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AND ALASTAIR REID, EDS.

*Borges A Reader: A Selection from
the Writings of Jorge Luis Borges*
New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981.
Pp. 369

I have a newspaper in my hands in which a reviewer "corrects" the title of this volume, making it *Borges: A Reader*. The one given on the title page, without semicolon—*Borges A Reader*—is, I daresay, the brainchild of Emir Rodríguez Monegal, who so famously telescoped the names of Borges and his collaborator Bioy into "Biorges." The word-play is appropriate, because the primary aim of this collection is to show Borges as the reader inside the writer—that is, as a writer who builds the reader's collaboration or "re-creation" into the work.

Probably there are no two men who know Borges and his work better than Rodríguez Monegal and Reid. Monegal has been writing about Borges's literature for at least thirty-five years and published his biography in 1978 (*Borges: A Literary Biography*, Dutton); Reid, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, is eminent among translators and interpreters of Borges's poetry. In this volume of 118 poems, essays, and stories, the editors have applied Borges's own principle of *ex ungue leonem*, giving us the claws from which to infer the lion. As they say in the Introduction, "almost any text of his (like the bone an archaeologist may find) can be used to reconstruct the whole body of his work." Keeping this in mind, they have attempted, despite the inevitable disruption of unity that is implied by selection, "to compile an anthology which covers virtually his entire production." They have included little-known as well as famous texts, a number of items not translated before, and some never before collected in a book.

Selections are grouped according to a schema that helps the reader to follow an elusive inner principle but also to know Borges chronologically. Within main divisions which represent aspects of a unified total work ("The Writer," "The Dictator," and "A Brief Return to Realism"), subdivisions keep chronology in mind ("The Young Poet's Voice," "Rediscovering Fiction," and "The Old Poet's Voice"). The appendices include ample notes on each

of the selections included, putting each into a biographical context and a literary perspective, and adding condensed but penetrating critical commentary.

In making their selection the editors have indeed captured something essential—an overview of Borges that is also an inside look at Borges and ourselves as readers. To see Borges as a writer who reads with us as he writes—who puts us into the work—is to see the Borges whose literature gets inside of us without our knowing how, as if we had collaborated with him in the writing and had forgotten it. We rediscover this sensation even in pieces written by Borges in collaboration with Adolfo Bioy Casares—as H. Bustos Domecq—whose style and conception often seem very distant from Borges's own. The editors, with commendable perception, have included a good example: "A Celebration of the Monster" (1947), a bitter parody of the Perón regime. Because of the underlying principle of selection, this volume is perhaps the most valuable anthology of Borges's work that has appeared to date.

The difficult art of translation is honored in this book as much as the work of Borges. Twenty-one of the translators who have been most successful in putting Borges into English are represented. No doubt they have been successful because they have realized that the essence of Borges is not to be found in the lexical adroitness and tricks of syntax for which he is famous, but in his masterful use of image and symbol in an inconspicuous way; he jerks them out of the reader's common store, and even in translation they tend to remain vital. The editors, as they point out, have taken the best available English versions or have produced new ones, and most of the familiar names are there: Reid himself, Belitt, di Giovanni, Simms, Fitts, Hollander. . . . Regrettable omissions are Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland, who translated *El hacedor* (*Dreamtigers*, 1964). For Borges, the editors observe, reading is an act of translation; by inversion, translating is an act of reading, and the translators included in this book have read very well indeed.

When a writer appears in the world, criticism and interpretation of his work begin at a plodding pace, labor into acceleration, and finally break into a run. With this book, which comes in the wake of Monegal's biography, we have perhaps entered the running stage. We have long

cherished Borges for his complexity and elusive depth; and now, though we may not yet comprehend him totally, we are getting a far better grasp of that central vision of his that makes his literature tick—or rather, that makes us vibrate to his rhythms. Reid and Monegal have made a fine contribution to this end.

Carter Wheelock

BONNIE J. BARTHOLD
Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. Pp. 209. \$17.50

Professor Barthold's book is less a scholarly study than a ritual endorsement of Black Zionism. Its informing myth is the black diaspora which scattered the children of Mother Africa throughout the New World, fragmenting consciousness and destroying the continuity of time. Barthold proposes to reverse the process of cultural dispersion by inventing a unified field theory of black fiction. Her unifying device is the concept of black time.

What is the nature of this racial time, which will serve as a spiritual basis for the in-gathering of the exiles? How does it differ from the Western variety? It is cyclical rather than linear, mythic rather than historical, sacred rather than profane. Rooted in ancient religious practices, this uniquely African perception of time survived the middle passage and resisted all subsequent efforts at Westernization. Elements of sacred time will thus be found in all contemporary black fiction, whether its proximate source is Africa, the Caribbean, or the United States.

In support of her thesis, Barthold leans rather injudiciously on Richard Wright, quoting him to the effect that time is perceived differently in a traditional, agrarian order and a highly industrialized society. But Wright approached these matters in historical, not racial terms, and would have been appalled by the notion of "black"

time. His thinking on the subject derived from Robert Redfield's classic study, *Tepoztlán*, which contrasts the time-sense of Mexican villagers with that of former peasants who have migrated to Mexico City. These were of course Indians, and not the sons of Mother Africa.

Wherein does the *blackness* of mythic time consist? "Central to the themes that unite American, Caribbean, and African fiction," Barthold claims, "is the black writer's focus on the chaos of time" (p. 31). But in this respect black authors are by no means unique. What is the fiction of Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and William Faulkner all about, if not the chaos of history and the reconstitution of mythic time? Nowhere is the ethnocentric bias of this study more apparent than in the author's deafening silence on the modernist movement.

Even on its own terms, the study is parochial. For the author's purpose is "to see black fiction whole, as a phenomenon that transcends geographic and national boundaries . . ." (p. 197). But not, apparently, linguistic boundaries. Barthold's exclusive concern is with black authors who write in English. Where are the black Francophones, or the black Hispanics? Are not they too the sons and daughters of Mother Africa? What sort of Pan-Africanism restricts its purview to Anglophones alone, or tolerates artificial divisions based on the language compartments of the white oppressor?

To summarize so far: *pre-industrial time* most assuredly exists, and many blacks of many nations undoubtedly move to its rhythms. So do brown, beige, and white populations who have never, or only minimally been industrialized. In the fiction of our century many writers, both black and white, have rebelled against the tyranny of the machine by striving to reconstitute a mythic time. But to call these essentially archaic modes of temporal perception *black time* is quite unwarranted.

When you bone a fish, you have something left to eat. But after removing the backbone of this study—the dubious notion of black time—what remains is the quality of Barthold's criticism. Unfortunately, it is not very high in protein. For the value of a work of fiction seems to depend on its compatibility with her own ideology. When she discusses Toni Mor-