

Doubles and Counterparts: Patterns of Interchangeability in Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths"

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That the governing structural principle of Jorge Luis Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths" is the analogy among fictional levels goes almost without saying.¹ In the fashion of Chinese boxes, many parallels are established between the characters Yu Tsun, Stephen Albert, and Ts'ui Pen, forming a chain that modern psychoanalysis would call "intersubjective repetition."²

Pen's novel is a labyrinth, a "garden of forking paths" (p. 26); Albert's garden abounds in zigzagging footways and, like Borges' own story, is named "the garden of forking paths" after the title of Pen's novel (or is it only a metaphor for the novel?). On the way to Albert's house, Tsun must turn always to the left, following a road that "fork[s]," as one goes in order to discover the central point of certain labyrinths (p. 22). Labyrinths are familiar to Tsun since he grew up in a symmetrical garden of Hai Feng, and like the garden, a certain Fang is mentioned in Albert's explanation to Tsun of Pen's mystery. War dictates Tsun's behavior, and war is described in the contradictory chapters of Pen's novel. To write that novel, Ts'ui Pen retired to "the Pavilion of the Limpid Solitude" (p. 24), and Albert, upon meeting the narrator, says, "I see that

1. Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," trans. Donald A. Yates, *Labyrinths*, ed. Yates and James E. Irby (New York, 1964), pp. 19-29. All further references to this story will be cited in the text. The original, with which I have also worked, appeared in *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires, 1956), pp. 97-111.

2. On intersubjective repetition, see Jacques Lacan, "Le Séminaire sur 'La Lettre volée,'" *Écrits I* (Paris, 1966). Lacan develops Freud's theory as expressed mainly in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

the pious Hsi P'eng persists in correcting my solitude" (p. 23). Similarly, Ts'ui Pen was murdered by "the hand of a stranger" (p. 23), and Albert, too, is killed by "a stranger, one Yu Tsun" (p. 29), who is himself about to be hanged for that crime. Yu Tsun is Chinese, a former professor of English at the service of a Western power, and Albert, an English professor of sinology, puts himself at the service of a Chinese labyrinth/book. In explaining Pen's concept of diverse futures to Yu Tsun, Albert gives the example of the different possible outcomes, all simultaneously maintained in Pen's fiction, of an encounter between a certain Fang and a stranger who calls at his door and whom Fang resolves to kill. This is obviously analogous to the events of the diegesis, but it also reverses them;³ for in the example it is Fang who resolves to kill the stranger, whereas in the diegesis it is the stranger who intends to kill Albert. However, the result in the example, as Albert says, may be different from the intention and thus may parallel the events of the diegesis. And the pattern of analogy and reversal thus created is itself similar to the mutually contradictory chapters of Pen's novel which, in turn, resemble the opposed accounts of the First World War by Liddell Hart and the narrator in Borges' own story.

The above are the most conspicuous examples of a principle of analogy which, I believe, is almost self-evident. What is less self-evident is that the analogies between the diegetic and the metadiegetic levels of narration function to collapse classical oppositions either by identifying them with each other or by rendering them interchangeable. Thus a message addressed to the public becomes esoteric, whereas an esoteric transmission appears in a public medium; the best form of revelation is omission, while the most effective method of concealment is exposure; the same speech act is both a success and a failure; speech itself (or writing) is shown to be an action, and action, in turn, becomes a form of speech (or writing); time is characterized both by the uniqueness of transitory moments and by the (time-negating) eternity of repetition; and these repetitions simultaneously disintegrate and define the self.

3. I adopt Gerard Genette's terms for the various fictional levels; see his *Figures HI* (Paris, 1972), pp. 238—51. I treat Yu Tsun as an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator, and hence the events he narrates constitute the diegesis. I ignore for this purpose the opening of the story, Liddell Hart's account of the war, probably narrated by the same "editor" responsible for quoting Tsun's dictated narrative as well as for the footnote on p. 19.

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Both Ts'ui Pen and Yu Tsun are faced with the task of transmitting a message, and both do so through indirection. Pen's message is a philosophy of time and is addressed to "the various futures (not to all)" in the form of a book (p. 25), a public medium. Nevertheless, as Albert acutely perceives, it is Pen's belief that the most effective form of revelation is omission:

"The Garden of Forking Paths is an enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time; this recondite cause prohibits its mention. To omit a word always, to resort to inept metaphors and obvious periphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic way of stressing it." [P. 27]

Such concealment for the sake of revelation turns a work written for the public into an esoteric message, deciphered only by one person: Stephen Albert. Is Pen's speech act then infelicitous through its failure to utter crucial words, meaningful to all appropriate participants?⁴ Yes and no. From a conventional point of view, Pen does not succeed in imparting his thought to the large, though selective, audience he had in mind. But because of Albert's discovery and the triple identification it effects between himself, Pen, and Tsun, the famous novelist succeeds not merely in discursively conveying his view of time but in dramatizing it through live repetition.

Unlike Pen's novel, intended for the many and decoded by one, Tsun's secret information is meant for one person only. But because of the absence of normal communication channels, it is addressed to the many. The spy-narrator pointedly formulates his predicament by the use of oxymoron:

If only my mouth, before a bullet shattered it, could cry out that secret name so it could be heard in Germany . . . My human voice was very weak. How might I make it carry to the ear of the Chief? [P. 20]

Crying out a secret, and doing so without being heard; both tasks seem paradoxical and infeasible. And yet, the solution devised by Yu Tsun is no less paradoxical than the problem with which it is intended to deal. It resolves the oxymoron by reasserting it. Yu Tsun decides that the best way to transmit the secret is by crying it out, by making it appear in the newspapers. Whereas Ts'ui Pen believes that the most effective method of revelation is omission, Yu Tsun discovers, rather like the queen and the minister in Poe's "The Purloined Letter," that the best form of con-

4. This is a paraphrase of some of the conditions of felicity formulated by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 14-15.

cealment is exposure,⁵ or rather pseudoexposure, since the newspaper item, formally available to everyone, is here used as a code whose real import can be deciphered only by the appropriate person. For the sake of his message's double status, Tsun devises a speech act of referring or naming from which the crucial "utterance of R" is missing and, in the fashion of Pen's novel, replaced by "inept metaphors."⁶ Nothing is said about the British artillery park, but the murder of the sinologist who carries the same name as that park is a metaphoric disclosure of the secret to the initiated. A city is named by killing a man—an indirect speech act, successful from the viewpoint of the Chief, guilt-provoking for its ingenious and insincere performer.

It is not only the indirectness of Pen's and Tsun's speech acts and the inverse relations they entertain between concealment and revelation that make the two episodes mirror images of each other. The constituent elements of speech acts, speech and action, are also interestingly juxtaposed and equated in these episodes. On both occasions—the one diegetic the other metadiegetic, the one concerned with a book the other with a crime—speech and action are first presented as separate activities and are then equated with each other.⁷ At the metadiegetic level, we are told by Stephen Albert that the famous Ts'ui Pen renounced worldly power "in order to compose a book and a maze" (p. 24). The "and" leads us, as it has led Pen's relatives and admirers, to believe that he had two projects in mind: the verbal act of writing and the physical act of constructing a labyrinth. This misleading impression is reinforced by memories of the spy-narrator, himself a descendant of Ts'ui Pen. His illustrious great-grandfather, he recalls, retired "to write a novel that might be even more populous than the *Hung Lu Meng* and to construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost" (p. 22). The "and" again acts as a *leurre*, further developed by the narrator's explanation that Ts'ui Pen devoted thirteen years "to these heterogeneous tasks" (p. 23).⁸ No one discovered the labyrinth after Pen's death, and the book was found to be incomprehensible and self-contradictory. It fell to the British sinologist, Stephen Albert, to solve the mysteries of the loss of the maze and the incoherence of the novel by postulating an identity of the seemingly "heterogeneous tasks": "the book and the maze were one and

5. See Lacan's stimulating analysis of Poe's story in his "Le Séminaire sur 'La Lettre volée,'" *Ecrits I*, pp. 19-75.

6. On the conditions necessary for a successful act of reference, see John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 94-95.

7. For convenience, I use "speech" to cover both speech and writing. On book and crime as the two *poles a"attraction* in Borges' work, see Noé Jitrik, "Structure et signification de *Fictions* de J. L. Borges," in *Linguistique et littérature, colloque de Cluny* (Paris, 1968), pp. 107-14.

8. I borrow the term "*leurre*" from Roland Barthes, *SIZ* (Paris, 1970).

the same thing" (p. 25). To write, for Pen, is to construct a labyrinth; speech is action.⁹

At the diegetic level, an analogous situation occurs. Two newspaper items which initially seem disparate prove in fact to be intimately related: the Germans' bombing of the city of Albert and the murder of the British sinologist by a stranger. No one but the "stranger"—the narrator—and the Chief in Berlin knew that the murder of Albert was the only way of imparting to Germany "the secret name of the city they must attack" (p. 29). The bombing is a result of the killing, and the murder itself is an action which replaces impossible speech—impossible because of the war conditions and the imminent arrest of the spy-narrator. Thus whereas at the metadiegetic level speech is seen as action, here action is seen as speech; the two episodes reflect each other as if in inverted mirrors.

This interchangeability of speech and action can easily be juxtaposed with post-Borges attempts to subordinate one to the other. Both speech-act theory and semiotics make such attempts, though with mutually opposed intents: while the former sees speech as a kind of action, semiotics views action as a type of language.¹⁰ Nor is this merely a semantic difference or a shift in emphasis. The disagreement is in both world view—Do we inhabit a verbal world or a world governed by action?—and methodology—Should linguistics become the stock of models for translanguistic practices or should it derive its own models from some other sign system? These are stimulating questions in themselves, but for the purpose of my study it is more profitable to note that Borges, like Ts'ui Pen, refuses to choose between the two contrary positions. In his story both views are correct: speech is action and action is speech.

A correlation emerges between this equation and the paradoxical treatment of another classical opposition, one that is prominent in the whole of Borges' work as well as in that of his fictional labyrinth producer: time versus timelessness. At first sight it may seem that language parallels timelessness, whereas action is time-bound.¹¹ By its very nature a sign is reproducible, capable of being repeated by different people in different circumstances at different periods, hence time transcending and in a sense "eternal." On the other hand, action, and in particular a radical action like murder, is irreversible, irreproducible, and hence bound to the flux of time. But the story shows that just as speech and

9. The nature of Pen's book also emphasizes its affinity with action, since it *dramatizes* its subject rather than simply states it.

10. Compare Searle, *Speech Acts* (p. 17), with Umberto Eco, "Social Life as a Sign-System," in *Structuralism: An Introduction*, ed. David Robey (Oxford, 1973), pp. 57-72.

11. The influence of Jacques Derrida on the section that follows is obvious and cannot be documented by simple references.

action can be identified with each other so can each of them manifest both the transitory and the eternal, and time itself must paradoxically be both negated and affirmed. For, to start with the language end of the equation, although it is true that a sign transcends time through repetition, it is also true that no repeated occurrence is identical with another, since the context in which the sign appears automatically changes it. This double nature of the sign is utilized by the narrator: it is precisely because the word "Albert" can be repeated in different circumstances that the narrator can refer uniquely to the object he intends (the city) through the one quality this object shares with another, that is, its name. But it is only because the referent of this name changes with the context that Tsun can disguise his reference and make it indicate one thing to the Chief and an entirely different thing to the ordinary newspaper reader.¹²

In principle, Tsun's reference could have been made verbally; but owing to the specific conditions in which Tsun finds himself, it must be replaced by action. And action, it would seem, is bound to the moment of its performance. Endorsing this view, the narrator emphatically declares:

Then I reflected that everything happens to a man precisely, precisely *now*. Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen; countless men in the air, on the face of the earth and the sea, and all that really is happening is happening to me. [P. 20]

As if sharing the narrator's view, the diegesis (narrated, of course, by the same person) emphasizes the transitory, moment-bound nature of events by making Albert's death "instantaneous" (p. 29). And if action is instantaneous, occurring only in the present, it has no past and no future, no prospect of being changed or repeated—hence the emphasis on expressions of finality, such as "inexorable death" (p. 20), "irrevocable determination" (p. 24), and "irretrievable details" (p. 25).

Given such expressions, how do we explain the presence of expressions like "innumerable," "infinite," and "various futures"? If Albert's death is really bound to the moment of occurrence, how can we account for the narrator's "innumerable contrition and weariness" (p. 29)? If the details of Pen's book are indeed "irretrievable," how has Albert "re-established" their "primordial organization" (p. 28)? And if everything happens only in the present, how could Ts'ui Pen "create a labyrinth which would be strictly infinite" (p. 25), illustrating "an infinite series of

12. The device used here is close to the principle of homonymy. It is interesting to note in this connection that the clue to the analogous episode, Ts'ui Pen's mystery, is the principle of synonymy: two expressions, "book" and "maze," are used to describe one and the same thing, whereas in homonymy the same expression is used to describe two different things.

times" and "innumerable futures" (p. 28)?¹³ Action, it seems, is paradoxically both bound to the moment of performance, hence transitory and irrevocable, and capable of "continuing indefinitely" (p. 25), being reestablished or repeated, and hence time transcending. On the one hand, "everything happens to a man precisely, precisely now," and on the other, "*the author of an atrocious undertaking ought to imagine that he has already accomplished it, ought to impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past*" (p. 22). Not only can the future be imagined as a past, but both dimensions are grasped as a proliferation of several alternatives rather than as uniform, absolute times. "In one of the possible pasts," says Albert to Yu Tsun, "you are my enemy, in another, my friend" (p. 26), and "Time forks perpetually toward innumerable futures. In one of them I am your enemy" (p. 28). Pen's book dramatizes this divergence of times by its self-contradictory narrative technique: "in the third chapter the hero dies, in the fourth he is alive" (p. 24). And the narrator subtly does a similar thing when he describes Albert's face a short time before his death as having "something unalterable about it, even immortal" (p. 26). In one future he is going to die, but in another he is immortal; only the dead cannot die.

Perhaps the most striking way in which action can transcend time is by the coincidence or repetition of the same occurrence in different temporal dimensions and/or in the lives of different people. In an article which bears the appropriately paradoxical title "A New Refutation of Time," Borges describes such a duplication and comments: "Time, if we can intuitively grasp such an identity, is a delusion: the difference and inseparability of one moment belonging to its apparent past from another belonging to its apparent present is sufficient to disintegrate it."¹⁴ Thus the various analogies between Pen, Albert, and Tsun function to disintegrate time through mirroring and repetition.

These analogies also disintegrate the concept of self or identity. Consistent with the pattern which governs all opposites in the story, however, the self is both lost through an identification with the other and at the same time most authentically defined by it. The phenomenon of repetition described in "A New Refutation of Time" serves to deny not only temporal succession but also the autonomy of the self:

We can postulate, in the mind of an individual (or of two individuals who do not know of each other but in whom the same process

13. Note that the word "infinite" is applied in this story to various conditions, not only to time: in the deserted street, Tsun feels "visible and vulnerable, infinitely so" (p. 21); on the way to Albert's, he notices that "the afternoon was intimate, infinite" (p. 23); toward the end of the story Albert's house "is infinitely saturated with invisible persons" (p. 28); and Pen did not simply devote himself to the "infinite execution of a rhetorical experiment" (p. 52), etc.

14. "A New Refutation of Time," *Labyrinths*, trans. Irby, pp. 226-27; all further references to this essay will be cited in the text.

works), two identical moments. Once this identity is postulated, one may ask: Are not these identical moments the same? Is not one single repeated term sufficient to break down and confuse the series of time? Do not the fervent readers who surrender themselves to Shakespeare become, literally, Shakespeare? [P. 224]

Like the fervent readers of Shakespeare, Albert becomes Ts'ui Pen through his devoted discovery of Pen's labyrinth, so much so that like Pen he is murdered by a stranger. In being killed by Tsun, Albert is revealed as a victim of the same device he so ingeniously unearthed in Pen's work, and Tsun, in turn, duplicates Albert by using the same technique in an inverted form. Significantly, Tsun is also the great grandson of Ts'ui Pen, and his thoughts before reaching Albert become, in retrospect, a divination of Pen's secret as formulated by the British sinologist: "I [Tsun] thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars" (p. 23). The identification thus becomes threefold, and the self is to some extent lost in the other.

Analogy among characters is not the only structural device which blurs the boundaries of the self. The very repetition of the act of narration, involving a chain of quotations, makes the story a perfect example of what Jakobson calls "speech within speech"¹⁵ and divorces the various characters from their own discourse. In addition to the real author's speech to the real reader, crystallized in that of the implied author to the implied reader, the whole story is the speech of an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator who, in the footnote, calls himself "editor" and who sums up Liddell Hart's account and juxtaposes it with Yu Tsun's dictated statement. Just as the editor quotes Tsun, so Tsun, an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator, quotes Albert who in turn quotes Ts'ui Pen, sometimes verbatim, as in the case of the crucial letter, sometimes by conjecture, as in the instance of Pen's supposed declarations about the book and the maze. Quotation, then, is a dominant narrative mode in this story, and quotation is the appropriation by one person of the speech of another. Since a person is to a large extent constituted by his discourse, such an appropriation implies, at least partly, an interpenetration of personalities. Thus both repetition through analogy and repetition through quotation threaten the absolute autonomy of the self.

Or do they? Is not a sinologist most truly a sinologist when he identifies himself with the object of his research? And is not a spy most truly a spy when he obliterates his own personality in an identification with another? Tsun's colleague does this by changing his name: "The Prussian spy Hans Rabener, alias Viktor Runeberg" (p. 19). And Tsun

15. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Essays on the Language of Literature*, ed. Seymour Chatman and Samuel R. Levin (Boston, 1967), pp. 296-322.

himself acts in complete opposition to his real emotions. He endangers himself for the Chief in Berlin, "that sick and hateful man" (p. 20), he risks his life for Germany while "car[ing] nothing for a barbarous country which imposed upon [him] the abjection of being a spy" (p. 21), and he kills "a man from England—a modest man—who for [him] is no less great than Goethe" (p. 21), kills him and feels "innumerable contrition and weariness." He has indeed bidden farewell to himself in the mirror figuratively as well as literally, and in so doing he has become a successful spy. But the identification with Albert is not limited to a definition of the narrator's role as a spy. It also defines something essential to the real face in the mirror, something which is to a large extent responsible for his decision to associate himself with Berlin. "I didn't do it for Germany," he says, "I did it because I sensed that the Chief somehow feared people of my race—for the innumerable ancestors who merge within me. I wanted to prove to him that a yellow man could save his armies" (p. 21). And it is precisely the culture of his ancestors that is "being restored to [him] by a man of a remote empire, in the course of a desperate adventure, on a Western isle" (pp. 26-27). The identification with Albert, it transpires, leads to an identification with Ts'ui Pen, and this return to his ancestors most intimately determines an essential aspect of Tsun's authentic personality.

Thus the same phenomenon of repetition which disintegrates the autonomy of the individual also defines it, and Borges is far from being unaware of this paradox. After a dazzling discussion of time and the self in "A New Refutation of Time" he concludes:

And yet, and yet . . . Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. Our destiny (as contrasted with the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges. [Pp. 233-34]

The real "scandal" in this story, I suggest, is not merely the disintegration of classical notions but the simultaneous denial and affirmation of a given concept and the interchangeability of mutually opposed ones. The world thus created is one which constantly, vigorously, and ingeniously courts paradox. And what can one expect when an irresistible force flirts with an immovable object?