

# Roberto Arlt, Jorge Luis Borges, and Felisberto Hernández

Arts One

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**Medieval labyrinth design**

# Lost in the Labyrinth

- Milieu
- Bios
- Detail
- Violence
- Mazes
- Mirrors
- Monsters
- Affect



**MILIEU**



# Three Writers, One Milieu

- Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986)
  - Roberto Arlt (1900-1942)
  - Felisberto Hernández (1902-1964)
- 
- The River Plate (Río de la Plata)
  - Rapid industrialization and urbanization

# Milieu: Against Canon

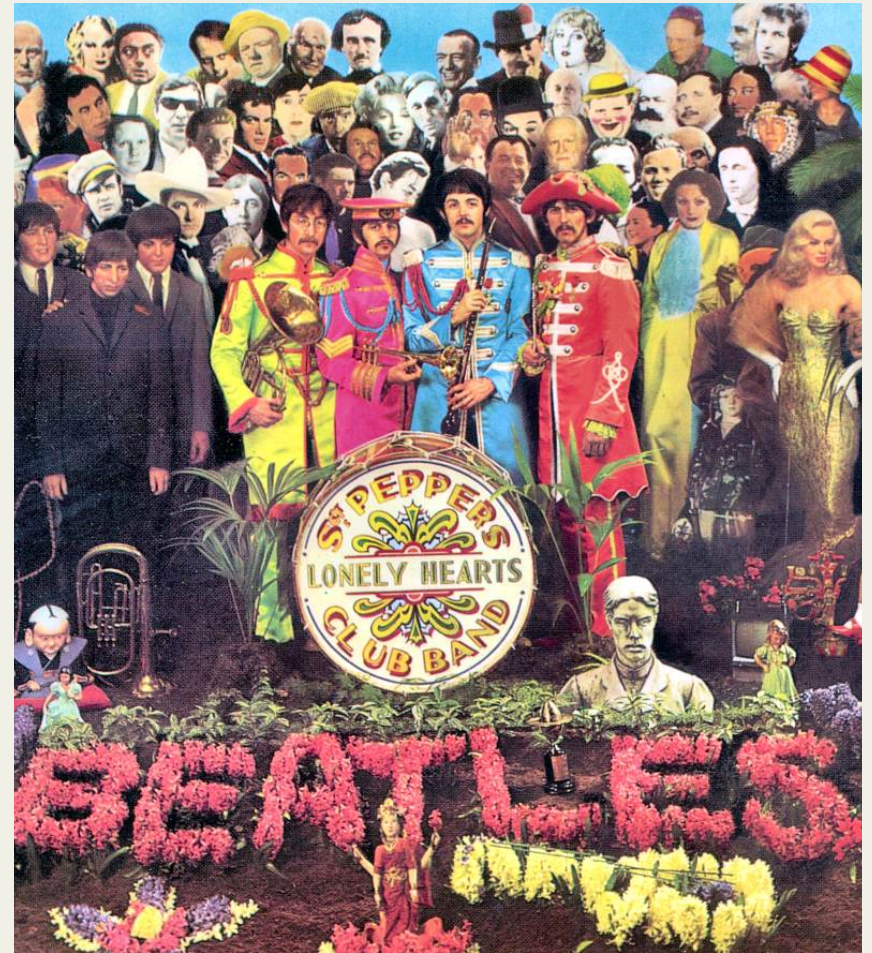
- The canon is selective
- The canon is transhistorical
- The canon is decontextualized
- The canon is a parade of DWEM
- The canon is stuck on representation
- Let's have a little less Geist, a little more Zeit

# Milieu: Against Canon

- From Historicism to “New” Historicism
- Recovering a multitude of perspectives
- Seeing canonical texts in contexts
- Reading overlapping, competing discourses
- An immanent approach to literary history

# Milieu: Not one, but many

- Geographical
- Historical
- Social
- Intellectual
- Political
- Discursive





## **Satellite image of the River Plate**

Looking Southeast. Buenos Aires at bottom right; Montevideo, top left.





**Political map of the River Plate**

# Milieu: The River Plate

- A colonial backwater
- Capitals isolated from countries
- Mass immigration in late nineteenth century
- Rapid modernization
- Italians who speak Spanish and dream in French



# Milieu: Argentina/Uruguay

- Uruguay, the Canada of Latin America
- Underpopulated, undefined, overlooked
- Resents larger neighbour
- Divided by common language
- Narcissism of small differences





# Milieu: The Modern City

- 1913: Income pp similar to France, Germany
- Far ahead of Italy, Spain
- Outgrew Canada, Australia
- 1920s: world's leading exporter of beef
- 1929: World 4th highest GDP per capita
- Eleventh largest exporting nation in world
- More cars per capita than the UK

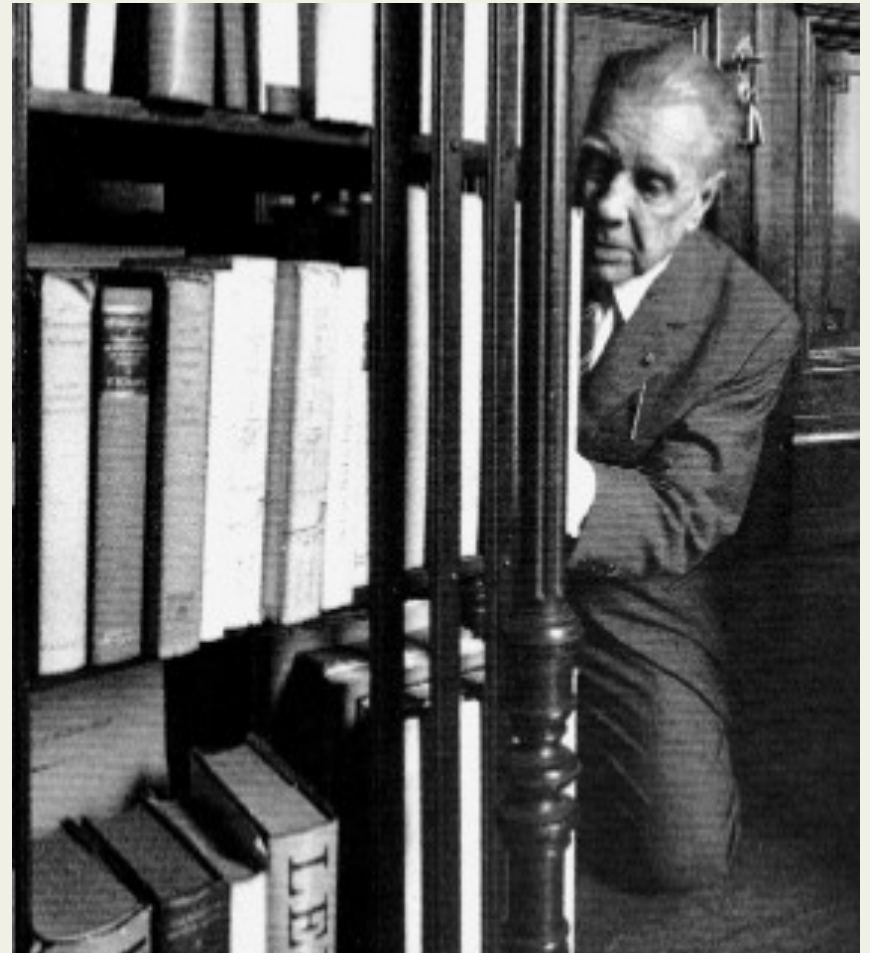
# Milieu: The Modern City

- 1869-1914: From 180,000 to 1.5 million in BA
- 1895: 2/3 foreign-born; 1914: 1/2
- “A new Babel”: Italian, French, Lunfardo
- Metro, street plan, widest street in world
- But Borges et al writers of suburbs
- Suburbs: where city meets countryside
- Suburbs: where future meets past

**BIOS**

# Jorge Luis Borges

- 1899-1986
- Mixed heritage: Irish / criollo
- Librarian; became blind
- Wrote short stories and poetry
- The Latin American Nobel that never was
- Fictions (1944)

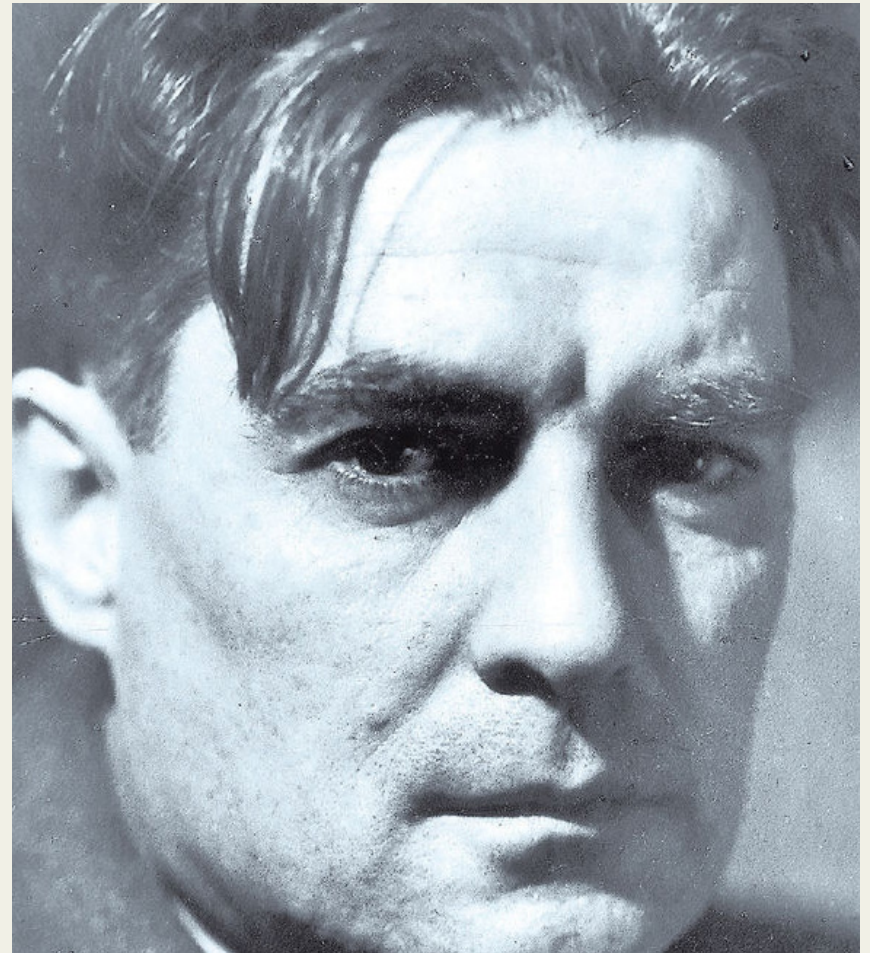


“Between cultures, between literary genres, between languages Borges is the writer of the *orillas*, a marginal in the centre, a cosmopolitan on the edge. He [. . .] entrusts literary processes and formal procedures with the power to explore the never-ending philosophical and moral question of our lives.” (Beatriz Sarlo)

“He [. . .] constructs his originality through quotations, copies, the rewritings of other texts, because, from the outset, he conceives of writing as reading, and he distrusts [. . .] any literary representation of reality.” (Beatriz Sarlo)

# Roberto Arlt

- 1900-1942
- Son of immigrants
- Journalist and writer
- Wrote short stories, chronicles, novels, and plays
- The first modern writer of Latin America?
- Mad Toy (1926)



“The truth is that he wrote like shit. Who? [...] Arlt, of course, Arlt. [...] No doubt he has one undeniable merit: it would be impossible to write worse. In that respect he is unique and without rival.” (Ricardo Piglia)



“The highest praise one can give Arlt is to say that at his best moments he is unreadable [. . .]. And in this regard Arlt is absolutely modern: he far surpasses those fools who accuse him. [. . .] Literature, they said [. . . had] a sacred mission to perform: to preserve and defend the purity of the national language in the face of the mixture, intermingling and disintegration brought on by the immigrants. [. . .] [But] Arlt's style is a boiling mass, a contradictory surface.” (Ricardo Piglia)

# Felisberto Hernández

- 1902-1964
- Uruguayan, son of Spanish father
- Pianist in cinemas, halls, and private homes
- Wrote short stories and novellas
- A “cult” writer?



“When Felisberto objectifies a human subject, he turns that subject into an object of the sort that exists in Felisberto’s world, that is, an object that has already assumed some degree of subjectivity.” (Santiago Colas)

“And conversely, when Felisberto endows his objects with subjectivity, they become the sort of subjects that Felisberto has already in some ways objectified. [. . .] Ultimately, the combined dynamics dissolve the categories each other, to create a fictional world in which [. . .] the terms “subject” and “object” [. . .] do not help us to make sense of that world.” (Santiago Colas)

**DETAIL**

# “How Do We Read?”

- Read Three Times
  - First: A preliminary foray, assessment
  - Second: Read for flow, plot, narrative
  - Third: Re-read for detail
- 
- Read selectively and reflectively

“The common reader does not readily perceive nuances” (“Guayaquil” 394)

“Menard has (perhaps unwittingly) enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique [. . .]. This technique fills the calmest books with adventure” (“Pierre Menard” 95)

# Reading for Detail

- What words do you stumble upon?
- What words repeat?
- What is apparently superfluous, decorative?
- Can we see a figure in the wallpaper?
- Details may undercut, derail narrative
- The devil (monster?) is in the details





**Don Quixote; engraving by Gustave Doré**

# Detail: Pierre Menard

- An exercise in reading
- Apparently an academic article or note
- Catalog of the work of a minor poet/scholar
- Detailing his literary production
- But our suspicions are raised from the outset
- “deceitful,” “deplorable”
- How to read this reading?

“... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.” (Miguel de Cervantes)

“... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.” (Pierre Menard)



**Set of US TV show, 1951**

# Detail: The Daisy Dolls

- The dolls are the same but different
- Objects like people; people like objects
- The importance of the captions
- Changing traffic: left to right
- Do details suggest secrets, portents?
- Is this imagination or mass reproduction

“Next to the garden was a factory, and the noise of the machines seeped through the plants and trees.” (“Daisy Dolls” 175)

“The soul inhabiting Daisy’s body was in touch with the machines.” (191)

“And when they caught up with him, he was going toward the noise of the machines” (230)



**Abandoned railway station, Jujuy province**



# Detail: The South

- Again, we are reading a reader
- Small details have large effects
- “symmetries and slight anachonisms”
- Are autobiographical elements mere details?
- Again, hints that destabilize narrative
- The details create a series of mirrors



“They went outside, and while there was no hope in Dahlmann, there was no fear, either. As he crossed the threshold, he felt that on that first night in the sanatorium, when they’d stuck that needle in him, dying in a knife fight under the open sky, grappling with his adversary, would have been a liberation, a joy, and a fiesta. He sensed that had he been able to choose or dream his death that night, this is the death he would have dreamed or chosen” (“The South” 179)

**VIOLENCE**

“A brief and tragic window on the sort of men that once fought their knife fights and lived their harsh lives in the tough neighborhoods on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.” (“Interloper” 348)

“That tired look that dead men get. [. . .] ‘All it takes to die is to be alive,’ one of the girls back in the crowd said.” (“Man on Pink Corner” 51)

# Violence

- Is this the state of nature?
- Is it the underside of “civil” society?
- Or the displaced violence of modernization?
- The cutting edge of primitive accumulation.

**MAZES**

“In Babylonia didst thou attempt to make me lose my way in a labyrinth of brass with many stairways, doors, and walls; now the Powerful One has seen fit to allow me to show thee mine, which has no stairways to climb, nor doors to force, nor wearying galleries to wander through, nor walls to impede thy passage.” (“The Two Kings” 263)

# Mazes

- Many labyrinths, of many types
- The city
- The universe
- Writing
- Thought
- Language



**MIRRORS**



“The earth we inhabit is an error, an incompetent parody. Mirrors and paternity are abominable because they multiply and affirm it.” (“Hakim” 43)

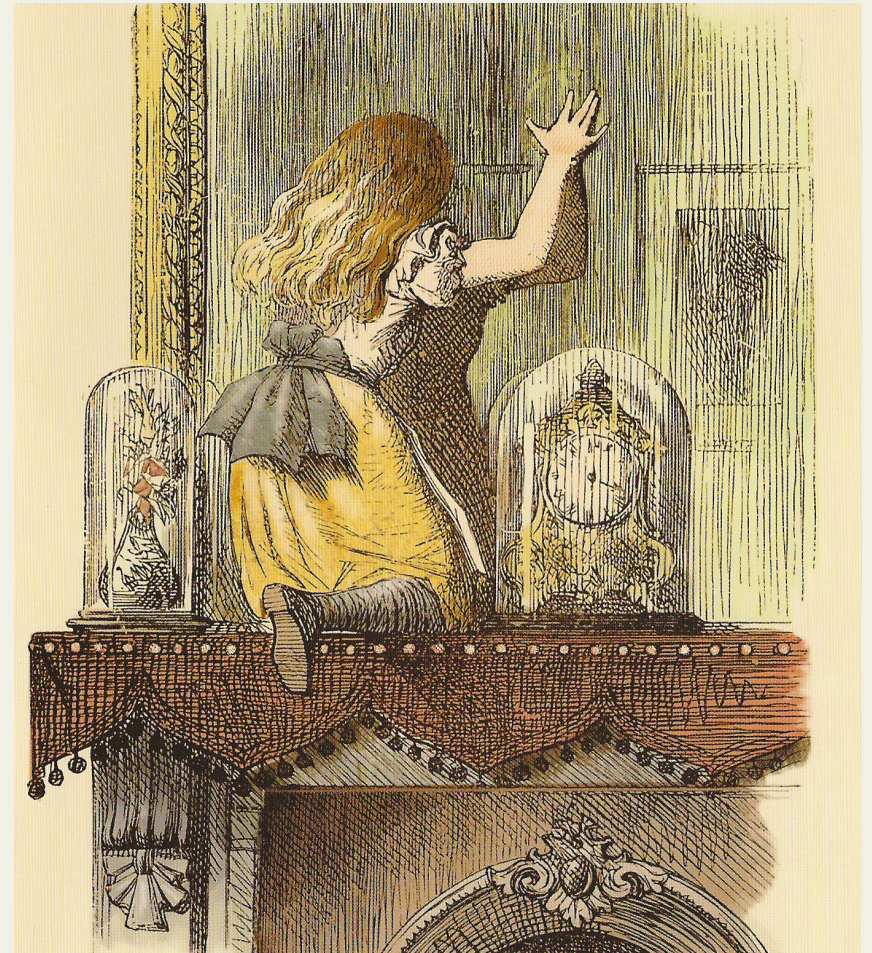
“For one of those gnostic, the visible universe was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are hateful because they multiply and proclaim it.” (“Tlön” 69)

“Mary was always careful to shield [Horace] from the mirrors: she dressed behind closed doors and made sure the curtains were in place before leaving the room.” (“Daisy Dolls” 206)

“From the mirror’s point of view he had always been a man with no head.” (“Daisy Dolls” 207)

# Mirrors: Fear of Reproduction

- Mirrors reproduce or repeat
- Confirm but also dissolve identity
- But with small differences
- They expand space—and time?





**Mirror Maze in Prague**

**MONSTERS**





**Goya, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters"**

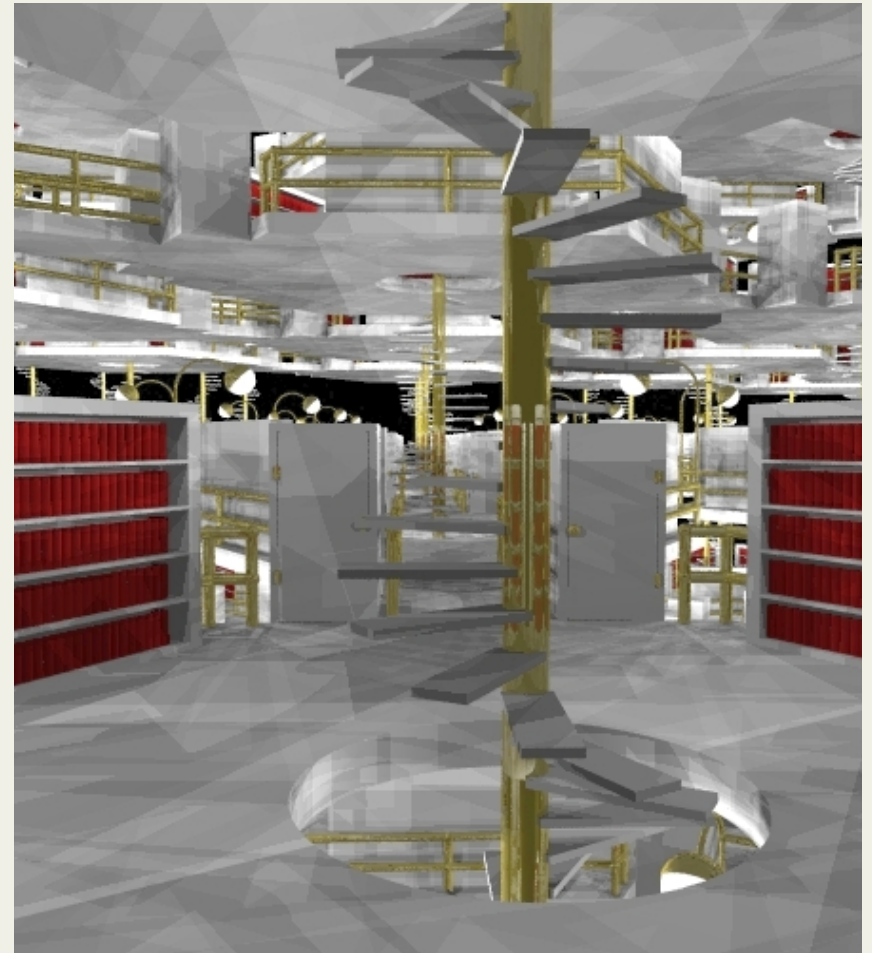
# Monsters: Civilization/Barbarism

- “Civilization and Barbarism”: which is which?
- Is modernity monstrous?
- Is reason monstrous?
- Which are worse: monsters of mind or flesh?



# Monsters: Order/Chaos

- “Hakim”: disorder through revelation
- “Emma Zunz”: order through dissimulation
- “Lottery”: a world ordered through chance
- “Library” a world made chaotic through order
- Is the milieu itself monstrous?





**AFFECT**



**Borges and groupies**

“And sitting there, Aunt Pepa spent the afternoon listening to the cat’s cries as it was cooked alive.” (“The Cooked Cat” 3)

“Let’s go to work, brother. The buzzard’ll come in to clean up after us. I killed ’er today. We’ll leave ’er her, her and her fancy clothes. She won’t cause any more hurt.” (“The Interloper” 351)

# Affect

- At first sight, these stories are devoid of affect
- Or rather, a disconnect between things
- But they are also disconcerting, troubling
- Do they show a desire for affect?
- A diagnosis that affect is now reduced?
- In place of music, the hum of the machines?
- Or a call for us all to become machinic?

# Affect, Power, and Prosthesis

- Affect as a measure of power (Spinoza)
- Modernity's many "prosthetic gods"
- Hence interest in objects and empowerment
- Objects empower us, but gain powers
- We become powerless without them
- Should we welcome this inhuman mixture?
- Or should we strive to be pure?