



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

“**M**ost 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

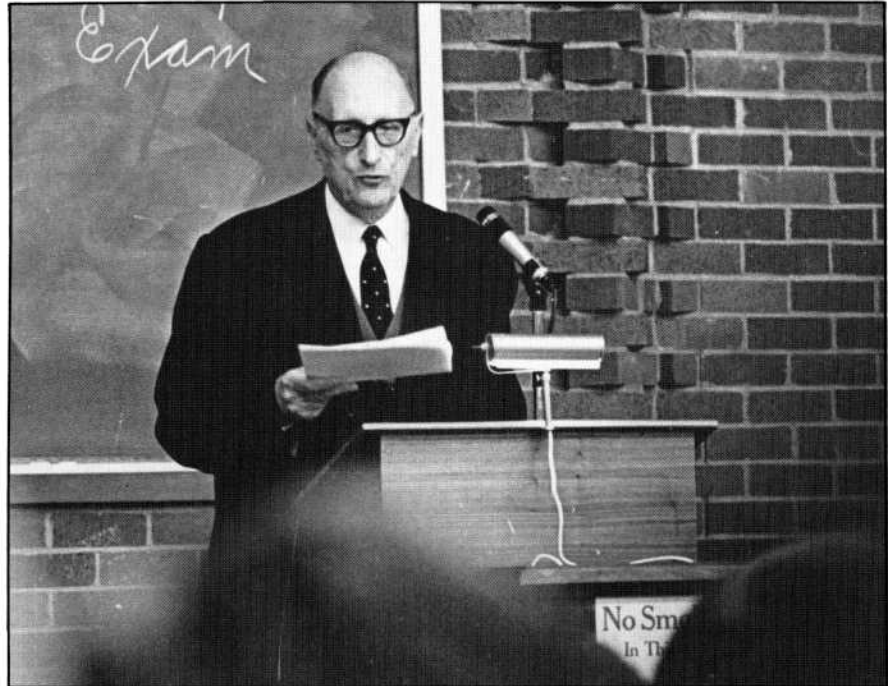
15-year-old conference series devoted primarily to the literature of Spain and Spanish America. Since 1979 the series has borne the formal title "The Puterbaugh Conferences on Writers of the French-Speaking and Hispanic World," but the conferences were actually inaugurated 11 years earlier.

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 Cortázar of Argentina, Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru, Carlos Fuentes of Mexico. (García Márquez, 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*),

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OU's first conference on a Hispanic writer, held in conjunction with Ivask's first issue of Books Abroad, was devoted to Spanish poet Jorge Guillén.

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 Okla-

homa 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-José 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-José 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 Dámaso 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



Argentine poet/short-story writer/essayist Jorge Luis Borges, left, with OU modern languages department chairman, Lowell Dunham.

From *The Cardinal Points of Borges*, edited by Lowell Dunham and Ivar Ivask
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on vigorously debating virtually every significant point made by the speakers. He claimed rarely to have enjoyed himself more, and he certainly 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 possible through the generosity of Mrs. Alene Webb Puterbaugh and the Puterbaugh Foundation of McAlester, Oklahoma. This generosity, together with the steadfast and enthusiastic 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 Conferences. The name derives from the Foundation, of course, but specifically honors the late J. G. Puterbaugh, an Oklahoma philanthropist, entrepreneur and civic leader who loved to discuss poetry and believed in the furthering of bilingualism.

November 1975 brought 6'6" Julio

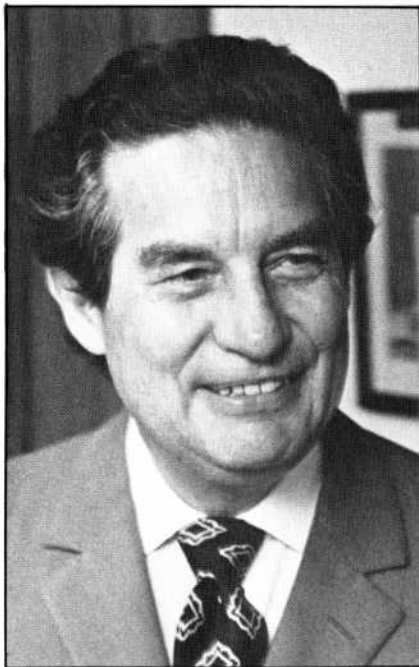
Cortázar, an Argentine literary (and literal) giant whom Borges had given his start in the 1940s and whose free-form, pick-your-own-sequence novel *Hopscotch* (1963) has been one of *El Boom's* most stunning single achievements. In addition to his thoughtful, low-key lectures and seminars on his own work, on Poe and the heritage of the fantastic, and on politics and the Latin American writer, 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 carpet grows," he later told friends), conducive enough to write a new short story, "Second Time Around." The story premiered in the Summer 1976 issue of *BA* along with the symposium papers and then was re-

printed in the OU Press' expanded book version, *The Final Island: The Fiction of Julio Cortázar* (1978).

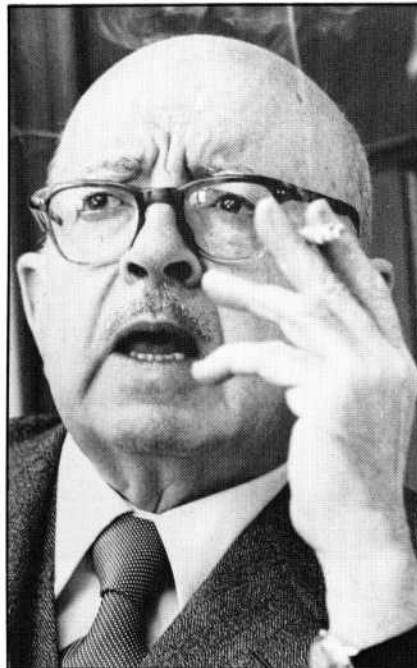
Cortázar's public reading was a delight: having chosen for the occasion his prose miniatures about the whimsical, imaginary creatures called *cronopios*. Possessing only a single Spanish copy of the work and no English translation, Cortázar simply read one piece at a time, ripped out the page with a 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 welcomed 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

*Mexico's Octavio Paz:
poet/essayist/editor/diplomat.*



*Spain's Dámaso Alonso:
ranking Peninsular poet/critic.*



*Argentina's Julio Cortázar:
Latin American literary giant.*



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 Gallic 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.

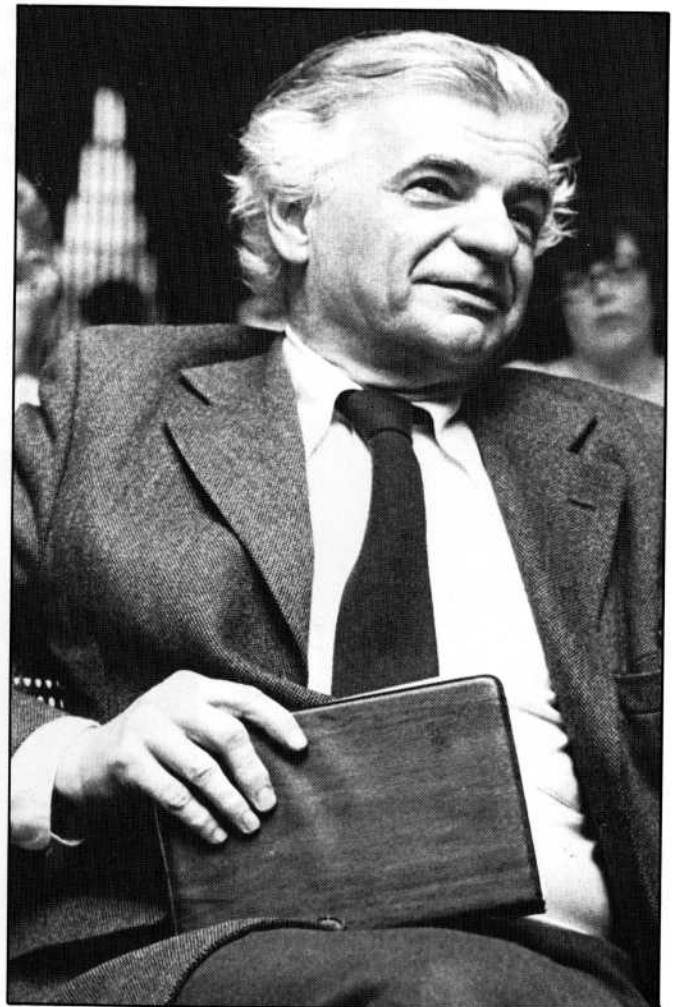
Besides conducting seminars on

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-



The dashing Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, left, with World Literature Today editor, Ivar Ivask.




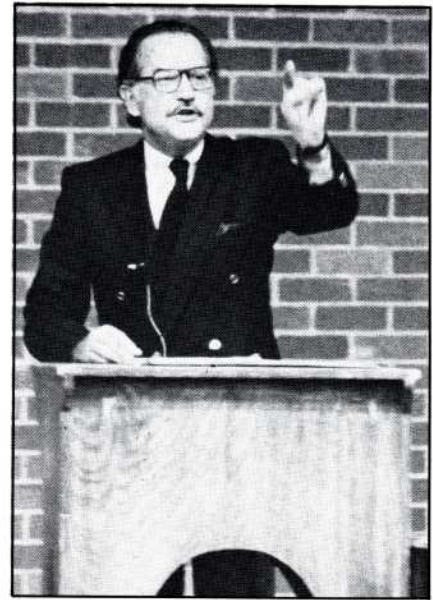
The first conference representative of French-language literature, eminent poet/essayist Yves Bonnefoy.

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 Cortázar and García 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 ven-

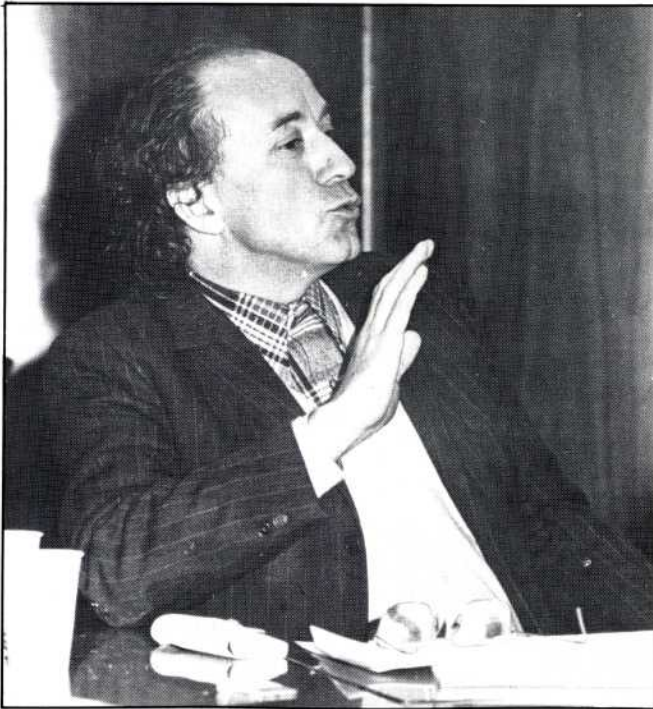
ture a guess at the moment as to who the next several guests might be, for he and the *WLT* editorial board are currently preparing for the 1984 Neustadt Prize jury, which alternates biennially with the Puterbaugh conference program. But for 1985, 1987 and beyond, there are still several major writers 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. 



Mexico's Carlos Fuentes: novelist/critic/diplomat.

Besides conducting seminars on five of his works and delivering two scintillating lectures, Butor became one of the first contemporary French poets to hymn American football.



French experimental novelist/art critic/essayist/poet and Oklahoma enthusiast, Michel Butor.

An Evening in Norman

For Tom and Allece 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 buttons 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