future as an active critic of Latin American culture?

I'm not as active as I used to be in my Montevideo or *Mundo Nuevo* days because I don't have a place where I can publish regularly. I try to keep up-to-date, but over the last eight or so years I have been writing more books and devoting more time to lecturing or teaching. One thing I have done with regard to Latin American culture is an anthology I published with Knopf. I tried to make it more than a collection of excerpts, because I wanted to articulate a vision of

Latin American literature. I present it as an ongoing enterprise instead of a collection of museum pieces. I also include Brazilian literature because I want to show Latin American culture as a diversity and not as a homogeneous structure.

The anthology seems like the concrete reflection of a theory. Are you going to publish a theory of Latin American culture?

Yes, that is a project I certainly have in mind. It wouldn't be a history but a critical essay on Latin American culture as a plurality. I want to show not only the divergency between nations but also within nations—elite versus popular culture, the culture of power versus the culture of the oppressed. Culture as a patchwork quilt and not a seamless cloth.

What about your work as a biographer? After all, you have written a considerable number of biographies, which in itself is unusual because Latin America, like Spain, does not have a great tradition in biography.

I have always been fascinated by biography—perhaps because as a boy I was an avid student both of geography and history. I must know the circumstances in which a literary work was produced: The text always leads me back to the author and his milieu. I can't say I set out to write a series of biographies—I'm not Lytton Strachey, just one of his admirers. I wrote on Rodó first because I wanted to provide a detailed biographical sketch for the edition of his works that I edited. I worked on Andrés Bello in order to trace the process by which Romanticism came into Spanish America in the nineteenth century, research I had begun at Cambridge University in the early fifties. I wrote about Horacio Quiroga to see if there was a relationship between his works and his tormented life. In the case of Neruda, I did not set out to write a biography. I was asked to write about his poetry, but I found as I studied it carefully that it was deeply autobiographical. The Borges biography was again a different matter. I had written extensively on his work before I came to the United States, but I had never written on his life as such. As I wrote Borges's literary biography I realized there is something novelistic in the composition of a biography—that we biographers compete with fiction writers. Borges became my character, almost my creation.

Who's next?

I would like to write a biography of Octavio Paz, but even though I have written quite a bit on him already I still look on the project with fear and trembling because of the complexity of Octavio's mind. In any case, I look on my own career as an unfinished project: It has taken on so many twists and turns since my birth in the border town of Melo that I sometimes think of myself as a bizarre combination of spectator and actor looking at a play in which I am simultaneously a performer and a critic.



illustrations by Liliana Porter