

“BORGES Y YO” and STEVE MURRAY



Steve Murray, educator, husband, father Head Master of The Lawrenceville School

INTRODUCTION

I always have felt a great curiosity for the intriguing lives of others – maybe that was the reason for me becoming a teacher of Spanish language and literature. During the last few years, I have been thinking on interviewing some famous characters who, in spite of their mayor or minor popularity, intrigue me very deeply. The first of them, from the day I read “Borges and I” and after 40 years of studying him, enjoying his writings, and sharing that privilege with my students, was Borges. The second, Gabriel García Márquez. Others on my list are: Noam Chomsky, Javier Bardem, Jimmy Carter, Maria Kodama, Steve Murray, Meryl Streep, José Tomás, Toni Morrison, Martha Ryan, Stathis Giallelis, John Waters, Jaime Botín, Oliver Stone, Joaquín Sabina, Taiye Salasi, Miguel Angel Martín Delgado, Christine Hallquist, Isabel Allende and some other famous but unknown individuals. I believe that they have been disfigured by fame, that is why I would try to talk to each one of them about any imaginable theme ... **not related with their professions, most of the times the cause of their deceiving fame.** I would ask my questions (most of them

related with “Borges and I”) to Meryl, Javier and Oliver ignoring films, Oscars, and other irrelevant topics; to Jose without bulls; to John without his thin mustache behind which he could hide; to Stathis without AMERICA, AMERICA, to Miguel Angel without the Royal Academy of Sciences... I would love to be able to talk to all of them as I would have done with Borges, García Márquez and Toni Morrison: speaking with them ignoring the writers (with Borges it would have been almost impossible, I admit), trying to learn something else about those special human beings disfigured and almost annulled by fame. The title of my next interview is going to be **“BORGES AND I” AND STEVE MURRAY**, God willing.

José L Martí

“Borges and I”

By Jorge Luis Borges

The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. I walk through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him. Little by little, I am giving

over everything to him, though I am quite aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things.

Spinoza knew that all things long to persist in their being; the stone eternally wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger. I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar. Years ago, I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. Thus, my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.

I do not know which of us has written this page.

Jorge Luis Borges,

Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings, New York: New Directions, 1964,

pp. 246-47.

“BORGES AND I” AND HEAD MASTER MURRAY

Jose L Martí — Good morning, Head Master Murray. Let’s interfere in “Borges and I” and you right away. In my classes, when we were studying his short masterpiece —trying to help my students to distinguish between the apparent narrator in the first person and Borges the writer — I called the former Jorge Luis. If you allow me to do the same thing, from now on I’ll call you Steve and **the other** Head Master Murray.

Steve —Very good. Absolutely.

J.L.M. — Then, let’s begin. Borges starts his perfect essay? (I believe he called it a “poem”) emphasizing the difference between his public persona, imagined by his readers, — limited by its original nature because it is based in an accumulation of different interpretations — and his inner self, the one that we all hold inside. The narrator of “Borges and I” says: “The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to.” In your case, who is the one more things happen to, you or Head Master Murray?

Steve —I am frequently struck as I am in this position, as I play the role of Head Master, that I am defined by that role. I have slowly come to terms with this. I used to take things more personally in my role. I now understand that people have needs from the position, from the Head Master, and part of my job is to try to meet those needs. But I am in a role and I am usually not Steve. I am typically the Head Master. People want me to stay in that role. I would say that more often things are happening to the Head Master and less frequently happening to Steve.

J.L.M. — According to “Borges and I”, Jorge Luis walks “through the streets of Buenos Aires and stops for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate”, and about the other, about Borges, he has “news from the mail and sees his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary”. When you walk alone through New York or any other place, what do you like to do?

Steve — Because I am frequently in a public position, if I am in New York, (for example) or Paris, or Madrid (I was recently in Madrid), I like to be anonymous so I can walk and I don't have to play a role...I just am a citizen and I like that feeling. Separately from that, or in addition to that, I am often struck that in a city, even though it could be very crowded, it is very depersonalized and disconnected... we're very atomized and we are moving in our own little world, so I do enjoy making small connections with people; like touching someone else's humanity, if you know what I mean. When I was much younger, in Paris, I developed a kind of superstition: If I saw a musician in the metro, or a street performance, I always gave them some money. They were human beings living on the margins, and I wanted to acknowledge their humanity. I felt it was bad luck not to offer something. In a similar way, if I see a homeless person, I like to have some dollar bills to make a tangible connection. Not that that's the best solution (probably better that I give my money to a homeless shelter, or something) but I want to acknowledge that person's existence when I walk by ... because we live very separate lives and we aren't connected. I like to do that when I am in the city.

J.L.M.— Who receives more mail (here we can include electronic mail), you or Head Master Murray?

Steve — Head Master Murray (laughing)

J.L.M. — Do you have somebody who helps you to scrutinize that mail? Who answers more mail, you or **the other**?

Steve — Actually, on that question, I would say I try to answer **together**. I try not to just be Head Master Murray when I answer emails. I try to have it be my own voice as well. And I write from my heart. I try to.

J. L. M. — Among his personal preferences, Borges' inner self, Jorge Luis, says that he likes "hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; **the other** shares these preferences, but in a vein way that turns them into attributes of an actor". Would you mind sharing with us which are your personal preferences?

Steve. — I share that with Borges...I love maps. I love coffee. I would say about my personal preferences: I love to exercise because I can think freely. When I go running my mind can wander and I think the exercise helps that happen. That's a state that I enjoy. The other preference, where I'm also very much in touch with myself is on the water, in a boat. I like to do almost any kind of activity on the water partly because the water is always changing. It's a landscape... or perhaps a waterscape but it shifts and evolves constantly. One hour to the next, the aspect of the water can totally change. If the tide shifts, if the current shifts, if the winds shift a little bit (increase or decrease), the sky color changes because clouds come in, the water can be completely different and you can't imagine it's the same body of water. I think that's mesmerizing. Just like with exercise, it's a way to kind of lose myself and just let my mind wander freely. Time spent on the water I find very soothing and very contemplative.

(Depending on the answer to this question, add other possibilities)

Preferences

1. Film. 2. TV program. 3. Movie director. 4. Actress. 5. Actor. 6. Author. 7. Novel. 8. Play. 9. Poem.
10. Music, etc.

Steve — I have several favorite films. Probably my all time favorite movie is “Les Quatre Cents Coups” (“The 400 Blows”) by Truffaut. Love that movie.

One of my favorite movie directors is probably Truffaut but also a little bit later than Truffaut a French film director, Jean-Jacque Beineix. He made “Diva”. “Diva” was a film from the 70’s. A beautiful film- visually very beautiful film.

My favorite actress might be Jeanne Moreau. The French actress, I like her very much.

For actors, I love Paul Newman. One of my favorite American movies is Paul Newman’s “Cool Hand Luke” from the 1960’s. It’s a great movie.

For authors, I love Samuel Beckett, “Waiting for Godot”. Beckett helps us understand man’s condition in the 20th century

I love Victor Hugo, of course. He is brilliant.

I love Tolkien, J.R.R. Tolkien, “The lord of the Rings”. It’s a novel about a journey, about faith, about friendship.

For novels: I have many favorite novels. I think one of the most important novels of the 20th century is “Night” by Elie Wiesel. If you say every Lawrentian should read Borges, I would say also every Lawrentian should read “Night” by Elie Wiesel. Auschwitz. How can we love humanity and also explain Auschwitz? I think that’s a very important question.

My favorite play? Probably Shakespeare's "King Lear". Shakespeare strips away the layers to see the essence of a man.

I also love Eugene O'Neill, American playwright, "Long Day's Journey Into Night" – dark, bleak story of family disfunction.

I love Robert Frost and one of my favorite Robert Frost poem's is "The Death of a Hired Man". It's a long poem. It's a beautiful poem.

I'll finish with music. I love "Claire de Lune" by Debussy. Haunting and beautiful.

J.L.M. — Name a politician that intrigues you positive or negatively. Why?

Steve - I think the sad thing about politics today is that we know so much about politicians. I want to admire them but all of the imperfections come out. So, it can be difficult to be inspired by a politician sometimes.

I think John McCain intrigues me. I don't agree with him on every political issue but I think he's a man of great integrity and great heroism. He was a prisoner in Vietnam and he refused to leave prison, he refused to use his family connections to be released until all the prisoners who got there before him first were released. He would not go to the head of the line and I think that story about him is remarkable. And, of course, Obama. Obama inspires me.

J.L.M. — Now, upon talking about your preferences, knowing that others are going to read what you say, do you do it "in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor"? In other words, who is talking, you or Head Master Murray?

Steve - Well, that's a great question because asking the question and knowing people were going to read it makes me think that I am answering it as Head Master Murray because it's my public persona. On the other hand, this whole interview is intriguing to me because I think you are trying

to identify my personal self as well, and let that come through... mainly. That's why I'm intrigued. It's an opportunity for me to be human.

There's a book by Louis Auchincloss called "The Rector of Justin". It's about a Headmaster (they call him the Rector). It's written in the 1950's and throughout the entire book you rarely get the perspective of the Headmaster. You read letters that are written to him. You read journal entries about him. You read other kinds of correspondence but it is always what people around him are projecting upon him. That's the point of the book - his own self is rarely recognized. It's all the needs that people have; his children, his spouse, his Board of Trustees, all the people in his orbit. I am intrigued by the book because I understand that very well. While I think, in a way, it's hard for me not to answer the **question about preferences** "in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor", I hope that we are successful and the other side of me comes through. I hope.

J.L.M. — Are there some things that Head Master Murray loves but you not so much?

Steve — I would say public speaking. I am actually a rather private person and somewhat introverted but as Head Master I don't play that role, and it has taken time for me to be comfortable speaking in public. I've learned to step into the persona. I'm always a little bit nervous before I speak but that is normal. When I am feeling like the Head Master, I feel I can get up and do it. I play a role.

J.L.M. — Because I can tell that you have a good sense of humor, I am going to ask you two totally different questions: who tells more jokes, you or Head Master Murray?

Steve — (Chuckling) I would say that I tell more jokes...mostly to my children.

J.L.M. — In my introduction, I say that I would ask questions to John Waters "without his thin

mustache behind which he could hide". Are you (Steve or Head Master Murray) hiding any thing behind your mustache?

Steve — Of course I am. It is part of the persona, part of the mask I wear. It gives me a hint of swagger that I otherwise do not have naturally.

J.L.M. — In other text I have read —according with my unreliable memory—, someone says that when Borges was a boy, going for a walk with his father through Buenos Aires, they stop in front of three contiguous buildings. On the first one, the Argentinian flag waved. The next one was a church, and the third, a butcher's shop. It looks like his father told him: "Pay attention to those three things because in a not too distant future, the three of them will no longer exist". What is your opinion about that?

Steve — **No estoy de acuerdo (en español!!)** I don't think I agree. I think the butcher shop yes, it is finished. Apparently, we will soon be able to order from Amazon. Apparently... so I think the butcher shop, sadly, will disappear.

The Church and the flag, on the one hand...I think that organized religion is something of an anachronism, in a way. I think the organized religion of today came to be in the distant past and they have not adapted well to modern life and that's true, except I think that people will have a desperate need for organized religion so I don't think we will abandon that easily. The flag and nationalism I think in a similar way. We are very tribal. We like to feel connected, we want affiliations and I think nationalism and the idea of "loyalty to a flag" is not likely to disappear. Countries will come and go but the idea will persist. Perhaps the danger is that the blind, evangelical religion will sweep over us. Weak people prefer not to think. That, or hyper-nationalism, this blind devotion to the flag: equally dangerous.

J.L.M. — Lets go back to “Borges and I”. The narrator tells us: “I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is not effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him”

Do you believe that your professional achievements, motive of your success, justifies your life?

Steve — I love Borges’ comment. Frequently we look at authors and sometimes we think it is their vanity that causes them to write because they want to be immortal and I think what Borges is saying is the writing that is produced does not make him immortal. The words may last and perhaps they can serve people but that does not make him immortal.

He separates himself from his writing. The writing is independent. I think that’s a very humble thing to say...and realistic. I hope I have a similar humility. I love what I do. I love the school. I think what we do here is fundamentally important. I think we shape young people in very positive ways and send them out into the world. That is meaningful to me, but I don’t think of my own legacy as important. I hope this school is a better place when I leave than when I found it because I believe in the school not because I want to have a legacy.

J.L.M. —Are you, little by little, as Jorge Luis seems to be doing with Borges, giving everything to Head Master Murray, or is there something that you never will cede?

Steve — I think there are things I will never cede. In other words, it is a consuming job. It consumes me. If my wife were here, she would say, “yes, it consumes you”, but there are certain things that are very important to me, like my relationship with my wife. That is more important than anything to me and I look past my job sometimes and think about life after working here and time

I can spend with her and that's more important and that will always be separate. That will always be something private for me.

J.L.M. — The narrator continues talking:

“Spinoza knew that all things long to persist in their being; the stone eternally wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger. I shall remain in Borges, not in my self (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar ... [and] my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him”.

Here, Jorge Luis seems to indicate that he doesn't believe in another life and he thinks that his possible survival is limited by the few things that Borges' followers will remember.

What do you think is going to happen after Steve and Head Master Murray's death?

Steve — I do think people live on in our hearts and in our memories. I think people do that as a way of thinking about the afterlife. I don't have a strictly Christian belief in the afterlife at all but nor do I have an atheist view of nothingness and oblivion. I think both are a form of arrogance. One could call it faith, and I respect someone's faith that is at the basis of their beliefs, but I am suspicious of the kind of certainty that can come with either “I know it doesn't exist” or “I absolutely know it does exist” ... I believe they are things I can't know or don't know and so I am intrigued. I have a hard time believing that the energy of human life evaporates into nothingness, into the ether. That doesn't make sense to me. I think there is a kind of beauty and mystery to our whole existence that is intriguing to me so I don't know how to conceive of God exactly but I have a hard time believing that God is absent from the universe. The whole world is too beautiful and too well done. Much of it is unknowable but I think there are many things I can't yet know and I will discover when I die.

J.L.M. — Borges starts his sonnet “Remorse” with these two stanzas:

I have committed the worst of sins
One can commit. I have not been
Happy. Let the glaciers of oblivion
Take and engulf me, mercilessly.

My parents bore me for the risky
And the beautiful game of life,
For earth, water, air and fire.
I failed them, I was not happy.

Which is for you “the worst of sins one can commit”?

Steve— I would say cruelty is one. (I’ll give you two) ... To knowingly inflict pain on someone else. I’ve always hated bullies. I’ve always hated people who pick on the vulnerable. Cruelty repels me. I think another one, maybe close to what Borges is saying, is failure to have an optimistic view of the world. I think we run into great difficulty when we fail to embrace optimism. Which is not to say with blind faith that things will always get better, but it is to embrace the hope that things can get better if we are willing to work at it. Failing to do this is a sin.

J.L.M — Borges confesses that he has committed the worst of sins a man can commit, and for the worst of sins, he demands the worst of punishments for a writer: “Let the glaciers of oblivion take and engulf me, mercilessly”.

What would be the worst of the punishments for those guilty of the sin that you have just mentioned?

Steve — Solitude. To be condemned to solitude for betraying a weaker person or failing to work to make the world a better place. Unforgiveable.

J.L.M. — Who plays better “the risky and beautiful game of life, you or Head Master Murray?

Well, the Head Master is certainly playing the game. I would say personally, I think I am all in with life. I have no regrets. I work hard. I love my wife. We have five children. We are blessed. Any misfortunes that befall us are part of life and I accept the risk and the misfortunes that come...try to anyway. So, I think as Head Master I am playing the game, that’s kind of his role - a different game.

J.L.M — In the interview I had with Miguel Angel Martín-Delgado (member of the Spanish Royal Academy of Sciences; Professor of Theoretical Physics at the Complutense University of Madrid; Nobel Price Correspondent in Physics...) upon touching slightly the always slippery and elusive theme of happiness, he said that, for him, “happiness consists in having problems... having problems and resolving them. There are people who think that being happy consists in not having any kind of problems. But that doesn’t lead to happiness but to death in life. Happiness is something dynamic, not static. When one resolves a problem, he feels happiness. Until then, he is unhappy. It is a permanent process of tension and distension ... as music is”.

How would you define happiness?

Steve — Happiness for me is the feeling that I made the most of this opportunity on Earth, that I did not waste a second, that someone is better off because I was here.

J.L.M. — This is the last line of “Borges and I”:

“I do not know which of us has written this page”.

Who do you think wrote it, Jorge Luis or Borges?

Steve — I think Jorge Luis, in a way, wrote it because he separates himself out from Borges in order to write it. He makes the distinction. On the other hand, if he is writing it is because it's a few pages (quarter of a page) that will survive (appealing to his vanity), perhaps it's the vanity of the writer who is writing it. I think Jorge Luis wrote it because ultimately in separating himself, his inner self, from the external Borges (the writer), he is trying to dismantle the vanity of a writer. Jorge Luis. (Yo creo eso)

J.L.M. If you were in my position, do you have someone that you would like to interview?

Steve — Jean Valjean from Hugo's Le Miserables.

J.L.M. — Now, finally, we are going to abandon Borges.

When you go to a Spanish restaurant to share conversation, food and sangria with friends related with The Lawrenceville School, who enjoys it more, Steve or Head Master Murray?

Steve — Steve.

J.L.M.— Many thanks for your patience and kindness and for sharing your ideas with all of us.

Final note for the possible readers of this interview: I would recommend that you reread the questions and try to answer them yourselves. Several people that were interviewed told me that while reflecting on their answers, they came across many situations and ideas that they had not considered or thought about in a long time...but right away it came to my memory what Antonio Machado had said to us: “I give advise because I am an old man, never follow my advise”.

(I warn you that if you don't follow my advise **you are following my advise**. So, think about it and do as you wish.)