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Labyrinths:

Jorge Luis Borges on
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Labyrinths:

Jorge Luis Borges on
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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There is scarcely a writer more interested
in play, and in playing games with
his readers, than Jorge Luis Borges.

His work takes play (in all senses of the term) seriously, at the same time that it plays with what is serious, whether that be mortality, theology, philosophy, or what for Borges is the particularly serious question of literature.

Borges plays with genre, with the forms
that writing can take and also what
the reader expects of it.

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.

Amid all the variation in style, there is
also much repetition.

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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.

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.

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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.

At the centre of every labyrinth,
life and death are at stake.



UNDERMINING DIFFERENCE

“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)

“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.” (79)

“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.

“Meticulously, motionlessly, secretly,
he wrought in time his lofty,
invisible labyrinth.” (94)

“The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible.” (52)

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).

These games can be (quite literally) deadly.

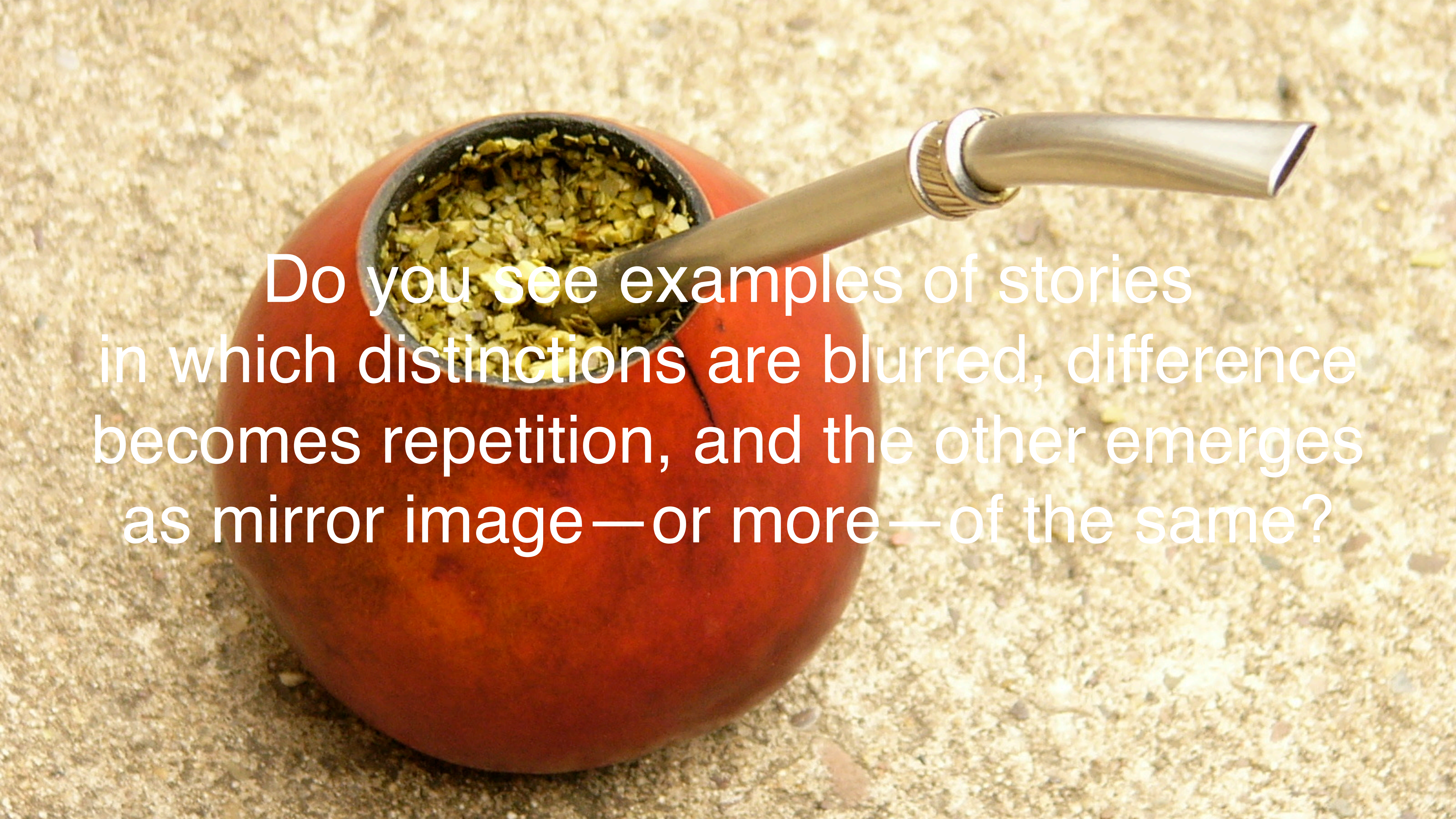
The distinction that “Borges and I” proposes between “mythologies of the outskirts” and “games with time and infinity” is—like the distinction that the “parable” posits in its title, between author and writer—unstable and uncertain.

No sooner does Borges establish
a difference than he questions
and undermines it.

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a difference than he questions
and undermines it.

What is dissimilar, even diametrically
opposed, comes to take on the
characteristics of its opposite.

Do you see examples of stories in which distinctions are blurred, difference becomes repetition, and the other emerges as mirror image—or more—of the same?

A close-up photograph of a traditional South American mate. It consists of a red, rounded ceramic gourd (mate) filled with dried, yellowish-green yerba mate leaves. A long, silver metal drinking tube (bombillo) is inserted into the gourd, extending towards the right. The entire setup is placed on a light-colored, textured surface, likely sand or gravel. The lighting is bright, casting soft shadows.

Do you see examples of stories
in which distinctions are blurred, difference
becomes repetition, and the other emerges
as mirror image—or more—of the same?

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.

“Everything connected with our ordinary conceptions of [Judas Iscariot], of his real purposes, and of his ultimate fate, apparently is erroneous.”

(Thomas de Quincey)

In subsequent elaborations, Runeberg's hypothesis is more provocative still.

In subsequent elaborations, Runeberg's hypothesis is more provocative still.

Not only is Judas *like* the Messiah,
Judas *is* the Messiah.

“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)

Everything we thought we knew was wrong.

Everything we thought we knew is wrong.

Up is down, left is right.

Borges is expert in the second look,
asking us to think again, to reconsider
what we think we know.

Borges is expert in the second look,
asking us to think again, to reconsider
what we think we know.

He is the eternal sceptic.



QUESTIONING SIMILARITY

If unlike can be like—if difference can turn out to be repetition or similarity—then like can equally end up as unlike.

If unlike can be like—if difference can turn out to be repetition or similarity—then like can equally end up as unlike.

Sometimes the most infinitesimal distinction can turn out to have surprising significance.

“I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee, and the prose of Stevenson [. . .].

“He [Borges] shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor.” (246)

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, but something escapes and something is lost.

The gap that opens up within the self is not exactly intolerable, 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)

“I do not know which of us has
written this page.” (247)

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.

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).

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).

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, what 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.

What is the smallest difference
that makes a difference?

Borges plays out, often 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.

The question of how to make a difference is also a properly political question—perhaps the only political question that really counts.


The question of how to make a difference is also a properly political question—perhaps the only political question that really counts.

“What is to be done?”

There is always some play available in the labyrinths in which we find ourselves, in the linguistic and other fetters that bind us.

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Borges is the eternal optimist.



MUSIC

Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca

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¡Don't leave it to mañana!

