

# A conversation with Borges

by Ana Cara-Walker

Unencumbered by blindness,  
legendary Argentinian can  
see fireplace flames  
and he has insatiable  
curiosity about  
many, many other things

Jorge Luis Borges has said: "An old man has a way of rambling on and on, but now I'm coming to the part I want you to hear." Indeed, the 84-year-old living legend from Argentina had the Oberlin community attentively listening. For two days last May, Oberlin College hosted Borges and his secretary, co-worker and companion, Maria Kodama.

His visit, sponsored by the office of the dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, the department of Romance languages, the committee on comparative literature, the Latin American studies committee, the Third World studies committee, the English department and the Moors Lecture Fund, was one of many appearances Borges made last spring after attending a symposium in his honor held at Dickinson College in April. Entitled "Borges, the Poet," the symposium brought together Borges scholars from throughout the country and from various parts of the world to reflect on his poetry. Borges addressed the Dickinson audience on three consecutive nights, speaking on such topics as the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Hispanic literature, English and North American literature. Maria Kodama, of Argentine/Japanese background herself, spoke on "Oriental Influence in Borges' Poetry: The Nature of the Haiku and Western Literature."

Oberlin was among Borges' last stops before returning to his native Buenos Aires. Prior to his arrival on campus, he had been the guest of Pierre Trudeau in Canada. Leaning on Kodama's arm, he arrived at Hopkins Airport—one more passenger. An avid traveler, he appears tireless and unencumbered by his blindness. Immediately, he begins asking questions; he wants to know about his

surroundings, about its history, its geography, its legends. He is curious about Ohio and insists on "seeing" Lake Erie. Are there mountains or plains? Were there Indians once here? What kind of animals inhabit these parts? What color is the water?

Upon hearing that tornadoes are not uncommon in this region he wanted to learn more, listening quietly until a word or an image challenged his imagination. When told that the sound of a tornado is like that of an oncoming train, that the sky turns a milky green and that small communities are sometimes entirely devastated, he sat back, reflecting. Quietly he repeated: "milky green . . . how uncanny"—a private vision of the sky taking over.

There is one thing, however, that the blind Borges can see: fire. Quietly greeted upon his arrival to Oberlin on the unusually chilly night of May 5, he sat next to a fireplace staring into the flames. "It is one of the few things I can still see," he said. Because of the movement? "Because of the light," his mind soon lost in myths and musings about fire: the etymology of "bonfire," the various names for Thor . . .

His curiosity is insatiable; his questions sometimes testing. He wants to know what states border on Ohio, he asks for the dates of wars and he expects critical assessments and opinions on a range of writers. Yet, when asked about the secrets of his own work he turns wry, the charm of his humor disarming any questioner. During a meal he was asked why he had picked the title "Museum" for one of his pieces included in *Dream-tigers*. Looking up, like a child who has just been naughty but clever, he responded, "You pays your money, you takes your choice."

Other times his answers are more earnest, though never predictable. He was asked at a press conference held at the Oberlin Inn before his noon appearance at First Church: "If you could take only three books with you to, say, a desert island, which would they be?" He closed his eyes and searched for the answer as if scanning the shelves of a private library. "Ah!" he opened them again, "you mean volumes, not books."



The writer (left) with Borges and Kodama.

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*He closed his eyes and searched for the answer as if scanning the shelves of a private library. "Ah!" he opened them again. Finally the answer came.*

Otherwise, I would take the *Encyclopedia Britannica*." His careful consideration did not lack humor: "I don't suppose a telephone book would do." Finally, the answer came: Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* and—"since I'm in America"—Charles and Mary Beard's *A New American History*.

Similarly, he was in complete command at the question and answer periods during his two Oberlin appearances. At the first session, entitled "A Conversation with Borges," he entertained a large, captivated audience, answering questions about his life and work. For those familiar with Borges, his concise, almost learned, comments did not come as a surprise. "Why the recurrent labyrinth in your work?" he was asked from the audience. "Because I am always lost," came the answer. "Why are your characters primarily male?" someone inquired. "I am always thinking of women, so I reserve men for my stories."

Less concise remarks were drawn from Borges by Assistant Prof. of English Joaquín Martínez-Pizarro, who together with Dan Lloyd, Oberlin guest alumnus and professor of philosophy at the University of California at Santa Barbara, had opened the dialogue before turning it to the audience. Martínez-Pizarro, a medievalist himself, wanted to know how the Argentine writer had become interested in Old English. Borges briefly recalled how he had come to learn it, citing the texts he had used. Not quite ready to dismiss the subject, however, he turned to his questioner: "How would you pronounce *yfete* (seagull)?" "Do you pronounce the first sound of *ceald* (cold) as a "k" or a "ch"?"

Afraid of losing the audience, Martínez-Pizarro touched on another favorite but seldom mentioned interest of Borges': his "detective" stories. "Does a crime always have to be a murder, say, rather than a robbery?" he asked. The answer was yes, "the bloodier the better." "Dreorig," Borges asserted, again returning to Old English and delighting in etymologies.

The second day Borges appeared as the guest speaker for Oberlin's annual Comparative Literature Conference. Accompanied by a panel that included Professor of English David Young, Professor of German Peter Spycher and Oberlin student Jessica Brown (winner of the Comparative Literature Prize for her translation of Borges' "The Circular Ruins"), Borges answered questions on "The Art of Translation." Again, the audience was enchanted as he spoke about language and literature, citing from his favorite translations. The reaction to almost every remark was applause and excited chatter. A roar of surprised laughter followed a most candid response. Having spoken primarily about moving from one language to another, he was asked to comment on the "translation" of words to music, as in opera. His answer was direct, revealing his clearly defined tastes but betraying his unawareness of Oberlin's musical sensibilities: "I hate opera," he announced.

While Borges speaks, María Kodama quietly fades into the audience. Her role, however, is far from that of a passive companion. She is herself a published author of short stories and articles of lit-

erary criticism. She has collaborated with Borges on various books: *Breve Antología Anglosajona* (1982), *Cien Dísticos de Angelus Silesius* (1982), the translation *La Gylfaginning* (forthcoming), and the translation *El Libro de Almohada de Sei-Shonagon* (forthcoming), which includes a preliminary study by Kodama and a prologue by Borges. Also one of their present projects is a book about their travels and experiences. Among the items to be included in the latter are impressions of a series of Frank Lloyd Wright houses they have seen. They felt privileged to visit Oberlin's Wright designed home of Ellen Johnson '33, emerita professor of art and honorary curator of modern art.

Unable to see the view of the orchard from Miss Johnson's living room, Borges could appreciate its beauty and calm as well as other details of the house through the precise and sensitive descriptions whispered by María Kodama. Her ability to sum up his surroundings with an admirable economy of language is clearly indispensable to Borges. Yet he will not limit himself simply to secondary impressions. Fascinated by the idea of Miss Johnson's transparent, inflatable arm chair, he caressed every angle of it guided by Kodama's hand. Although advised not to sit in it, lest he should slip or have difficulty getting up, he insisted—gingerly dropping himself on the seat, leaning back, making himself comfortable.

But Borges does not sit still long. A tireless traveler, he continues to explore the world and to discover new territories in his fiction. His style, he has noted, is always evolving, becoming ever more simplified. His last book of poems, *La Cifra* (dedicated to María Kodama), attests to this ultimate refinement. No doubt Jorge Luis Borges is a gifted master. Speaking on the act of creating, he says: "Suddenly I feel something is about to happen. Then I sit back and get passive and something is given to me. I receive a beginning and an end." With meticulous art, he crafts the middle, giving unity to the whole. "When I write," he continues, "I forget my own prejudices, my own opinions. The whole world comes to me." We are fortunate, indeed, that last May Borges came to us.