

PAGE-TURNER

CÉSAR AIRA'S INFINITE FOOTNOTE TO BORGES

By Alena Graedon January 27, 2017nonfiction. Last month,

César Aira doesn't like to be called "prolific." He has, however, published more than eighty works of fiction and nonfiction. "Ema, the Captive," which was first published in Spanish, in 1978, became the thirteenth of his novels available in English. (He's been translated into seven other languages as well.) Aira, who was born in Argentina, in 1949, has spent most of his life in Buenos Aires. In "Ema," which is set in the nineteenth century, soldiers take a young woman prisoner and, after a journey marked by baroque violence, bring her to "the edge of the world," Argentina's southern frontier. "Ema" is as inventive and aphoristic as Aira's best works. It also includes depictions of "Indians" that can come across as exoticizing, which may have been intentional; some of Aira's other fiction deploys the trope of Western colonizers smothering reality with prefabricated forms. In "Ema," he mentions "Darwin's sketches of the Indians, crude vignettes that always show them about to mount a skinny horse with a human face."

Aira's novels are difficult to classify—they're by turns realist, surrealist, absurd, and philosophical. He has written about an accident that disfigured the nineteenth-century German painter Johann Moritz Rugendas ("Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter"), a construction site haunted by naked ghosts ("Ghosts"), and a translator-cum-mad scientist who sets out to clone the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes ("The Literary Conference"). When I asked him, a while back, about works in progress, he described two very different books: one was an "extreme roman à clef," for which, he joked, "only one person in the world" has the key. The other he compared to an Escher drawing, a "completely irrational narrative." His novels' most consistent features are their brevity—they're generally a hundred pages or less—and their method of composition, which he has called "la huída hacia adelante," or the constant flight forward. Roughly, this means that he writes without rewriting, inventing as he goes.

When I met with Aira, a little more than a year ago, in Buenos Aires, we talked less about his writing than his habits of reading. Aira's day is as punctuated by reading as it is by meals: periodicals in the morning, prose in the afternoon, and, in the evening, poetry. Every night at 9:30 p.m., he takes a whiskey. (After that, he said, laughing, it's harder to follow prose.) We spoke twice, in cafés in an area of the Palermo neighborhood known as Villa Freud, for its density of psychologists. Per Argentinian custom, we were served delicate cookies with our coffees. Gracious and mannerly, Aira picked me up before our first meeting and later walked me home, stopping, at one point, to give a stranger directions. His hair is graying and he wore dark-rimmed glasses, with a light jacket for the early spring cold.

Aira laughs often and speaks deliberately, in a smoky baritone. He's a translator, including from English; we talked in my language, rather than his. Decades ago, when translation was his livelihood, he specialized in "bad literature," he said: it took less time to translate but paid just as well. The story of "Ema, the Captive" was modelled on the plot of one such book, he told me. He transported the narrative from Australia to Argentina, and gave Ema pheasants instead of sheep to raise. ("Sheeps are cheap," he said.)

Aira grew up in the small agricultural town of Coronel Pringles in the south of Buenos Aires Province. (Much of "Ema" is set there.) One of his earliest memories, from when he was at most three years old, involves books. Telling me this, he provided narration as if it were happening again. "I see myself, my aunt, and my mother," he began; they were in his grandmother's house. His aunt had a child who was Aira's age, his cousin Mario. "And my aunt said, 'I had two little books for you. Libritos, for you.'" But she didn't have them anymore, because Mario ("Bad boy!") had

destroyed them. Maybe, Aira said, sighing theatrically, he hadn't even known yet what books were. Still, a desire to have them took hold then.

The Pringles library was unusually good, because a man in the town—his own father's former primary-school teacher, Aira explained, who'd also been a diplomat in Russia—had donated his private collection. "There was everything," Aira told me. "It was wonderful." In the stacks, he discovered Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, James Joyce. "I read there, for the first time, Proust, when I was fourteen—fourteen and fifteen." He read Proust in Spanish then. But when he moved to Buenos Aires a few years later the first thing he bought at the end of school was the full set of "In Search of Lost Time" in French, which he dedicated his holiday to rereading. He has read French literature in the original ever since. "How do you read Baudelaire in translation?" he said. "Rimbaud? No."

Growing up, Aira wasn't alone in the Pringles library. Arturo Carrera, a boy one year older than Aira, was also there frequently. Carrera is now a renowned poet as well as Aira's lifelong friend. They were introduced, Aira said, when he was an infant; Carrera bit his nose. Early in their teens, they realized that they both wanted to be writers. "We divided: for him, poetry; for me, prose." Later, as students, they co-founded a literary journal, *El Cielo*. When Aira and I met, his daughter was pregnant with his first grandchild. "He's going to be called Arturo," Aira said, laughing. "I'll have my own Arturito."

Our second interview took place on a brisk Saturday morning at the Velvet café on Plaza Güemes, across from the Romanesque Basílica del Espíritu Santo. The café, which has big windows and high ceilings dotted with track lights, was nearly empty when we arrived, but it soon filled. It was October 17th, Loyalty Day, which commemorates the date in 1945, four years before Aira was born, when large popular demonstrations erupted to protest the imprisonment of a young Colonel Juan Perón. "And that was the beginning of the end of Argentina," Aira said. The next year, Perón won the Presidential election, and he soon established an oppressive, isolationist regime. He was deposed in a revolutionary coup, in 1955.

Aira remembers the revolution vividly. He was six when fighting broke out at a naval base near Bahía Blanca, roughly eighty miles from Aira's home town. At the time, he and his family were staying at a great-aunt's house. Then the bombing began. "It was lights, all the lights," Aira said. "And then . . . silence." The bombs fell not in the town proper but into the river nearby. Nonetheless, he remembers soldiers and stretchers. "And all the rest of my childhood I went with a bicycle there to see the"—and here he paused, and laughed, as he often did, even when recalling dark memories—"the corpses. Like a movie."

Aira glanced down at the white tablecloth. When he was in his twenties, Argentina's Dirty War began. It lasted until 1983. At least thirty thousand people, many of them students, were "disappeared." Aira was a "young militant leftist" then, he once told an interviewer for *The Nation*. One day, after leaving a political assembly at the University of Buenos Aires—it was boring, he said—he was detained. He didn't realize that students and police were clashing on campus. Cops caught up with him as he was running—probably from tear gas, though he told the *Nation* interviewer, "Surely, I was in a rush to get home and keep reading Proust." For his bad luck, he spent nearly three weeks in jail. "Once, I lost consciousness," he told me. But he found a way to pass the time. "My sister brought me the Virgilio. Virgil . . . in Latin."

The one writer Aira kept returning to as we talked was Jorge Luis Borges. It would have been hard not to mention his name—Jorge Luis Borges Street was just a few blocks from where we sat sipping coffees that had by then turned cold. When we discussed the Pope, Aira noted, "You know, Borges said once that there is no idea so absurd that a philosopher has not thought it." Smiling

wryly, he added that if there was an idea so absurd that even a philosopher hadn't thought it, a theologian had. At one point, Aira told me, "We are always talking about Borges."

Aira first saw the name when he was twelve or thirteen. It kept showing up in the paper—"Borges, Borges, Borges," he recalled—and he became curious. He located Borges's publisher and wrote the firm a letter, asking if he could buy Borges's books. Just send a check, the publisher replied. Aira's father did so, and books by Borges soon arrived in the mail. "That changed my life," Aira said.

He was prepared for Borges's work by Superman comics, he explained. "Superman was an intellectual exercise. Because Superman had all the powers. But he had to have a Lex Luthor." And, Aira continued, if Superman has "all the powers," then Lex Luthor must have "something more." I thought of one of Aira's short stories: "The Infinite," from his story collection "The Musical Brain." In it, two boys devise a game that consists of trying to one-up the other by listing larger and larger numbers. Inevitably, they end up repeating "infinity," "infinity infinities," "infinity infinity infinities," and so on, back and forth. They each have to add something more.

Aira saw Borges many times, at the old National Library, which Borges then directed; at the University of Buenos Aires, where he taught literature; and at conferences. "But I never talked with him," Aira said. "That was bad luck for me, because many of my colleagues have made a career out of having talked for five minutes with Borges." These writers, he joked, "spend their life repeating, 'Borges told me, Borges told me.'" I asked if Borges's presence had been very strong in Buenos Aires when Aira first arrived as a young man. "Yes, of course," he said, suddenly serious. "Of course. He was an immense presence." When Borges died, in 1986, he said, "a light was gone."

Later, I made the mistake of asking if Aira was especially moved by any of Borges's characters. He seemed nonplussed. "Borges characters are not exactly human characters," he said. "They're literary characters." Elaborating, he offered a small link to his own work. "Characters are not important," he said. "For me, it's the play, the literary play. And characters, in what I write, they're necessary to advance the story." But it's the story that matters.

Many readers think of Aira's work, like that of Borges before him, as *sui generis*. When I asked Aira if he agrees, or if he feels that Borges has influenced his writing, he responded, "I am thinking now that maybe . . . maybe all my work is a footnote to Borges." I was a little surprised by this, and Aira sounded surprised, too, as if he were testing the idea's truth. Borges was famously a fan of footnotes; a footnote to a body of footnoted works seems like a devious sort of tribute, almost Lex Luthor-like.

But Aira may not be in the best position to judge if his writing shows traces of Borges: one author whom Aira doesn't read is himself. When we met, the translation of "Ema, the Captive" was under way, and Aira's translator had been sending him queries. As he'd written the book thirty-seven years before, Aira's recall of its finer points wasn't perfect. "But I did not want to go to the book," he said. "So I invented the answers."

Alena Graedon is the author of "The Word Exchange," a novel. More