

## ***Labyrinths: Jorge Luis Borges on Difference and Repetition***

There is scarcely a writer more interested in play, and in playing games with his readers, than the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges. It can be hard to tell when he is serious. Equally, it can be hard to tell when he is joking. Indeed, one of the characteristics of his work is that it takes play (in all senses of the term) seriously, at the same time that it plays with—or seeks the play in—what is serious, whether that be mortality, theology, philosophy, or what for Borges is the particularly serious question of literature.

Among other things, Borges plays with genre, with the forms that writing can take and also what the reader expects of it—for the cues provided by genre are, in the end, ways of managing a reader's expectations. *Labyrinths*, which was the first substantial collection of Borges's work to appear in English (first published in 1962, but periodically augmented and revised thereafter), draws from four of Borges's books in Spanish: it includes most of *Ficciones* ("Fictions," 1944/1956) and *El aleph* ("The Aleph," 1949/1952), which the translators call "Stories"; a smaller selection from *Discusión* ("Argument," 1932) and *Otras inquisiciones* ("Other Inquisitions," 1952), classified as "Essays"; and a few texts from *El hacedor* ("The Maker," 1960), grouped under the heading "Parables." But the forms bleed into each other: many of the stories are presented as essays, or as history, chronicle, memoir, or confession; the essays are often as much experiments in thought and style as are the stories. Meanwhile, the parables are distinguished mostly because they are simply shorter, a consequence of the fact that Borges had gone blind—after half a lifetime of steadily deteriorating vision—by the time he wrote, or rather dictated, them.

Often Borges returns to similar concerns, but in different genres or forms. Amid all the variation in style, there is also much repetition in his work. But this is as much theme as style: Borges is interested in difference and repetition, in the secrets that we do not notice the first time around, but which we may discover have been evident all along. (Hence his stories are always worth reading more than once.) It is perhaps no coincidence that a man who was losing his sight should be fascinated by how we can so easily be fooled by what we think we see, by what we believe to be obvious. His games often challenge convention and common sense, teasing out contradictions by taking ideas to their logical extremes. *He exposes secret complicities, as when apparent oppositions hide more fundamental similarities. But he is also concerned with how novelty and change emerge from repetition, how real difference*

*arises from the most minor of variations.* For a writer who is often viewed as conservative (in both habits and expressed political opinions), Borges proves surprisingly attentive to the possible conditions for social and other change. His stories are not simply exercises in intellectual ingenuity. At the centre of every labyrinth, life and death are at stake!



Illustration of labyrinth, with Theseus and Minotaur at centre

### 1. *Undermining Difference*

In "Borges and I," a very short quasi-autobiographical text in which the author, "I," distinguishes himself from the writer or public figure, the one whose name ("Borges") appears on the front covers of his books, Borges (or is it "I") provides a brief capsule summary of his career to date: "Years ago I tried to free myself from him [Borges] and went from the mythologies of the outskirts to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things" (246-247). By "outskirts" ("*arrabal*"), Borges means the rough suburbs of a rapidly expanding early twentieth-century Buenos Aires, where the country was being overtaken by the city, and haunt of gangsters and ruffians who once thrived in this retreating milieu. We see something of this landscape in the detective story "Death and the Compass": "To the left and the right of the automobile the city disintegrated; the firmament grew and houses were of less importance than a brick kiln or a poplar tree"; it is here that the body is found, "a keep knife wound [. . . in] his breast" of one Daniel Simon Azevedo, "the last representative of a generation of bandits who knew how to manipulate a dagger, but not a revolver" (79). But in these stories we equally see the "games with time and infinity" with which Borges's name is ultimately associated, especially abroad.

In "The Secret Miracle," for instance, time stands still as a man sentenced to death by firing squad is mysteriously granted a year, while he and everything around him is paralyzed, stuck in the moment, in which he is able to complete in his head the verse drama he has been working on: "Meticulously, motionlessly, secretly, he wrought in time his lofty, invisible labyrinth" (94). "The Library of Babel," meanwhile, describes a library that is a universe, containing every possible book, in all possible languages and in all possible variations. Made up of hexagons like a beehive, "The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible" (52). Not that the violence of the *arrabal* is entirely absent in this rarified environment of infinite books: stirred up by the search for the volume that would vindicate them, some librarians "disputed in the narrow corridors, proffered dark curses, strangled each other in the divine stairways, flung the deceptive books into the air shafts, met their deaths cast down in a similar fashion by the inhabitants of remote regions. Others went mad. . ." (55). Indeed, throughout these stories the twin motifs of sudden, arbitrary death and esoteric ratiocination run hand in hand. These games can be (quite literally) deadly.

In short, the distinction that “Borges and I” proposes between “mythologies of the outskirts” and “games with time and infinity” is—like the distinction that the “parable” posits in its title, between author and writer—unstable and uncertain. No sooner does Borges establish a difference than he questions and undermines it. What is dissimilar, even diametrically opposed, comes to take on the characteristics of its opposite. I wonder if you see any other examples of this: of stories in which distinctions are blurred, difference becomes repetition, and the other emerges as mirror image—or more—of the same? Pick a story, think about how this logic unfolds, and write down some notes; again, feel free to add them also in the comments to this video. While you do that, I’ll have a *mate*, but I’ll be right back.

#### Drinks Pairing: *Mate*

*Mate* is the quintessential drink of Argentina, Uruguay, and (prepared slightly differently) Paraguay. In “Funes the Memorious,” the farmboy-turned-savant, Ireneo Funes, has “a mate gourd bearing the Uruguayan coat of arms” (59), as though to stamp the drink, and by association Funes himself, with the claims of nationality. But as well as a national drink (albeit one, like many such symbols, that is not the unique preserve of a single nation), *mate* is also very much a social drink. Though people do drink it alone—while reading, studying, relaxing, or taking a walk in the park—they tend to drink it in groups. The gourd of dried *yerba mate*, into which hot water is poured from a kettle or thermos, is typically shared, passed from hand to hand: one person sips from the steel straw that has been thrust into the steeping mixture before passing it either to the next person or back to whoever has hot water, who refreshes the drink and hands it out again. As well as symbol, then, *mate* is an embodied practice of unusual intimacy. Borges himself, meanwhile, tells us: “I drank a lot of *mate* when I was young. Drinking *mate*, for me, was the way to feel like an old-time *criollo*. I’d pack it in the gourd myself and I think I did it very badly because there were always some suspicious bits of straw floating around in it. [. . .]. And now, my God, I’ve lost the habit” (qtd. in Vázquez, *Borges* 390).

One instance of a story in which Borges plays with collapsing distinctions is “Three Versions of Judas.” Again, this is a text that lacks many of the features we associate with stories, being without much in the way of plot or characterization: it reads, instead, as

abstruse intellectual history, describing in sometimes tedious detail the life and work of a Swedish theologian, Nils Runeberg, replete with footnotes and citations as well as learned discussion of theological niceties. But the arguments that Runeberg is portrayed as advancing threaten to overturn one of the fundamental narratives of Western culture: the story of the Incarnation and Passion of Christ. For the theologian expands “monstrously” on the claim about Christ’s betrayer, Judas Iscariot, made by English Romantic essayist Thomas de Quincey (most famous for *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*): “Everything connected with our ordinary conceptions of this man, of his real purposes, and of his ultimate fate, apparently is erroneous” (“Judas Iscariot” 147). Runeberg’s analyses of Judas, renowned over the millennia as epitome of treason, selling Christ out for thirty pieces of silver, focus on the disgraced apostle’s own “sacrifice” that in fact, in the theologian’s first approach to the problem, “reflects” that of Jesus, an earthly “mirror” essential to the divine plan (*Labyrinths* 96, 97). In subsequent elaborations, Runeberg’s hypothesis is more provocative still: not only is Judas *like* the Messiah, Judas *is* the Messiah. In this new account of the incarnation, of the Word became flesh, “God made himself totally a man but a man to the point of infamy, a man to the point of reprobation and the abyss. [. . .] He could have been Alexander or Pythagoras or Rurik or Jesus; He chose the vilest destiny of all: He was Judas” (99). Judas, not Jesus, dies to save our sins. Everything we thought we knew is wrong: up is down, left is right.

For a lover of paradoxes, ironies, and contradictions (and Borges certainly delighted in all three), this transposition of reviled human into secret divinity is very neat and, from the right perspective, wryly amusing. Other stories perform similar inversions, upending expectations and common sense: in “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero,” for instance, the hero of the tale turns out to be in fact the traitor, though he redeems himself (and becomes implicitly once more heroic) by acting out a strange drama in which history imitates art; in “The Circular Ruins,” a man tries to attain almost divine magical powers by dreaming up another living being, only to discover that he himself has been dreamt up by another; in “Death and the Compass,” the detective ends up the victim, outsmarted by a criminal who uses his own methods against him. Borges is expert in the second look, asking us to think again, to reconsider what we think we know. He is the eternal sceptic.

## 2. *Questioning Similarity*

If unlike can be like—if difference can turn out to be repetition or similarity—then like can equally end up, in Borges's hands, as unlike. Or rather, sometimes the most infinitesimal distinction can turn out to have surprising significance. This, after all, is the premise of "Borges and I": the self is split; "I" is not quite "Borges," and "Borges" is not quite "I." "I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee, and the prose of Stevenson," we are told. "He [Borges] shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor" (246). The two are similar, perhaps at first sight identical, surrounded by the same accoutrements. But one is more of an "actor," merely imitating or simulating with a vanity that indicates too much self-consciousness; being too conscious of oneself also distances one from the self, as you begin to perceive yourself as other. The gap that opens up within the self is not exactly intolerable ("It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship"), but something escapes and something is lost: "my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him" (247). The difference between the two, within a now fragmented and lost unity, is both definite and incalculable, undecidable: "I do not know which of us has written this page" (247). As so often in Borges, (almost) everything comes down to writing: I who write can no longer locate myself with any certainty in what I have written; through writing, I leave a trace in the world, but at the cost of a self-alienation as that trace is absorbed, at best, into "the language [. . .] and tradition" (246). The best that one can hope is to become impersonal, common: to produce a text that others will cite (consciously or otherwise), and thereby also appropriate.

Borges explores further these concerns about legacy or inheritance, and at the same time takes the proposition about the significance of minimal differences to its extreme, in "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote." This story purports, in the first instance, to be a catalogue of an otherwise little-known French writer's literary legacy: the narrator lists this Pierre Menard's "visible work," which ranges from poetry to aesthetic theory to translation. Menard has also left the world "a technical article on improving the game of chess," in which he "proposes, recommends, discusses, and finally rejects" the possible "innovation" of "eliminating one of the rook's pawns" (37). This is a writer interested in games, and in changing their rules; but it is also someone whose interests and obsessions

do not obviously have a much wider impact beyond a small—and, the narrator obliquely indicates, eccentric—coterie of fellow writers and hangers on.

But Menard has also left behind another work, which is invisible, “subterranean,” and therefore easily overlooked. Nonetheless, the narrator claims that it is “perhaps the most significant of our time.” It “consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of chapter twenty-two” (39). What Menard has written, in short, is word for word a repetition of (part of) the masterpiece of the Spaniard Miguel de Cervantes, the first modern European novel. The redundancy of Menard’s project is, on the face of it, obvious: we already, after all, have the *Quixote*. What could such a ridiculous enterprise achieve? But the narrator’s claim, citing as an example a couple of lines that otherwise differ by not an iota, is that a *Quixote* written by Cervantes is a product of its time, perhaps even to be expected if we believe that historical context determines the horizons of literary ambition: it is “necessary and perhaps even unavoidable” (41). By contrast, for a French symbolist poet of the early twentieth century to write the (very same) text is a heroic achievement that goes against the grain of context and history. Where Cervantes merely expresses the spirit of his age, Menard’s *Quixote* is “astounding” in the way it goes against all we think we know now. The later text, then, which appears to be mere “copy” or imitation, is in fact “almost infinitely richer” (43, 42). The like becomes unlike; the same is now radically distinct.

Here, and in his many other “games with time and infinity” (and with much else besides), Borges is interested in asking what is the smallest difference that makes a difference. How, for instance (in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”) a throwaway conversational remark, “the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia” (3) might lead to the discovery of a vast, transhistorical conspiracy to materialize an entirely other world. How (in “The Lottery in Babylon”) we might imagine a society entirely governed by the exigencies of chance and fortune. He plays out, often (fittingly) in very similar ways, “examples of variation with unlimited repetition” (54) that constitute, he suggests, the elusive conditions for true novelty, true change in a world in which what we believe to be major differences are too often revealed to be simply more of the same. And in the end, Borges’s philosophical concerns lead him back to the issues of violence and power, margin and centre, past and present, and the seemingly inexorable advance of a particular form of urban modernity. For the question of how to make a difference, of the smallest difference

that makes a (real) difference, is also a properly political question—perhaps the only political question that really counts. It is the question posed by the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin: “What is to be done?” And the fact that Borges continues to ask it, despite all the odds, evidences his faith that there is always some play available in the labyrinths in which we find ourselves, in the linguistic and other fetters that bind us. He is the eternal optimist.

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Song: “Milonga de Manuel Flores” (Jorge Luis Borges / Aníbal Troilo)