THE PUTERBAUGH CONFERENCES

In Latin America and Europe, issues of universal concern are being defined by the intellectuals, yet in the United States, their names are virtually unknown—except at the University of Oklahoma.

By WILLIAM RIGGAN

Photographs courtesy of World Literature Today

"Most Americans neither know nor care to know too much about Latin America," reads the first paragraph in Time's recent lengthy essay "Where the Fiction Is Fantástica." In a similar piece a week later, the New York Times Sunday Magazine stated: "By holding aloof from the Latin American writer's extensive involvement in the region's politics, the United States is passing up an opportunity to present its case to Latin America's principal opinion molders. These writers are wrestling with issues... that are of universal concern. Intellectuals may not be the principal actors in the Latin drama, but they define the issues. Nothing less than the continent's long-range political evolution may be at stake."

On his swing through the area last November, Ronald Reagan was taken aback by Colombian President Betancur's charge that the U.S. was consistently denying admission to his country's most prominent citizen. "But you are welcome in the States at any time," Reagan responded. "I don't mean myself," Betancur retorted. "I mean Gabriel García Márquez. You and I will both be out of power in a few years; writers like him outlive us all." No one in the American contingent seemed to know that this very writer, only three weeks earlier, had been named the 1982 recipient of the Noble Prize in Literature.

Too bad in a way that New York and Washington don't pay more attention to what's happening in places like Oklahoma, not to mention Latin America. If they did, they would know that statements such as those made by Time and the Sunday Magazine don't apply here. It would not have taken them 20 years to discover the El Boom in Latin American literature, and they certainly would have long since heard of García Márquez.

The reason is simple: the University of Oklahoma's Neustadt International Prize for Literature (featured in the first issue of the new Sooner Magazine two years ago) and its companion program, a biennial
15-year-old conference series devoted primarily to the literature of Spain and Spanish America. Since 1979 the series has borne the formal title "The Puterbaugh Conferences on Writers of the French-Speaking and Hispanic World," but the conferences were actually inaugurated 11 years earlier.

What the series does, quite simply, is bring the so-called "living classics" of contemporary Hispanic and French-language literature to the OU campus for two full weeks of seminars, lectures, interviews and informal gatherings with all segments of the local and regional community. The visit is concluded with a two-day scholarly symposium on the featured guest's work, a banquet, and a public reading by the author.

Interestingly enough, the very writers photographed and quoted most prominently in the *Time* and *Sunday Magazine* articles are some of the same writers who have graced the University campus in Norman as conference guests: Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina, Octavio Paz of Mexico, Julio Cortazar of Argentina, Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru, Carlos Fuentes of Mexico. (Garcia Marquez, who generally refuses to participate in such symposia, came to OU as the laureate of the 1972 Neustadt Prize — dubbed the "Oklahoma Nobel" by the *New York Times*. Paz became the first writer to be honored by both the Puterbaugh and Neustadt programs when he was awarded the 1982 Neustadt Prize.) Sooners have long been exposed to the "Boomers" from "the other America"; the news took a while longer to reach the East Coast.

How did this all come about? And why in Oklahoma? First of all, for decades the modern languages department at the University had boasted its strongest program in Spanish. Second, Oklahoma's location in the Southwest, in proximity to the Hispanic influences handed down from the conquistadors and welling up from Mexico and points beyond, made the Spanish language and culture a natural for emphasis and study at OU. Third, and perhaps most important, was the arrival of Ivar Ivask at the University in 1967 as the new editor of *Books Abroad*, the school's international literary quarterly (now known as *World Literature Today*), and his decision to dedicate his first full issue of the journal to the outstanding Spanish poet Jorge Guillén.

Ivask's proposal to convene a "Jorge Guillén Conference" in conjunction with the special issue — and in celebration of the poet's 75th birthday — was enthusiastically seconded by modern languages department chairman Lowell Dunham, himself a professor of Spanish for more than 20 years. Together with a committee of other Spanish faculty members at the University — among them Jim Artman and James Abbott — and with the support of the University administration and the OU Foundation, the conference took place on 9-11 February 1968, drawing more than 200 persons from 21 states and Canada for the opening session and more than 250 for the high point of the event, a reading by the poet himself.

Through a fortunate coincidence, the University of Oklahoma Press brought out at that same time the most extensive English selection of Guillén's poetry yet published, the bilingual *Affirmation*. With the support of a generous grant arranged by then-President George L. Cross, the conference proceedings were published not only in the Winter 1968 issue of *Books Abroad* but also in book form by the OU Press as *Luminous Reality: The Poetry of Jorge Guillén* (1963; unfortunately now long out of print).

So the series was off to a splendid...
start, though no one really knew yet that it was a series—or would become one. Nearly two years afterward, in late November and early December 1969, a huge step was taken in that direction when the leading representative of Hispanic literature in the New World came to the Norman campus. With Jorge Luis Borges the nascent series also adopted the two-week format of lectures, seminars and symposia that has served it well ever since.

The blind, humble, quietly ironic poet, short-story writer and essayist concentrated on his native Argentine literature and on his own writings in his graduate Spanish seminars and evoked a circular, self-contained, mythical world of the past in his two public lectures—delivered in the impeccable English he loves as dearly as Spanish. At the two-day symposium which concluded his visit, Borges surprised several of the scholars present by sitting beside the podium, resting on his cane, mute and impassive like some sightless "Homer of millennial memory," as Ivask later called him in the poem "Borges in Oklahoma 1969." The effect was "Borgesian" in the best sense—both stimulating and oddly unsettling, like many of the writer's cryptic "fictions" about labyrinthine libraries, self-absorbed scholars and esoteric documents.

A reading and banquet ended the fortnight in festive style, and only the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Borges' mink coat marred this first full-scale conference. A special Borges issue of BA followed in the summer of 1971 and was reprinted in book form by the OU Press as The Cardinal Points of Borges later that year.

The autumn of 1971 also brought a third conference to OU, as well as the official labeling of the now bonafide series as "The Oklahoma Conferences on Writers of the Hispanic World." Whereas the first two events had brought the respective patriarchs of Peninsular and Spanish American letters to Norman, the October 1971 conference brought the most dynamic younger force in Hispanic literature, Mexico's Octavio Paz — poet, essayist, editor, philosopher, translator and prominent diplomat.

In six seminars Paz expounded with impassioned and prophetic fervor on postmodernism and the avant-garde in modern Spanish American poetry, tracing its evolution from romanticism and symbolism and contrasting the literatures of Europe and the Americas, always leading toward the present and remaining open to the future. One of his equally impressive English lectures was devoted to the provocative topic "The New Analogy: Poetry and Technology."

Amid all the official activities Paz and his charming wife Marie-Joseé found the time and interest to explore such Oklahoma landmarks as Indian City and the Cowboy Hall of Fame before the final weekend symposium (unlike Borges, Paz did not attend the sessions) and the now customary reading and dinner.

Paz's brief words at the banquet offered eloquent testimony to the stature of the young series as well as heartfelt gratitude for the "lucid cordiality" he and Marie-Joseé had found in Norman—"a kind of spiritual correspondence to the brightness of these autumn days." The symposium papers appeared in the Autumn 1972 issue of BA, followed in early 1973 by an expanded OU Press book version entitled The Perpetual Present: The Poetry and Prose of Octavio Paz.

Again events dovetailed somewhat, for in March 1973 Ivask and Dunham welcomed the outstanding Peninsular poet and critic Damaso Alonso to OU as the fourth Hispanic conference guest. The two hosts were taken aback somewhat by Alonso's insistence on a windowless room—impossible at the Sooner House quarters reserved for him—and were further astonished to see him open his valise and take out several yards of black cloth, with which they all then proceeded to cover the windows and block out every trace of the spring sun.

The next two weeks were comparatively uneventful, as Alonso, a ranking member of the elite Spanish Academy, lectured on Spain's classic poets and on his own lyric and critical writings. At the symposium, however, he insisted not only on attending the sessions, like Borges, but also...
on vigorously debating virtually
every significant point made by the
speakers. He claimed rarely to have
enjoyed himself more, and he cer-
tainly gave the visiting scholars
something other than the customary
easy time they had expected.

This fourth Oklahoma conference
was equally significant for the fact
that it was the first to be made possi-
ble through the generosity of Mrs.
Alene Webb Puterbaugh and the
Puterbaugh Foundation of McAles-
ter, Oklahoma. This generosity, to-
gether with the steadfast and en-
thusiastic support of Mrs.
Puterbaugh's longtime friends and
Puterbaugh Foundation officers Tom
and Allece Garrard, sustained the
series in 1975 and 1977 and led to the
program's endowment in 1979 and its
rechristening as the Puterbaugh Con-
ferences. The name derives from the
Foundation, of course, but specifically
honors the late J. G. Puterbaugh, an
Oklahoma philanthropist, entre-
preneur and civic leader who loved to
discuss poetry and believed in the
furthering of bilingualism.

November 1975 brought 6'6" Julio
Cortázar, an Argentine literary (and
literary) giant whom Borges had given
his start in the 1940s and whose free-
form, pick-your-own-sequence novel
Hopscotch (1963) has been one of El
Boom's most stunning single
achievements. In addition to his
thoughtful, low-key lectures and
seminars on his own work, on Poe and
the heritage of the fantastic, and on
politics and the Latin American writ-
er, Cortázar (like Paz) trekked
through Indian City on the heels of
guide Doris Buffalo, fell in love with
the pampas-like landscape west of
Norman, and even watched the first
half of the OU-Nebraska football
game on his final Saturday, forsaking
a symposium on his work which was
nearly drowned out by the noise of
70,000 Big Red fans. He also found
the executive suite at Sooner House,
with its purple shag that seems to
climb walls and furniture ("The car-
pet grows," he later told friends), con-
ducive enough to write a new short
story, "Second Time Around." The
story premiered in the Summer 1976
issue of BA along with the sym-
posium papers and then was re-
printed in the OU Press' expanded

Cortázar's public reading was a de-
light: having chosen for the occasion
his prose miniatures about the whims-
ical, imaginary creatures called
cronopios. Possessing only a single
Spanish copy of the work and no En-
glish translation, Cortázar simply
read one piece at a time, ripped out
the page with a grand flourish and
handed it to his translator, Gregory
Rabassa, for an impromptu rendering
in English. The crowd loved it.

In February 1977 the series wel-
comed its youngest guest so far, the
dashing Peruvian novelist Mario
Vargas Llosa, not yet 41 at that time
but already a dazzling brilliant writer
and critic and also newly-elected
president of the International PEN
Club. Part of the new generation of
Latin American writers, Vargas
Llosa riveted audiences with his
lucidly intense seminars and virtuoso
lectures, including an excellent essay
on sociopolitical commitment in Latin
American literature, later published
with the symposium papers in the
Winter 1978 issue of World Literature Today (formerly Books Abroad).

In 1979, in accordance with the terms of the $150,000 Puterbaugh endowment, the conference series was expanded to encompass the French-speaking world as well. The first Gaedic guest was the eminent poet and essayist Yves Bonnefoy, now a member of the august Collège de France. Quiet, contemplative, almost reticent in person, Bonnefoy proved an authoritative critic and speaker in seminars ranging from Racine to surrealism and in lectures on poetic translation and contemporary French verse.

His moving words of thanks at the final banquet echoed thoughts expressed privately by most of his predecessors: far from thinking himself deceased at hearing critics speak for two days about his work (as the poet Paul Valéry once claimed to have felt), he found himself "led to new thoughts, incited to new projects: I felt that I was taking up a new stage in my own reflection and history. If my poems may be one of the ways to this beautiful experience of fully human discourse, I do not ask for anything more, and I feel happy."

Bonnefoy's countryman Michel Butor followed in November 1981, as Ivask and the modern languages department (now chaired by Peter Brueckner) moved to strengthen the French side of the series before returning to the Hispanic world. This widely-traveled experimental novelist, essayist and art critic was no stranger to OU, having lectured here in 1971 and, as a Neustadt Prize juror, having championed his compatriot Francis Ponge to victory in 1974.

Besides conducting seminars on five of his individual works and delivering two scintillating lectures on "Literature and Dream" and "The Origin of the Text," Butor became certainly one of the first contemporary French poets to hymn American football. From his Walker Tower suite he loved observing the landscape and the students at work and play below his window, hearing trains in the distance and planes overhead, with Oklahoma Memorial Stadium looming in the background, "silent today of the football-bomb/its tiers rising like enormous fangs/reverberate still from loyal chimes/...as tall-hatted farmers pass them by." (See "An Evening in Norman.")

February 1983 brought the Hispanic world to Norman once more in the person of the dynamic Carlos Fuentes—novelist, short-story writer, critic, former Mexican ambas-
sador to France, film buff extraordinaire, and friend of statesmen and intellectuals on three continents. Having heard all sorts of tales about OU's "growing carpets" and full-grown hospitality from Cortazar and Garcia Márquez and Paz, Fuentes plunged into his seminars and lectures with an ardor that even a freakish first week of floods, high winds and 6-inch snowfall could not dampen or smother. A loyal group of self-proclaimed "Fuentettes" and crowds of 120-150 heard him speak on three of his novels, on the films of Luis Buñuel and on his personal odyssey to literary fame, then witnessed a zestful reading of his still-gestating novel *Christopher Unborn* as a finale.

Where does the series go from here? Ivask, who has chaired all nine conferences, doesn't even want to venture a guess at the moment as to who the next several guests might be, for he and the *WLT* editorial board are currently preparing for the 1984 Neustadt Prize jury, which alternates biennially with the Puterbaugh conference program. But for 1985, 1987 and beyond, there are still several major writers to be considered from the French-speaking world and from Spain and South America. A French-Caribbean or a French-African, a Chicano or a Cuban émigré, a woman from either language area — all are distinct possibilities, as long as they and their work can stand as equals beside the pantheon OU already has hosted.

Washington and New York — as well as Mexico City, Paris, Madrid and Buenos Aires — would do well to watch OU and the Puterbaugh conference series.

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An Evening in Norman

For Tom and Alleece Garrard

My window faces west just as it does in Nice where it's deep night now the rays of the moon's first quarter illuminate the sky both here and there

The elm tree's leaves were just now luminous but were extinguished like the sparkling motorcycle there near the garbage bags and tall grasses which sway as tall-hatted farmers pass them by

The bluejays are about to stop their screeching an airplane starts its descent over Oklahoma City the long slow train complains in the outskirts while the gentle guitarist button spin his shirt in a chill

The ancient and recent religions of the Indians wandering or parked slyly haunt these somber brick towers where lamps of amber gradually are lit

And even the immense temple behind me silent today of the football-bomb its tiers rising like enormous fangs reverberate still from loyal chimes

Some of its young acolytes meanwhile practice on the pale prairie and splatter puddles that reflect the sky which then turns red like here the earth itself

Michel Butor
7 November 1981
Adapted from the French
by Ivar Ivask