

MEETING BORGES
A MISCELLANY OF FIRST ENCOUNTERS



Dana Cook

GRAHAM GREENE, NOVELIST: *Eyes looking into themselves*

I would like to recount the occasion on which I met Borges. I was invited with him to lunch by my friend Victoria Ocampo, and I was dispatched to the National Library to lead him to her flat because of his blindness. Almost as soon as the door had shut behind us at the National Library, we began to talk about literature. Borges talked about the influence G. K. Chesterton had had on him and the influence Robert Louis Stevenson had had on his later stories. He spoke of the prose of Stevenson as a great influence. I then interjected a remark. Robert Louis Stevenson did write at least one good poem. A poem about his ancestors. His ancestors had built the great lighthouses on the coast of Scotland and I knew that ancestors were an interest of Borges'...

It was a very noisy, crowded Buenos Aires street. Borges stopped on the edge of the pavement and recited the whole poem to me, word perfect. After an agreeable lunch, he sat on a sofa and quoted large chunks of Anglo-Saxon. That, I'm afraid, I was not able to follow. But I looked at his eyes as he recited and I was amazed at the

expression in those blind eyes. They did not look blind at all. They looked as if they were looking into themselves in some curious way, and they had great nobility. (Early 1960s)

From *Reflections*, by Graham Greene. Lester Orpen and Denys, 1990

ALBERTO MORAVIA, JOURNALIST AND NOVELIST: *Pablo who?*

I interviewed him for the *Corriere della sera*: likable, a bit of a trickster. “Did you know Picasso?” I asked him. “Picasso? Never heard the name,” he answered. Very Argentinian and bookish, the typical, brilliant heir of a nonnational culture. (early 1960s)

From *Life of Moravia*, by Alberto Moravia with Alain Elkann.
Steerforth Press, 2000

HERBERT A. SIMON, ECONOMIST, ORGANIZATION: *Origin of the labyrinth*

In December of 1970, Dorothea and I visited Argentina, where I was to give some lectures on management. In my correspondence about arrangements, I did something I have never done before nor since—I asked for an audience with a celebrity. For a decade, I had admired the stories of Jorge Borges (I didn’t then know his poetry), and had been struck by the role that mazes played in them. I wanted to know why...

I met Borges in his beautiful high-ceilinged baroque office in the Biblioteca Nazionale. We had several hours of conversation (in English)...

BORGES: But I’d like to know why you are interested in having this conversation.

SIMON: I want to know how it was that the labyrinth entered into your field of vision, into your concepts, so that you incorporated it in your stories.

BORGES: I remember having seen an engraving of the labyrinth in a French book—when I was a boy. It was a circular building without doors but with many windows. I used to gaze at this engraving and think that if I brought a loupe [a small magnifying glass] close to it, it would reveal the Minotaur.

From *Models of My Life*, by Hebert A. Simon. Basic Books/HarperCollins, 1991.

ABRAHAM PAIS, THEORETICAL PHYSICIST: *Fear of immortality*

I met Jorge Luis Borges in New York after a poetry reading, a man whose writings I admire enormously. At age seventy-two his face was still smooth and full of vitality. We talked about the resemblance between science and literature—beginning in a myth and ending in it as well (see his essay on Cervantes in *Labyrinths*). I remember one other curious comment of his: “Sometimes I have the haunting fear of being immortal.” (1971)

from *A Tale of Two Continents: A Physicist's Life in a Turbulent World*,
by Abraham Pais. Princeton University Press, 1997.

PAUL THEROUX, TRAVEL WRITER AND NOVELIST: *Ideas from the air*

There was a sound of scuffing in the corridor, and a distinct grunt. Borges emerged from the dimly lit foyer, feeling his way along the wall. He was dressed formally, in a dark blue suit and dark tie; his black shoes were loosely tied, and a watch chain depended from his pocket. He was taller than I had expected, and there was an English cast to his face, a pale seriousness in his jaw and forehead. His eyes were swollen, staring and sightless. But for his faltering, and the slightest tremble in his hands, he was in excellent health. He had the fussy precision of a chemist. His skin was clear—there were no blotches on his hands—and there was a firmness in his face...He spoke so rapidly that I was not aware of an accent until he had finished speaking. He seemed breathless. He spoke in bursts, but without hesitation, except when starting a new subject. Then, stuttering, he raised his trembling hands and seemed to claw the subject out of the air and shake ideas from it as he went along. (Buenos Aires, 1978)

From *The Old Patagonian Express*, by Paul Theroux. Houghton Mifflin, 1979.

FRANCIS KING, NOVELIST: *Erudite lecturettes*

It was during a British Council lecture-tour...that I met Jorge Luis Borges, a writer whom I revered...

...Borges now lived in an orderly flat, with an orderly peasant woman to act as his housekeeper...

...Borges sat me down on a sofa and then, literally, almost sat on top of me. Since the blind soon learn their way about their own premises, I presumed that this contact was intentional. I was embarrassingly conscious of his arm along my own, of his knee against mine, and of the side of the sofa digging into my ribs. At once he began to ask me questions: never about myself or the England which he told me that he so much loved, but about this or that English author. Did I read Kipling? Did I admire Browning? Did I feel that Stevenson was too smooth to be a truly great writer? But, like Pontius Pilate, he did not stay for an answer. I would start to say something and he would cut me off with a lecturette. Since each lecturette was erudite, lambent with a playful irony and often barbed with wit, I had no complaint.

From the first he struck me as projecting all the winsomeness of a supremely gifted child. The chief joy of this child was to make brilliantly intricate constructions, not out of such real materials provided by life as, for example, the intrusion of an English novelist into his home, but out of a seemingly inexhaustible Lego-kit of books read and remembered....(Buenos Aires, 1979)

From *Yesterday Came Suddenly*, by Francis King. Constable, 1993

HERBERT MITGANG, LITERARY JOURNALIST

In Manhattan for one day before going to Indiana University for a series of *charlas* ("chats"), Jorge Luis Borges, the internationally revered Argentinian poet and storyteller, sat in a restaurant only two blocks from where *Evita*, the musical about the Argentinian dictator Perón's mistress and wife, was playing.

I asked him (guessing his reply but wanting to hear his own inimitable ironic-humorous response) if he planned to attend it.

"Why should I? We never mention her in Argentina today. At least, I hope people don't. *Evita* was one of the ladies in the brothel, you know."

Borges knows about the Perón dictatorship from personal experience. "Perón did not like my family because we despised his regime. He arrested my mother. I was removed from my post in 1965 as di-

rector of the National Library and appointed an inspector of fish and fowl—a chicken inspector,” he said, only half amused.

Borges smiled sweetly, innocently. An ever-present smile composes the features of the silver-haired poet’s face, an inner serenity that perhaps comes from the fact that he has been blind for a quarter of a century—and an inner vision that has enabled him to dictate some of his finest writings during these years. (1980)

From Words Still Count With Me: A Chronicle of Literary Conversations,
by Herbert Mitgang. W.W. Norton, 1995

Compiled by Dana Cook
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