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“El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” and Bergsonian Duration

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HENRI BERGSON CONTEMPLATED virtually every aspect of human existence in an attempt to unravel the mysteries that have perplexed man through the centuries. Among Bergson's many theories, his philosophy concerning time is the most famous and, perhaps, his greatest accomplishment. Bergson, in *Matter and Memory*, differentiates between two categories of time. One is chronological or scientific time, or the time that governs human social order. The other is the time we experience directly, or time, in a metaphysical sense, that truly corresponds to reality and to our universe. Since Bergson believed that life is an inner experience, an internal flow, he rejected the former category as an inadequate conceptualization of time because it is a spatial, homogeneous medium that consists of numerically distinct units (minutes, hours, days, etc.). Although chronological time governs our daily life, it is an illusion. It does not correspond to human experience, which is, according to Bergson, an irreversible flow of states that melt into one another to form an indivisible process. This process is heterogeneous and perpetual. Time, for Bergson, thus becomes an endless flow, without a beginning or an end, that occupies a “duration.” It is this Bergsonian concept of time as duration that one encounters in much of the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, especially in “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” from the collection *Ficciones*.¹

¹ All quotations that appear in this study come from the translated edition of *Ficciones* edited by Anthony Kerrigan that is listed in the works cited. The story itself is translated by Helen Temple and Ruthven Todd.

The purpose of this study is to analyze this short story from a Bergsonian point of view. The results will reveal Borges's vision of the universe and our existence.

A brief summary of the story, as well as of Bergson's ideas, are in order. In "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," the protagonist Yu Tsun is a Chinese spy during World War I attempting to deliver a message to the Germans.² His job is to reveal the name of a secret allied base. First, he chooses a name out of the phone book that is synonymous with the name of the base. Then, in order to relay its location, he must kill the person whose name he had selected. The news of the murder in the papers will indicate to the Germans the site to be bombed. Yu Tsun chooses Stephen Albert, a sinologist who has dedicated his life to the study of a novel written by Yu Tsun's great grandfather, Ts'ui Pen. When Yu Tsun arrives at Albert's house he is welcomed in and the two discuss Ts'ui Pen and his novel. While Yu Tsun and Albert are discussing the novel, Madden, Yu Tsun's enemy and pursuer, arrives at the house. Upon Madden's arrival Yu Tsun kills Albert. Yu Tsun is arrested but the papers carry the headlines about the murder and the Germans know where to bomb.

The key element in this story, however, is not the factual account given by Yu Tsun in his deposition, but rather Ts'ui Pen's novel, also entitled *The Garden of Forking Paths*. The novel is in the form of a labyrinth, as is the actual garden outside Albert's house. Albert has deciphered the true meaning of the novel, which previously was considered a "shapeless mass of contradictory rough drafts" (96). The theme of Ts'ui Pen's novel is time itself. What is interesting about it is that it not only has diverse futures, but futures that happen all at once. For example, we could conceive of the possibility of listening to all radio stations at the same time. Therefore, in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" the idea of a labyrinth takes on a temporal, rather than a spatial, structure. It is here that Bergson's influence is evident. Borges, like Bergson, rejected the belief that time is a dimension of space. In his essay "Time and J.W. Dunne" Borges writes: "Dunne is a famous victim of that bad intellectual habit denounced by Bergson: to conceive of time as a fourth dimension of space" (1964, 20). For Bor-

² When I refer to Yu Tsun as the protagonist I am referring to the principal human character in the work. The true protagonist, however, is Time itself.

ges the opposite is true. As he states in "The Penultimate Version of Reality," space is "an episode of time" and consequently "situated in it, not vice versa" (1976, 37; translation mine). Therefore, the result is Ts'ui Pen's novel, in which every chapter develops every possibility for all the protagonists. Subsequently, there is a geometric expansion due to the possible situations for all characters in each chapter. The purpose of this is twofold: 1) to accurately depict time as Borges believed it to be, and 2) to create a universe so diminutive that the reader can inspect it.

In Bergson's efforts to define our existence, one of his focal points was the relationship between the mind and the body. His starting point was in terms of time rather than space. He concluded that there was no separation between the spatial (i.e. matter) and the temporal (i.e. consciousness or memory).³ Therefore, Bergson postulated a "preestablished harmony" (1991, 221) that characterized all things in the universe, including our mind and body. They form a union and function as one. Bergson believed the unifying basis for all things to be time, which is an endless flow that occupies a duration. Everything in this flow is constantly changing. Hence, our universe, as well as ourselves, are in perpetual motion: "The truth is that we change without ceasing, and that [our] state itself is nothing but change" (1920, 58). Since our state is one of constant change it logically follows that the past, present and future (being states themselves) are not distinct nor definitive. Our existence is not a homogeneous medium, rather, it is a heterogeneous one in which "states melt into one another like the crystals of a snowflake when touched for some time with the finger" (1920, 39). As mentioned previously, the accurate term for this heterogeneous fluid mass that describes existence is "duration." Bergson characterizes duration as follows: "Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances" (1920, 60). Where, however, does Bergson place this duration? His response is that

³ Bergson believed that those theories which make a distinction between the spatial and the temporal were ill-equipped to explain our existence, especially the relationship between the mind and the body. This dualism lead to "the impossibility of understanding how the spirit acts upon the body or the body upon the spirit" (1991, 221).

it resides on both sides of what chronological or mathematical time refers to as the "present":

It [duration] is both on this side and on that, and what I call "my present" has one foot in my past and another in my future. In my past, first, because "the moment in which I am speaking is already far from me"; in my future, next, because this moment is impending over the future: it is to the future that I am tending. (1991, 138)

Although there is a heterogeneous overlapping and our past "gnaws into the future" our consciousness cannot experience the same state twice due to our constant changing. Subsequently, our duration is indivisible and irreversible.

"El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" begins with a historical account of the delay encountered by a British military offensive in July of 1916. The reason for the delay is attributed to torrential rains. This information derives from Captain Liddel Hart's *A History of the World War*. However, Yu Tsun's deposition, which follows, reveals the true reason for the delay—the Germans bombed the British military base thanks to the information Yu Tsun provided. Why, then, does Borges begin the story with historical fact? Why not begin directly with Yu Tsun's deposition? One critic's response is that the opening paragraph "acts as a frame to the body of the text" (Rudy 133). This frame based on historical (i.e. chronological) fact serves to draw the reader into the narrative. Like Bergson, Borges believed that most humans participate in the illusion of chronological time. Therefore, on the one hand, the frame grounded in historical fact is a device utilized by Borges to lure the reader into his world. On the other hand, according to Rudy, it serves to subvert chronological time and emphasize its falsity:

This frame is there for the purpose of exploding on itself: it is subversive. History, chronological time, has no place in Borges' universe, and since his universe so often appears as the "book" or model of our universe, ours is left on shaky ground when he has completed his supposedly innocent operation of ascertaining the "truth." (133)

This subversion of history and chronological time is evident in the first paragraph. It begins with a historical event and then ends by stating that the following deposition "casts unsuspected light upon this event" (1962, 89). Consequently, the doubt concerning history (i.e. reality) that Borges immediately introduces into the narrative indicates the different version of reality that is about to unfold. Borges can now begin to penetrate the surface realities of this world and enter the metaphysical world which lies beyond everyday human experience.

As the body of the text opens with Yu Tsun's deposition, the subversion of chronological time continues. The first few existing pages of Yu Tsun's deposition are permeated by chronological references: "the hazy six o'clock sun" (90), he developed his plan in "ten minutes" (91), Fenton was "less than half an hour away" (91), his train was leaving in a "few minutes, at eight-fifty" (92), he avoided an encounter with Madden by "forty minutes" (92), etc. All these chronological references are undermined, however, by Yu Tsun's following statement: "Then I reflected that all things happen, happen to one, precisely *now*. Century follows century, and things happen only in the present" (90). These words, along with the subversion of history and chronology, prepare the reader to enter the metaphysical and temporal labyrinth that is "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan."

As Yu Tsun is recounting the events that lead up to the murder of Stephen Albert, he interjects some advice that is an indication of what Bergson refers to as duration: "Whosoever would undertake some atrocious enterprise should act as if it were already accomplished, should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past" (92-93). Yu Tsun is relaying the essence of reality which he learned from Stephen Albert and his interpretation of Ts'ui Pen's novel, i.e. that time is a duration, a fluid mass, that encompasses past, present and future. Robert Philmus remarks that since "the future is already inexorably configured in the particulate structure of the present time, what will happen is already destiny" (242). This exemplifies the concept of the "infinite return" which, according to Mireya Camurati in "Borges, Dunne y la regresión infinita" is another motif that pervades Borges's work. The past determines the future, which determines the past, which determines the future, and on and on until infinity. This concept forms an integral part of the structure of the story, a point I will expand upon later in this study.

Upon his arrival at Albert's house, Yu Tsun is welcomed in and Albert proceeds to reveal the mystery about Ts'ui Pen and his novel *The Garden of Forking Paths*. Since Borges was concerned with the relation between reality and the articulation of reality, Albert's interpretation of Pen's novel is the perfect means to this end. Through this interpretation Borges is able to articulate the essence of the universe as he believed it to be. It is for this reason that Albert reveals everything concerning Pen's novel in a very un-Borges-like straightforward manner. Ts'ui Pen, an ancient ancestor of Yu Tsun, was the governor of his native province who decided to give everything up to create a book and a labyrinth. Albert discovered that the book and the labyrinth were one and the same. A fragment of a letter left by Ts'ui Pen led him to this discovery: "I leave to various futures, but not to all, my garden of forking paths" (97). This leads Albert to believe that this quote "suggested the image of bifurcating in time, not in space" (97). Albert then states: "[Ts'ui Pen] thus creates various futures, various times which start others that will in their turn branch out and bifurcate in other times" (98). This is more evidence of Bergsonian philosophy; time is the key element in the essence of the universe, not space.

Another important factor that led Albert to decipher Pen's work was the absence of the word "time." He discovers that the word "time" never appears in the novel. This leads him to conclude that "*The Garden of Forking Paths* (Pen's novel) is an enormous guessing game... in which the subject is time" (99). It logically follows that the elimination of the word "time" does draw attention to time itself. However, I believe the word does not appear for another reason. Borges believed, as maintained by Bergson, that human language is an inadequate means of expressing the true essence of anything. It is a mere tool invented by humans to simplify daily life. Holly Mickelson draws a similar conclusion: "The problem faced by Borges [. . .] is this: the language he uses as a tool for communication [. . .] is a reflection of the traditional concept of time, and therefore serves as a barrier to the communication of any other concept" (93). Nevertheless, Borges does overcome this barrier. Even though he uses the word "time" in "*The Garden of Forking Paths*" (the short story), he does not use it in *The Garden of Forking Paths* (the novel) thus cleverly overcoming the boundaries imposed by language.

Albert then concludes his explanation of Ts'ui Pen's novel by revealing its true meaning:

The Garden of Forking Paths is a picture, incomplete yet not false, of the universe such as Ts'ui Pen conceived it to be. [. . .] He believed in an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times. This web of time—the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries—embraces every possibility. (100)

These words are not only directed at Yu Tsun by Albert, but rather, it is also directed at the reader by Borges. It is synonymous with his own vision of the universe.

In order to truly appreciate Borges's literary genius, the structure of "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" must also be examined. I have formulated two conclusions: 1) the structure is an example of Bergsonian duration, and 2) the story, with Ts'ui Pen's infinite novel as the centerpiece, is an infinite *mise-en-abyme*. Since Borges believed mathematical time to be an illusion, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" does not unfold chronologically. As previously stated, it begins with the historical past. Then a deposition follows, which relates certain past events. However, the deposition is the present for anyone who is reading it. In addition, the deposition also contains the future, which will be revealed to readers if they continue to read. Furthermore, at the same time that it is the future for those who have not read it, it is the past for those who have already read it, as well as for Borges and his characters. Then Ts'ui Pen's ancient novel is introduced into the narrative, which is obviously the past. Nevertheless, this novel is the present for Yu Tsun (and the reader) when Albert discusses it with him. What Borges achieves by this mixture is a structure that represents reality, something that the traditional chronological narrative fails to do. He fictionalizes an infinite present. Robert Roland Anderson observes that in much of his fiction, Borges creates "an infinite present, in which the future's only reality exists as a present expectation, and the past is but present memory" (315). This recalls Bergson's description of duration: duration is on both sides of the "present"; what he refers to as his "present" has one foot in his past and another in his

future. Albert Bagby concurs: "No one has lived in the past and no one will live in the future; the present is in the form of all life" (105). Hence, the structure of "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" exemplifies Bergsonian duration.

The second aspect of the structure of "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan"—an infinite series of *mise-en-abymes*—truly reveals its profound complexity. *Mise-en-abyme*, according to Brian Stonehill, is the act of fiction turning the mirror upon itself, producing an "endless regression of [. . .] portraits" (8). Although he applies this concept to the novel, it can be expanded to cover any type of literature, especially a short story by Borges. Stonehill also classifies *mise-en-abyme* as the novel within the novel (for the purpose of this study, the short story within the short story). In short, *mise-en-abyme* occurs when, within the structure of a story, a mirror image of the same story appears. "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" exemplifies this concept infinitely, especially when one considers the figure of the labyrinth. There is of course, the labyrinth of Ts'ui Pen's novel, then the labyrinth of the temple of the Limpid Sun (where Ts'ui Pen wrote his book), the labyrinth outside Albert's house, the labyrinth that Yu Tsun must walk through to get from the train station to Albert's house, and the labyrinth that is Borges's short story "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan." A series of "Chinese boxes" (Camurati 930) is created, and each contains a garden of forking paths (the physical entity), *The Garden of Forking Paths* (Ts'ui Pen's novel) and "The Garden of Forking Paths" (Borges' short story). Within the center of all these labyrinths is the temporal labyrinth that is our universe, which goes on infinitely. The function of this infinite regression is to disintegrate time in the human linguistic sense. Furthermore, as Mireya Camurati states: "Quizás jugando con las cajas chinas, Borges encontró una forma de aquietar la angustia del infinito" (930). Therefore, Borges accomplishes with his "Garden of Forking Paths"—the short story—what his fictional character Ts'ui Pen accomplished with his *Garden of Forking Paths*—the novel: an infinite work of fiction which contains various futures happening all at once, a work that fictionalizes what Bergson referred to as duration.

It is frequently stated that Borges's fiction is not simply fiction. Rather, it provides a means of pondering the mysteries of existence; it is a forum for the author to fictionalize various philosophies that he

adheres to; and it provides the outlet for communicating the essence of our universe as envisioned by the mind of one of the greatest literary figures the world has ever known. "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" is truly an infinite work containing infinite possibilities. However, as Borges often said himself, infinity is devastating to reason and frightening. Once the reader can surpass this fear and enter the labyrinth with Borges, the true artistic beauty of his works will be evident. And, as Bergson postulated, the union of mind and body, which can lead to true freedom, will be possible.⁴

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⁴ Professor Mireya Camurati, with her extensive knowledge of Borges and his literature, was an inspiration for this study. She overcame the mysteries of the infinite and entered the labyrinth with Borges. I am grateful to have been a student of such a fine literary critic and human being.

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La verdad cubana

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UNA DE LAS VERDADES más duras de Galicia es la emigración. A lo largo de varias décadas el camino emprendido por los emigrantes los llevaría a América, y especialmente a América Latina. Tal vez de modo egoísta veía yo ese hecho histórico del contacto entre Europa y el mundo que quedaba al oeste de ésta—hecho que identificaba como una tragedia de individuos y de naciones—como algo que me unía ligeramente a una tierra europea que había yo "descubierto" a través de los estudios y algunos viajes. Parecía, en principio, que se afirmaban los lazos tanto desde el continente europeo como desde el americano. Se dice en principio, porque los personajes gallegos populares o de drama personal del emigrante proliferan en diversos escritores. En Cuba se encuentran ejemplos en autores como Lino Novás Calvo y Carlos Montenegro. En Argentina se retrata a una Galicia soñada, idealizada o perdida en la poesía de varios escritores, entre ellos Francisco Luis Bernárdez, Víctor Luis Molinari, González Carbalho, Lorenzo Varela, Luis Seoane y Eduardo Blanco-Amor. También se analizan las raíces gallegas en la lejanía del tiempo, en la memoria novelada de Angel Rama, *Tierra sin mapa*.

Algunos de los autores que tratan el "tema gallego" nacen en Galicia y llegan muy jóvenes a su tierra adoptiva; otros sólo la conocen por referencias familiares, mientras que otros simplemente mantienen una relación estético-sentimental. ¿Se podrá afirmar que una visión sea más fiel que otra? ¿Depende del lugar de nacimiento del escritor o de otra cosa? No se debe olvidar tampoco que cuando era peligroso, o como menos, sumamente difícil, publicar en lengua gallega bajo un régimen franquista que se ensañaba con todo lo que no pudiera o no