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Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations

Edited by Richard Burgin

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Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations

Richard Burgin / 1967

...and thousands of circumstances about them. And if you think of the characters you think of the characters in Stevenson a character, let’s say in a book by past a page, but you feel that you know known, but in the case of Ulysses you about the characters. You know, for exact twice to the men’s room, you know all exact positions when they are sitting really know them. It’s as if Joyce had a magnifying glass.

I a lot about English literature to your English literature, it’s so rich ... But sealed Robert Browning to many young thing whatever about him. Now I’m won poetry—of course, he should have of Browning’s pieces would have fared, had they been written as short stories. The very fine verses in The Ring and the I suppose we’ve grown out of the habit But had he written it in prose, had The novel, and the same story told over and might have been more amusing, no? passages of verse. Then I should think of all modern literature. But nowadays...

...and, by the blank verse, by the rather say, well, yes, had he been a good prose think of Browning as being the forerunner... lots of his poems to my students, they a they read them, they found them, well, a task. But if you tell somebody the framework of The Ring and the Book, it’s very interesting. The idea of having the same story told by different characters from different angles, that seems to be, well, more or less, what Henry James would have liked you to do—a long time before Henry James. I mean that you should think of Browning as having been the forerunner, quite as good as the forerunner, of Henry James or of Kafka. While today we don’t think of him in that way; and nobody seems to be reading him, except out of duty, but I think people should enjoy reading him.

Burgin: You’ve linked Henry James and Kafka before—you seem to associate them in your mind for some reason.

Borges: I think that there is a likeness between them. I think that the sense of things being ambiguous, of things being meaningless, of living in a meaningless universe, of things being many-sided and finally unexplained; well, Henry James wrote to his brother that he thought of the world as being a diamond museum, a museum of monsters. I think that he must have felt life in much the same way.

Burgin: And yet the characters in James or in Kafka are always striving for something definite. They always have definite goals.

Borges: They have definite goals, but they never attain them. I mean, when you’ve read the first page of The Trial you know that he’ll never know why he’s being judged, why he’s being tried, I mean, in the case of Henry James, the same thing happens. The moment you know that the man is after the Aspern papers, you know, well, either that he’ll never find the papers, or that if he does find them, they’ll be worthless. You may feel that.

Burgin: But then it’s more a sense of impotence than it is an ambiguity.

Borges: Of course, but it’s also an ambiguity. For example, “The Turn of the Screw.” That’s a stock example. One might find others. “The Abasement of the Northmores”—the whole story is told as a tale of revenge. And, in the end, you don’t know whether the revenge will work out or not. Because, after all, the letters of the widow’s husband, they may be published and nothing may come of them. So that in the end, the whole story is about revenge, and when you reach the last page, you do not know whether the woman will accomplish her purpose or not. A very strange story... I suppose that you prefer Kafka to Henry James?

Burgin: No, they stand for different things for me.

Borges: But do they?
Burgin: You don't seem to think so. But I think that Henry James believed in society, he never really questioned the social order.

Borges: I don't think so.

Burgin: I think he accepted society. I think that he couldn't conceive of a world without society and he believed in man and, moreover, in certain conventions. He was a student of man's behavior.

Borges: Yes, I know, but he believed in them in a desperate way, because it was the only thing he could grasp.

Burgin: It was an order, a sense of order.

Borges: But I don't think he felt happy.

Burgin: But Kafka's imagination is far more metaphorical.

Borges: Yes, but I think that you get many things in James that you don't get in Kafka. For example, in Henry James you are made to feel that there is a meaning behind experience, perhaps too many meanings. While in Kafka, you know that he knew no more about the castle or about the judges and the trial than you do. Because the castle and the judges are symbols of the universe, and nobody is expected to know anything about the universe. But in the case of Henry James, you think that he might have had his personal theories or you feel that he knows more of what he's talking about. I mean that though his stories may be parables of the subject, still they're not written by him to be parables. I think he was really very interested in the solution, maybe he had two or three solutions and so in a sense I think of Henry James as being far more complex than Kafka, but that may be a weakness. Perhaps the strength of Kafka may lie in his lack of complexity.

Burgin: I think of James as being able to create characters; whereas Kafka has no characters, Kafka is closer to poetry really. He works with metaphors and types as opposed to characters.

Borges: No, there are no characters.

Burgin: But James could create characters.

Borges: Are you sure of that?

Burgin: You don't seem to think so.

Borges: No, I think that what is interesting in James are the situations more than the characters. Let's take a very obvious example. If I think of Dickens, I'm thinking of Sir Pickwick, Pip, David Copperfield. I think of people, well, I might go on and on. While if I think of James, I'm thinking about a situation and a plot. I'm not thinking about what happened to them. If I think of the framework of a hideous story of at least I understand, I think of that and not of her mother's lover and so on.

Burgin: You also said that you don't think it's an allegory, perhaps?

Borges: Yes, I think of it as being the thousands of things about Daedalus or he knows them. At least I don't. But I think in Shakespeare or in Dickens. Now—if I think of Moby Dick, I think of the characters, because the whale stands for evil, and Captain Ahab stands doing battle against evil, but I cannot think of it as an allegory, no?

Burgin: To think only in terms of a part of the text, it reduces the story to one statement.

Borges: Yes, of course it does. That's not an allegory, no?

Burgin: But I don't think it's so simple as perhaps you can't perhaps verbalize the exact statement. I don't like to think of it in terms of a single idea of evil.

Borges: No, no, of course the idea of evil.

Burgin: Yes.

Borges: Of course, I'm not allowed to think of Captain Ahab as being a real man, but you think of him as a real man.

Borges: I think of Billy Budd as being a real man.
have to respect literary conventions—words and what story form should mean, and
ventions make things easier. For example, there is no obligation. You have to accept
language, you refuse the writing. Besides, I
the language is very important. Even in
a renewer of the language as James
of his finest sentences; “The rivering
waters of night.” That is very fine, but
“river” means “river” and “night” means
mean “hither” and “thither.” It can’t
the conventions, since, after all, conven-
tions; since we accept them, there is no
But, of course, if you want to invent a
 suppose you will be a kind of Robinson
lonely life.

Q: The first part of the question: is writing pleasurable for you? And the
second part: when you are writing the middle of your story which you can’t
find, is it groping or does it come clear to you?
A: Writing should be a pleasure. All things should be a pleasure, even a
toothache, I suppose, if taken the right way. Now as to groping our way, that
is a pleasure also. There is a pleasure in groping; a pleasure in hesitating—
why not? Those are parts of the game. I accept them. Yes, I always think of
writing as a pleasure. If it’s not done for pleasure, it can’t be done. It’s not
compulsory.

Yates: The answer to the second part is that you do groove in the middle
for what is going to be the story?
A: Yes. I enjoy the grooving.

Yates: In one story that you wrote, “The Circular Ruins,” your grooving
became part of the story since the magician or the stranger—whoever—was
trying to find a way to imagine or dream or create another person, and he
tried several things that didn’t work. These were your attempts to write the
story. Is that right?
A: Yes, of course I was. I am sure I was very clever to have woven them
into a story.

Q: First, do you accept the linking of your name with Kafka, and second,
do you enjoy being linked with Kafka?
A: I think Kafka taught me the way to write two quite bad stories: “The
Library of Babel” and “The Lottery of Babylon.” Of course, I owe a debt to
Kafka. Naturally. I enjoyed that. At the same time, I couldn’t go on reading
Kafka all the time so I left it at that. I only wrote two stories following the
pattern and then I left off. Of course I owe much to Kafka. I admire him, as
I suppose all reasonable men do.

Yates: In the “Library of Babel” you insert a word spelled thusly: Qaphqa.
I think the only way to pronounce that is Kafka. Did you put that in there to
show that you were aware that you were writing like Kafka?
A: Yes. Of course I did.

[To a question on the influence on Borges of contemporary Latin-American
writers.]
A: I am not a futurist. I was not aware of García Márquez and Cortázar,
who came after.
Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations with a Writer


Beicken: It is with special pleasure that I welcome you to this workshop Kafka: The Writer's Writer with which we celebrate the centenary of Kafka's birth in 1883, and I am particularly pleased to be able to present to you on this occasion the distinguished Argentine author and living legend of modern world literature, Jorge Luis Borges... Borges, born into the Kafka generation of the 1880's and 1890's, is probably one of the few early contemporary readers of Kafka still with us today. Living in Switzerland during World War I and having taught himself German with the poetry of Heine, Borges followed the literary scene in Germany at that time, notably the rise of German Expressionist literature. Keenly observing the development of Expressionist poetry, above all the works of Johannes R. Becher, Alfred Mombert, Wilhelm Klemm, August Stramm and others, Borges came across some of the small prose pieces of Kafka published in literary magazines, few pieces indeed which yielded only glimpses of an oeuvre which was saved from oblivion by Max Brod after Kafka's untimely death in 1924. Borges remained faithful to his early reception of and fascination with Kafka. In 1938 he edited a volume of Kafka's stories including his own translation of The Metamorphosis, and he added a famous preface which tells us as much about Kafka as it does about Borges, the exceptional reader and translator. Borges' biographer, Emir Rodriguez Monegal, has observed that Borges studied and discussed Kafka when he, himself, was about to begin a new career as a story teller in 1938. Borges continued his conversations with Kafka, and it is today that we have the wonderful opportunity to engage in our conversation with Borges about Kafka.

Jorge Luis Borges
Alastair Reid / 1983
Alastair Reid: I want to briefly say one or two things at the beginning. It is always an honor to have Borges with us, but much more than that it is always a pleasure. We have been very blessed in this city in recent years with Borges’ appearances. People have been reading Borges extensively, in fact, as I said in a similar regard not long ago, not to have read Borges has become the literary equivalent of being a virgin. We have read Borges, we read Borges all the time, and two or three times a year we are lucky enough on these occasions to have Borges with us to talk to us, and the presence of Borges is a very affecting one as is the reading of Borges. For instance, I discovered after one reads a story of Borges, perfectly ordinary events take on an odd significance. One cannot, say, miss a train with impunity without it becoming ominous. Now, one of Borges’ most famous essays, much celebrated and much used by critics, I think for wrongful ends, is an essay that he wrote, “Kafka and his Precursors.” And he suggests an idea that is very extraordinary there. That, in fact, each writer creates his own precursors and that because we have Kafka we look on the paradox of Zeno, on the manuscript of Han Yu, a poem of Browning, a poem of Lord Dunsany, and see foreshadowings of what Kafka is. Thus Kafka created his own precursors, and so we talk of things as ‘Kafkaesque’ that long preceded Kafka. This has been seized on. And we can say that things become ‘Borgean.’ In many ways, Borges has created his own precursors, one of whom is Kafka. [laughter]

Borges is going to talk about Kafka, and then we’ll have a conversation followed by your questions.

I remember that Camus wrote of Kafka that the whole art of Kafka consisted in making his reader re-read and sending him back to re-read what he thought he had read. So is Borges. Borges has said once that there are only five or six metaphors and that one rewrites them all the time. Borges, would you like to speak of Kafka?

Borges: I said in a paper that I recorded more or less this way:

All things are given to all men, all things, the sun, the moon, the common stars, the earth, oblivion, memory, friendship, books, that long dream we call the history of mankind, bereavement, betrayals, the kingdom, the power and the glory are given to the writer. And his curious task is to weave those things into dreams, into words, into cadences, sometimes into metaphors, and also into fables.

Now, the writer, I think, is not allowed to speak outright. He should return things in a different way. Because if he speaks outright, then he is merely a journalist or a spokesman or a politician which would be very sad, of course;
Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations

...one or two things at the beginning. It is us, but much more than that it is blessed in this city in recent years with reading Borges extensively, in fact, do, not to have read Borges has become a. We have read Borges, we read Borges year we are lucky enough on these talk to us, and the presence of Borges is of Borges. For instance, I discovered exactly ordinary events take on an odd rain with impunity without it becomingamous essays, much celebrated and fulsome ends, is an essay that he wrote, suggests an idea that is very extraordinary: his own precursors and that be-paradox of Zeno, on the manuscript of Lord Dunsany, and see foreshadowed his own precursors, and so we talk exceeded Kafka. This has been seized on. "Borjean." In many ways, Borges has is Kafka. [laughter] and then we'll have a conversation Kafka that the whole art of Kafka con-sending him back to re-read what he-rges has said once that there are onlyrites them all the time. Borges, would ordered more or less this way: things, the sun, the moon, the common endship, books, that long dream we call betrayals, the kingdom, the power and his curious task is to weave those things, sometimes into metaphors, and also ved to speak outright. He should return e speaks outright, then he is merely a man which would be very sad, of course; but what would be quite good, is a historian. Now, in the case of any major writer we have to make allowances all the time... In many cases you have to take the periods into account: for example, Sir Thomas Browne, a writer of the seventeenth century; then, when we talk about Walt Whitman we have to remember the American dream of democracy and so on.

But in the case of Kafka we find a very strange and a very beautiful difference: we know that Kafka was an Austrian Jew. He thought of himself as German born in America, of course. We know that he lived through that very awful experience of the First World War. And we know that he wrote in the heyday of the Expressionists when people were attempting all sorts of experiments with language, for example, Johannes R. Becher who has just been mentioned. Other examples, not German, are William Butler Yeats and James Joyce.

Well, in the case of any writer you have to make allowances, you have to think this was written in such and such a period. But in the case of classic writers and that goes for all classic writers, you are allowed to forget the period. Of course, Kafka was to suffer greatly, unhappiness which he turned into poetry.

Now, many writers today write hinting of a history of literature, I mean, they write rather to be analyzed than to be read. The reader follows the history of literature. I suppose that was James Joyce's great mistake. He did not write in order to be read or judged, he wrote in order to be famous, to be analyzed. I mean, he wanted his readers, here I quote a very fine line and metaphor from John Keats, "to unweave the rainbow." I suppose when John Keats said, "a thing of beauty is a joy forever," he did not mean that the thing of beauty should wear out; he thought of beauty as timeless.

Now, in the case of Kafka, I think we may safely prophesy that he will be famous let's say when a hundred years are over, because we don't have to think of the circumstances. I suppose, when I read—I prefer the stories to the novels—when I read the story about the building of the great wall of China, when I read that story Odradek ("Troubles of a Householder," "Cares of a Family Man"), then those things are accepted by my imagination as easily as very famous texts, such as the Arabian Nights which were invented in India, rewritten in Persia, originally compiled in Egypt, one reads and accepts them.

Now, in the case of Grimm's fairy tales, I think they are accepted by the imagination; the imagination of children. In the case of Kafka, I think that we accept all his work. His opinions hardly concern us. Well, if I may speak
for myself, I try not to meddle with what I write. I want my opinions to be left outside. A dream is a unity...

In the case of Kafka, if we read him we are dreaming with him; his dreams, of course, are nightmares. They are not nightmares to be found in a single sentence or a single page; they are spread all over the book so to say. I remember, the first thing I read was a short piece of Kafka's in the magazine Die Aktion; the editor was Franz Pfemfert, I remember. Well, all the rest of the names, Wilhelm Klemm, Johannes R. Becher, and so on, had been doing adventures in language; well, Kafka wrote in his own quiet style. And I said, how on earth did one publish this, I could faintly understand him, of course. And then afterwards I found out that he was in the right, that Kafka was in the right. But the fact that we think of Kafka as being timeless, is a good omen. We hardly know what the future will think of us. But when people will mention twentieth century writers, they will mention a few names only. We hardly know who will be famous. But it is quite safe to say, especially since I am here at this time, that Kafka will be famous...

As to the opinions of Kafka, I suppose he thought the universe a secret cosmos, a cosmos indifferent and hostile to man and he wanted to find a place in that cosmos. Now, personally, I never felt that way. I mean, whether there is a cosmos or not, there is a yearning. I decided to be an ethical man; I tried to be Kafka. And there, of course, I failed. I went on being Borges.

Reid: Borges, you, after all, translated Kafka. You translated The Metamorphosis. What was the experience of translating Kafka like?

Borges: I was full of envy. I would have liked to have written the text. I was chuck full of envy. Yes. [laughter]

Reid: Did he prove difficult to translate?

Borges: No, I don't think so, because, after all, he writes in a crystal clear style and does not weave metaphors, I mean, he avoids purple patches quite easily. Of course, Spanish is a different language. In German and in English you can coin words. Not in Spanish, it seems very artificial. . .

I was sent to the German language by Carlyle. Carlyle fell in love with Germany and he wrote a number of very fine essays on Richter (Jean Paul), on the Nibelungenlied, on Schiller, on Goethe, and above all that wonderful essay on Novalis. I wanted to read Schopenhauer's Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung—the English translation The World as Will and Idea is not quite right, idea is not the same as "Vorstellung," maybe appearance is better—and I learned German by reading Heine's Buch der Lieder . . .
Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations

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Buch der Lieder ...

All things have changed since Kafka. Things are read in a different way
... I think that anybody who writes now stands in debt to Kafka. I do my
best to keep on being a wordly reader of our common master Franz Kafka.

Reid: Borges, did you feel akin to Kafka when you read him first?

Borges: No, it took me some time, very sensibly, quite some time, but
then I wrote two stories and there I played with being close to Kafka, minor
stories, “The Library of Babel” and “The Lottery in Babylon”; but I went
on being Borges, I couldn’t do it. But now and then, when a page of mine
comes out as it should, then I imitate Kafka, really.

Reid: You also wrote parables.

Borges: Yes, I suppose, I owe that to Kafka and also to a quite forgotten
book, to the fables posthumously published, of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Reid: How is Kafka in Spanish? Do you think the Spanish language fits
Kafka or Kafka fits the Spanish language?

Borges: I think that, very happily for us, all languages fit Kafka. That’s
the reason for my being here. Let’s see, for a classic the words of a language
are not a cold thing. In Amerika you have the idea of a factory heaven ... In
the case of Kafka, you think of heaven being such a factory, of happiness as
being such a factory, that is different. Then you have the other two novels
with the same plot; of course, that kind of book should be endless, see; the
whole scheme of events or postponing events. Somehow Kafka has to work
in an end to feel satisfied with the results. But I think the best things Kafka
ever wrote were his tales. There’s a wonderful English translation by Edwin
Muir. I have read the German text and the English text and they seem to go
together insofar as language can replace another language; of course, it can’t
really ...

Reid: Borges, coming back to Kafka for a moment.

Borges: For quite a moment, for all time.

Reid: In your celebrated essay on “Kafka and His Precursors.” ...

Borges: I wonder what I said there, I have forgotten about it ...

Reid: I think you’ll recall ...

Borges: Something about forerunners, and a reception ...

Reid: Did this notion that a writer that we read now creates his own fore­
runners, did that occur to you when you were reading Kafka? Or had it always
been around?
Borges: No, I think it was given to me like so many things, like all things by Kafka.

Reid: And it is the notion that Kafka gives us a certain focus, an eye or a way of looking at things with which one looks back on things one had previously read without that focus. This is what a lot of people have written about your work, however.

Borges: Well, there is a reason to enrich what I wrote. It wasn’t all that much. I suppose all readers enrich what they read. For example, Shakespeare is a greater writer now after Coleridge, etc. after the time when he wrote. We enrich him all the time. A writer should be enriched. We read more into him, more than the writer intended. I see that my critics are always inventing new stories of mine far better than the original ones that I wrote...

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Reid: Here is a question. Do you think Kafka has affected the detective novel? Would you comment on that? Who are your favorite detective writers?

Borges: No, I think they came before Kafka, they were forerunners. I think of Edgar Allan Poe, Chesterton, Wilkie Collins, and then quite a known writer, Eden Phillpotts.

I wrote a detective story, in a sense out of Kafka; it was called “Death and the Compass.” When it was finished, I felt it was like Kafka, I hope so.

Reid: Here is a question that is very practical. Which poem by Browning makes him a precursor of Kafka?

Borges: When I wrote that, I was thinking of a poem “How it Strikes a Contemporary.”

Reid: Here is a question. Oh, I think I am not quite sure that I understand it. Here is another question: Do you think a quiet style is essential to greatness in this century?

Borges: No, because so many fine writers are horribly quiet writers, William Butler Yeats, for example, Carl Sandburg, a very loud poet and quite a good poet, I should say. Of course, I do my best to be quiet, I am not a loud man by any means. Kafka was quiet all the time, quiet and kind and terrifying.

Reid: Apropos, here is a question. Considering how important Kafka is today, why do you think he did not wish for us to see his work?

Borges: Yes, he asked Brod to destroy it. I think Kafka wanted it to be known, imperfect, he wanted it to be published left his great poem to his friends and so wouldn’t. A man must destroy his own his work would be published. He knew They were friends.

Reid: Do you think he was sure that

Borges: I met Kafka’s ghost last nig

Reid: What do you think about Kafka

Borges: I don’t think it is his best so

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Reid: Here is quite a rude question: I

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Reid: Borges, you learned German i

Borges: Yes, in Geneva. Yes, I taught
deutsch, I am afraid to say.
**Conversations**

Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations with Alastair Reid, 1983

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**Borges:** Yes, he asked Brod to destroy it. But he knew he wouldn’t destroy it. I think Kafka wanted it to be known, that he knew that the work was imperfect, he wanted it to be published, not out of concern for himself; he left his great poem to his friends and said to destroy it. But he knew they wouldn’t. A man must destroy his own work or he doesn’t . . . He knew that his work would be published. He knew Max Brod, and Max Brod understood. They were friends.

**Reid:** Do you think he was sure that it would be kept and preserved?

**Borges:** I met Kafka’s ghost last night and he said so.

**Reid:** What do you think about Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*?

**Borges:** I don’t think it is his best story. The title is “The Change.” In German it is “Die Verwandlung.” And that means “The Change.”

**Beicken:** The transformation.

**Borges:** Transformation, of course.

**Reid:** Here is quite a rude question: Did you ever, like Kafka, want to burn your manuscripts?

**Borges:** I should have done so, but I am afraid I printed them, of course. No, I destroyed many books of mine. Before I published my first book I destroyed three manuscripts. My first book came out in 1923, I was twenty-four at that time. I destroyed three books before that one. Because my father told me: ‘Only write when you feel an inner need to do so. Re-write as often as you can.’ And one more: ‘Don’t rush into print.’ And yet I rushed into print at the age of twenty-four with that first book. One or two poems can be found in there, the rest is sheer stuff of nonsense, I should say.

**Reid:** Have you continued to be interested in translation?

**Borges:** I translated Faulkner’s *The Wild Palms*, and then a piece of André Gide. I and my mother translated together. She did Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. She also translated a very fine story by a writer called Vincent Benét from a book called *Tales Before Midnight*, a very fine book. I wonder what became of him, whether he still lives or not. Vincent Benét, *Tales Before Midnight*. “Before” makes it more uncanny than Tales at Midnight or Tales After Midnight. “Before” is better.

**Reid:** Borges, you learned German in Switzerland.

**Borges:** Yes, in Geneva. Yes, I taught myself German. Not Schweizerdeutsch, I am afraid to say.
Reid: You wrote a poem in *La Rosa Profunda* to the German language.

Borges: Yes.

Reid: What is your connection to the German language?

Borges: I think it is one of the most beautiful of languages except when spoken by Germans, somehow I can’t stand it. A beautiful language, like all languages perhaps, when spoken by foreigners.

Reid: How about your connection to the English language?

Borges: The English language is essential to me. [After a long explanation, Borges, digressing into Icelandic, concludes with the Lord’s Prayer in Anglo-Saxon.]

Reid: Borges, we thank you and we honor you.