The Garden of Forking Paths[a]

Jorge Luis Borges

For Victoria Ocampo

Trans. Donald A. Yates

Annotated by Robert R. Snapp

On page 22 of Liddell Hart's *History of World War I* you will read that an attack against the Serre-Montauban line by thirteen British divisions (supported by 1,400 artillery pieces), planned for the 24th of July, 1916, had to be postponed until the morning of the 29th.[b] The torrential rains, Captain Liddell Hart comments, caused this delay, an insignificant one, to be sure.

The following statement, dictated, reread and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun, former professor of English at the *Hochschule*[c] at Tsingtao,[d] throws an unsuspected light over the whole affair. The first two pages of the document are missing.

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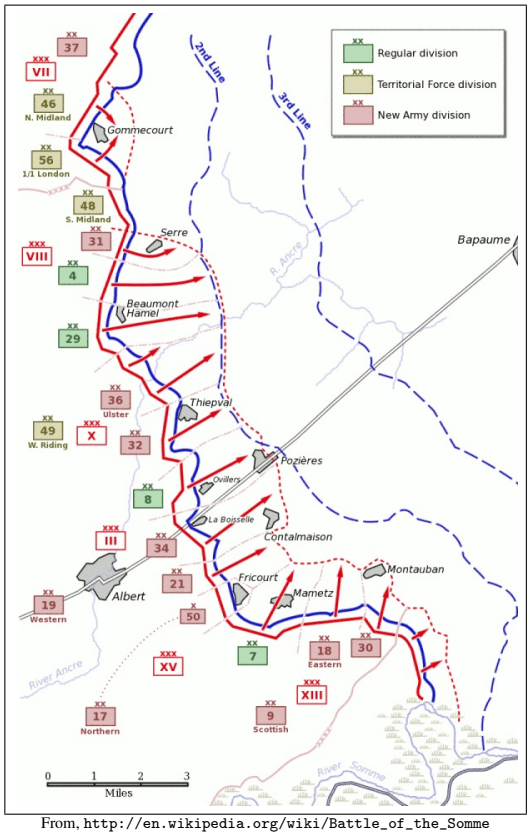
"... and I hung up the receiver. Immediately afterwards, I recognized the voice that had answered in German.[e] It was that of Captain Richard Madden. Madden's presence in Viktor Runeberg's apartment meant the end of our anxieties and—but this seemed, *or should have seemed*, very secondary to me—also the end of our lives. It meant that Runeberg had been arrested or murdered.[1,f] Before the sun set on that day, I would encounter the same fate. Madden was implacable. Or rather, he was obliged to be so. An Irishman at the service of England, a man accused of laxity and perhaps of treason,[g] how could he fail to seize and be thankful for such a miraculous opportunity: the discovery, capture, maybe even the death of two agents of the German Reich? I went up to my room; absurdly I locked the door and threw myself on my back on the narrow iron cot. Through the window I saw the familiar roofs and the cloud-shaded six o'clock sun. It seemed incredible to me that day without premonitions or symbols should be the one of my inexorable death. In spite of my dead father, in spite of having been a child in a symmetrical garden of Hai Feng, was I—now—going to die? 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 ... The almost intolerable recollection of Madden's horselike face banished these wanderings. In the midst of my hatred and terror (it means nothing to me now to speak of terror, now that I have mocked Richard Madden, now that my throat yearns for the noose) it occurred to me that that tumultuous and doubtless happy warrior did not suspect that I possessed the Secret. The name of the exact location of the new British artillery park on the

[1] An hypothesis both hateful and odd. The Prussian spy Hans Rabener, alias Viktor Runeberg, attacked with drawn automatic the bearer of the warrant for his arrest, Captain Richard Madden. The latter, in self-defense, inflicted the wound which brought about Runeberg's death. (Editor's note.)

[a] Originally titled "El jardin de senderos que se bifurcan," written in 1941. This translation appears in Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, Donald A. Yates, ed., New Directions Publishing Company, NY, 1962. Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1969) was an Argentine author, literary critic, and poet.

[b] Basil Henry **Liddell Hart** served in the British Army during World War I, fighting on the Western Front. He rose to the rank of Captain, and later in life became a military historian. **Serre** and **Montauban** are two towns in northeast France, north of the Somme River. The Battle of the Somme, fought within and across labyrinthine networks of trenches from July 1–Nov. 18, 1916, was one of the bloodiest and most futile episodes in modern warfare, resulting in a net shift of the western front by about 6 miles at a cost of 1.5 million lives. The map below describes the British assault on German troops planned for July 1, 1916, one of the most intense days of fighting. The solid curves denote the initial front lines for the British (red) and German (blue) troops. Note that the River Ancre flows through the town of Albert, and eventually into the Somme, which in turn flows through the city of Amiens, coincidentally the site of one of the first church labyrinths. The reference to the month of **July** in line 4 is almost certainly an intentional departure from reality. Liddel Hart actually writes, "The bombardment began on June 24; the attack was intended for June 29, but was later postponed until July 1, owing to a momentary break in the weather. This postponement, made at French request, involved not only the spreading out of ammunition over a longer period, and a consequent loss of intensity, but a greater strain on the assaulting troops, who after being keyed up for the effort, had to remain another forty-eight hours in cramped trenches under the exhausting noise of their own gunfire and the enemies retaliation—conditions made worse by torrential rain which flooded the trenches." [8]



From, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Somme

River Ancre. A bird streaked across the gray sky and blindly I translated it into an airplane and that airplane into many (against the French sky) annihilating the artillery station with vertical bombs. 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? To the ear of that sick and hateful man who knew nothing of Runeberg and me save that we were in Staffordshire[h] and who was waiting in vain for our report in his arid office in Berlin, endlessly examining newspapers ... I said out loud: *I must flee*. I sat up noiselessly, in a useless perfection of silence, as if Madden were already lying in wait for me. Something—perhaps the mere vain ostentation of proving my resources were nil—made me look through my pockets. I found what I knew I would find. The American watch, the nickel chain and the square coin, the key ring with the incriminating useless keys to Runeberg's apartment, the notebook, a letter which I resolved to destroy immediately (and which I did not destroy), a crown, two shillings and a few pence, the red and blue pencil, the handkerchief, the revolver with one bullet.[i] Absurdly, I took it in my hand and weighed it in order to inspire courage within myself. Vaguely I thought that a pistol report can be heard at a great distance. In ten minutes my plan was perfected. The telephone book listed the name of the only person capable of transmitting the message; he lived in a suburb of Fenton, less than a half hour's train ride away.

I am a cowardly man. I say it now, now that I have carried to its end a plan whose perilous nature no one can deny. I know its execution was terrible. I didn't do it for Germany, no. I care nothing for a barbarous country which imposed upon me the abjection of being a spy. Besides, I know of a man from England—a modest man—who for me is no less great than Goethe.[j] I talked with him for scarcely an hour, but during that hour he was Goethe ... 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. Besides, I had to flee from Captain Madden. His hands and his voice could call at my door at any moment. I dressed silently, bade farewell to myself in the mirror, went downstairs, scrutinized the peaceful street and went out. The station was not far from my home, but I judged it wise to take a cab. I argued that in this way I ran less risk of being recognized; the fact is that in the deserted street I felt myself visible and vulnerable, infinitely so. I remember that I told the cab driver to stop a short distance before the main entrance. I got out with voluntary, almost painful slowness; I was going to the village of Ashgrove but I bought a ticket for a more distant station. The train left within a very few minutes, at eight-fifty. I hurried; the next one would leave at nine-thirty. There was hardly a soul on the platform. I went through the coaches; I remember a few farmers, a woman dressed in mourning, a young boy who was reading with fervor the *Annals* of Tacitus,[k] a wounded and happy soldier. The coaches jerked forward at last. A man whom I recognized ran in vain to the end of the platform. It was Captain Richard Madden. Shattered, trembling, I shrank into the far corner of the seat, away from the dreaded window.

[c] Here ***Hochschule*** likely refers to a technical college, and perhaps specifically to the Deutch-Chinesische Hochschule that was established in Tsingtao in 1909. According to Schrecker [10, p. 244] (cf. Balderston [1]). This latter school taught courses in English as well as German, Chinese, mathematics, science, etc., until November 1914, when the Shantung Peninsula was invaded by the Japanese.

[d] **Tsingtao**, also known as Qingdao, sits on southern side of the Shantung Peninsula in northeaster China. From 1898–1914, the city and the territory around Kiaochow Bay were occupied by Germany as a protectorate. This territory was initially taken by German naval forces in 1896, and then leased from China, as Hong Kong was occupied by the British. During this period the German's established a brewery in Tsingtao which still produces a popular beer of that name. The German occupation ended suddenly in 1914 as a result of a Japanese invasion, in alliance with the British.

[e] The telephone was invented in the United States by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876. By 1914, two years prior to the beginning of this story, there were approximately 15 million telephones operating in the world, 64% of these were in the United States. In London at this time, 258,895 telephones were shared by 7.3 million inhabitants. In the rural county of Staffordshire (where the action takes place) there was about one telephone per fifty inhabitants. Telephones of this era did not have a dial or buttons, but a crank that one would turn in order to connect with a switchboard operator who would in turn route the call to the desired party. [7]

[f] The "Editor's note" is one of several literary devices employed to make this short story appear closer to a work of nonfiction. Ironically, this editor, who is fictitious, provides a frame of objectivity for the reader.

[g] During Easter Week, April 24–30, 1916, Patrick Pearse and James Connolly led an unsuccessful rebellion in Dublin that protested English sovereignty over Ireland, and declared Irish independence. The *Easter Rising* of 1916 turned quickly violent as the British army fought with field artillery and machine guns. After hundreds of innocent civilians, rebels, and British troops had been killed, Pearse ordered an unconditional surrender to halt the violence. Over 3000 were eventually arrested. In May of that year Pearse, Connolly, and other rebels were executed for treason. Incidentally, a German ship loaded with arms for the Irish rebels was sunk by the British navy off the coast of Ireland on April 21, 1916 (Colby, 1917 [5, p. 290]). British rule over Ireland remained intact until the Irish War of Independence (1919–21) led to the independent Republic of Ireland in 1921. The largely protestant state of Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom. See the National Library of Ireland's online exhibit about the 1916 Rising at `http://www.nli.ie/1916/`

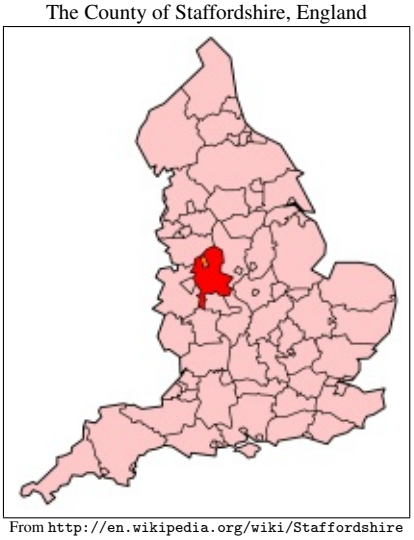
[h] **Staffordshire** is a county in the western English midlands, highlighted in the map on the following page.

From this broken state I passed into an almost abject felicity. I told myself that the duel had already begun and that I had won the first encounter by frustrating, even if for forty minutes, even if by a stroke of fate, the attack of my adversary. I argued that this slightest of victories foreshadowed a total victory. I argued (no less fallaciously) that my cowardly felicity proved that I was a man capable of carrying out the adventure successfully. From this weakness I took strength that did not abandon me. I foresee that man will resign himself each day to more atrocious undertakings; soon there will be no one but warriors and brigands; I give them this counsel: *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*. Thus I proceeded as my eyes of a man already dead registered the elapsing of that day, which was perhaps the last, and the diffusion of the night.[l] The train ran gently along, amid ash trees. It stopped, almost in the middle of the fields. No one announced the name of the station. "Ashgrove?" I asked a few lads on the platform. "Ashgrove," they replied. I got off.

A lamp enlightened the platform but the faces of the boys were in shadow. One questioned me, "Are you going to Dr. Stephen Albert's house?" Without waiting for my answer, another said, "The house is a long way from here, but you won't get lost if you take this road to the left and at every crossroads turn again to your left." I tossed them a coin (my last), descended a few stone steps and started down the solitary road. It went downhill, slowly. It was of elemental earth; overhead the branches were tangled; the low, full moon seemed to accompany me.

For an instant, I thought that Richard Madden in some way had penetrated my desperate plan. Very quickly, I understood that was impossible. The instructions to turn always to the left reminded me that such was the common procedure for discovering the central point of certain labyrinths. I have some understanding of labyrinths: not for nothing am I the great grandson of that Ts'ui Pên who was governor of Yunnan[m] and who renounced worldly power in order to write a novel that might be even more populous than the *Hung Lu Meng*[n] and to construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost. Thirteen years he dedicated to these heterogeneous tasks, but the hand of a stranger murdered him—and his novel was incoherent and no one found the labyrinth. Beneath English trees I meditated on that lost maze: I imagined it inviolate and perfect at the secret crest of a mountain; I imagined it erased by rice fields or beneath the water; I imagined it infinite, no longer composed of octagonal kiosks and returning paths, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms . . . I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths,[o] of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars. Absorbed in these illusory images, I forgot my destiny of one pursued. I felt myself to be, for an unknown period of time, an abstract perceiver of the world. The vague, living countryside, the moon, the remains of the day worked on me, as well as the slope of the road which eliminated any possibility of weariness. The afternoon was intimate, infinite. The road descended and forked among the now confused meadows. A high-pitched, almost syllabic music

The County of Staffordshire, England



From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Staffordshire

The most populated city in Staffordshire is Stoke-on-Trent. On April 1, 1910, the six towns Stoke-on-Trent, Hanley, Burslem, Tunstall, Longton, and Fenton (referred to in line 61) were incorporated into the borough of Stoke-on-Trent. The town of Ashgrove (mentioned in line 81) appears to be fictitious. (There is a village called Ashley in western Staffordshire, and another called Ashwood near the southern tip of Staffordshire, far removed from Fenton.)

[i] This would have been a pocket **watch**, as wrist watches were not widely worn by men until after the war. The development of the American watch industry was stimulated by the development of the transcontinental railroad. Track is expensive, so nearly all railroad lines, in the nineteenth century as well as today, use a single pair of rails that is shared by trains moving in both directions. In order to avoid collisions, one train must wait in a siding, until the higher priority train passes. Both the telegraph and pocket watch were important tools for coordinating these operations. The watch here also a symbol for linear time, which plays an important rôle later in the story. Presumably this is a double-ended **pencil**, with red lead at one end, and blue lead at the other, usually ideally suited for editing documents or grading papers. A **crown** was a coin with one-fourth the value of a British pound, also equal in value to five shillings. One **shilling** was also equal to 12 **pence**. In 1916 one pound was equivalent to US $4.87 [5], which would be equivalent about 100 US dollars today. Thus, Dr. Tsun's coins would have had the equivalent spending power of about 35 US dollars today.

[j] Johann Wolfgang von **Goethe** (1749–1832) was a monumental German author and philosopher whose novels, plays and poems heralded the Romantic Era. His most famous works are the two part play *Faust* and the novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Ironically, Tsun here praises the culture (or *Kulture*) of "a barbarous country."

[k] **Tacitus** (56–117 CE) was a Roman historian and senator. The ***Annals*** describes the lives of the four Roman emperors that followed Caesar Augustus, namely Tiberius (42 BCE–37 CE), Caligula (12–41 CE), Claudius (10 BCE–54 CE) and Nero (37–68 CE), Unfortunately, Tacitus died before his work was completed, and only a portion of the chapters that he finished survive to the present day.

[l] This sentence provides both a temporal and seasonal clue. At this northern latitude the sun would set sometime between 9:00 and 9:30 PM during the month of July.

[m] **Yunnan** is the southernmost landlocked province of China, bordering with Myanmar (formerly Burma), Laos, and Vietnam. The capital city of Yunnan province is Kunming.

[n] The ***Hung Lu Meng*** or *Dream of the Red Chamber* (also known as *The Story of the Stone*) is a 120 chapter Chinese novel written by Cao Xueqin in the late 18th century. It is believed that the author died after writing only 80 chapters, and that the remaining chapters were written by others. It is a very complex work of literature, with over 400 significant characters. English translations of this work are available on the internet and in print.

[o] Linguists might classify the phrase "**labyrinth of labyrinths**" as an example of the *genitive of gradation*, as in the biblical "King of Kings," from *Daniel* 2:37 (originally in Hebrew, "Melech ha-M'lachim"), *I Timothy* 4:14, and *Revelations* 17:14 and 19:16 (Curme, [6, p. 88]). Here the repetition of words conveys a sense of preeminence or superiority. A similar rhetorical device occurs earlier in line 30. But "centuries of centuries" might be more readily interpreted as a time span of hundreds of hundreds of years, constituting what is known as the *partitive genitive*, as in the "land of milk and honey." Both usages are marvelously recursive, like "wheels within wheels," and like the *Thousand of One Nights*, alluded to on line 230, which is a tale of a tale of a tale . . ..

[p] A nonexistent literary work invented by the author.

[q] The **bronze phoenix** is likely symbolic of cyclical time. The following is quoted from Bulfinch's *Mythology* [4, p. 386]:

> Ovid tells the story of the Phoenix as follows: "Most beings spring from other individuals; but there is a certain kind which reproduces itself. The Assyrians call it the Phoenix. It does not live on fruit or flowers, but on frankincense and odoriferous gums. When it has lived five hundred years, it builds itself a nest in the branches of an oak, or on the top of a palm tree. In this it collects cinnamon, and spikenard, and myrrh, and of these materials builds a pile on which it deposits itself, and dying, breathes out its last breath amidst odors. From the body of the parent bird, a young Phoenix issues forth, destined to live as long a life as its predecessor. When this has grown up and gained sufficient strength, it lifts its nest from the tree (its own cradle and its parent's sepulchre), and carries it to the city of Heliopolis in Egypt, and deposits it in the temple of the Sun."

[r] Pink and white Chinese porcelain.

[s] **Tientsin** is located in northeastern China, close to Beijing. Following the Boxer rebellion in 1900, Beijing was invaded by a diverse alliance of western nations: Austria-Hungary, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States. As part of the Boxer Protocol, signed in 1901, the city of Tientsin was one of several ceded to the invading nations. Tientsin was divided into districts, one for each nation, and became a uniquely international city. Today it is called Tianjin.

[t] According to Murray [9] our modern game of chess, and all of its diverse variations found around the world, can be traced, using 8th century literary references, to a game called *chaturanga* which was played in India during the 8th century, and likely earlier. From India the game spread eastward into Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan; to the north to Tibet, Central Asiz, and Russia; and to west via Persia and Arabia. The game evolved differently along the different migratory

approached and receded in the shifting of the wind, dimmed by leaves and distance. I thought that a man can be an enemy of other men, of the moments of other men, but not of a country: not of fireflies, words, gardens, streams of water, sunsets. Thus I arrived before a tall, rusty gate. Between the iron bars I made out a poplar grove and a pavilion. I understood suddenly two things, the first trivial, the second almost unbelievable: the music came from the pavilion, and the music was Chinese. For precisely that reason I had openly accepted it without paying it any heed. I do not remember whether there was a bell or whether I knocked with my hands. The sparkling of the music continued.

From the rear of the house within a lantern approached: a lantern that the trees sometimes striped and sometimes eclipsed, a paper lantern that had the form of a drum and the color of the moon. A tall man bore it. I didn't see his face for the light blinded me. He opened the door and said slowly, in my own language: "I see that the pious Hsi P'êng persists in correcting my solitude. You no doubt wish to see the garden?"

I recognized the name of one of our consuls and I replied, disconcerted, "The garden?"

"The garden of forking paths."

Something stirred in my memory and I uttered with incomprehensible certainty, "The garden of my ancestor Ts'ui Pên."

"Your ancestor? Your illustrious ancestor? Come in."

The damp path zigzagged like those of my childhood. We came to a library of Eastern and Western books. I recognized bound in yellow silk several volumes of the *Lost Encyclopedia*, edited by the Third Emperor of the Luminous Dynasty but never printed.[p] The record on the phonograph revolved next to a bronze phoenix.[q] I also recall a *famille rose*[r] vase and another, many centuries older, of that shade of blue which our craftsmen copied from the potters of Persia . . .

Stephen Albert observed me with a smile. He was, as I have said, very tall, sharp-featured, with gray eyes and a gray beard. He told me that he had been a missionary in Tientsin[s] "before aspiring to become a Sinologist."

We sat down—I on a long, low divan, he with his back to the window and a tall circular clock. I calculated that my pursuer, Richard Madden, could not arrive for at least an hour. My irrevocable determination could wait.

"An astounding fate, that of Ts'ui Pên," Stephen Albert said. "Governor of his native province, learned in astronomy, in astrology and in the tireless interpretation of the canonical books, chess player,[t] famous poet and calligrapher—he abandoned all this in order to compose a book and a maze. He renounced the pleasures of both tyranny and justice, of his populous couch, of his banquets and even of erudition—all to close himself up for thirteen years in the Pavilion of the Limpid Solitude. When he died, his heirs found nothing save chaotic manuscripts. His family, as you may be aware, wished to condemn them to the fire; but his executor—a Taoist or Buddhist monk—insisted on their publication."

"We descendants of Ts'ui Pên," I replied, "continue to curse that monk. Their publication was senseless. The book is an indeterminate

heap of contradictory drafts. I examined it once: in the third chapter the hero dies, in the fourth he is alive. As for the other undertaking of Ts'ui Pên, his labyrinth . . ."

"Here is Ts'ui Pên's labyrinth," he said, indicating a tall lacquered desk.

"An ivory labyrinth!" I exclaimed. "A minimum labyrinth."

"A labyrinth of symbols," he corrected. "An invisible labyrinth of time. To me, a barbarous Englishman, has been entrusted the revelation of this diaphanous mystery. After more than a hundred years, the details are irretrievable; but it is not hard to conjecture what happened. Ts'ui Pên must have said once: *I am withdrawing to write a book*. And another time: *I am withdrawing to construct a labyrinth*. Every one imagined two works; to no one did it occur that the book and the maze were one and the same thing. The Pavilion of the Limpid Solitude stood in the center of a garden that was perhaps intricate; that circumstance could have suggested to the heirs a physical labyrinth. Ts'ui Pên died; no one in the vast territories that were his came upon the labyrinth; the confusion of the novel suggested to me that *it* was the maze. Two circumstances gave me the correct solution of the problem. One: the curious legend that Ts'ui Pên had planned to create a labyrinth which would be strictly infinite. The other: a fragment of a letter I discovered."

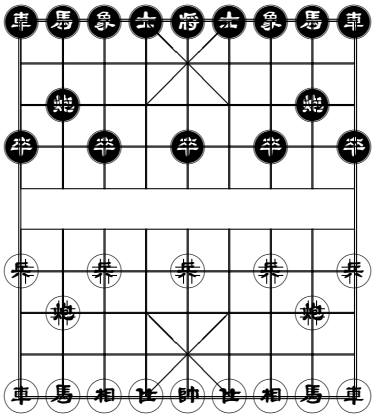
Albert rose. He turned his back on me for a moment; he opened a drawer of the black and gold desk. He faced me and in his hands he held a sheet of paper that had once been crimson, but was now pink and tenuous and cross-sectioned. The fame of Ts'ui Pên as a calligrapher had been justly won. I read, uncomprehendingly and with fervor, these words written with a minute brush by a man of my blood: *I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths*. Wordlessly, I returned the sheet. Albert continued:

"Before unearthing this letter, I had questioned myself about the ways in which a book can be infinite. I could think of nothing other than a cyclic volume, a circular one. A book whose last page was identical with the first, a book which had the possibility of continuing indefinitely. I remembered too that night which is at the middle of the *Thousand and One Nights*[4] when Scheherazade (through a magical oversight of the copyist) begins to relate word for word the story of the *Thousand and One Nights*, establishing the risk of coming once again to the night when she must repeat it, and thus on to infinity. I imagined as well a Platonic, hereditary work, transmitted from father to son, in which each new individual adds a chapter or corrects with pious care the pages of his elders. These conjectures diverted me; but none seemed to correspond, not even remotely, to the contradictory chapters of Ts'ui Pên. In the midst of this perplexity, I received from Oxford the manuscript you have examined. I lingered, naturally, on the sentence: *I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths*. Almost instantly, I understood: 'the garden of forking paths' was the chaotic novel; the phrase 'the various futures (not to all)' suggested to me the forking in time, not in space. A broad rereading of the work confirmed the theory. In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên, he chooses—simultaneously—all

paths. The Chinese version, called *xiangqi*, was presumably the version of the game that would have been played by Ts'ui Pên. *Xiangqi* uses a modified board, that is divided by a central "river." Since the pieces are always placed on the vertices, the board has 9 files (or columns), and 10 ranks (or rows). Like western chess, each player begins the game with sixteen pieces. However they are distributed differently than in western chess. Some of the major pieces have a different name for red and black, however pieces on the same row in the table below share the same move and ability.

No.	Red	Black
1	Governor 帥	General 將
2	Guard 仕	Councilor 士
2	Assistant 相	Elephant 象
2	Horse 馬	Horse 馬
2	Chariot 車	Chariot 車
2	Cannon 炮	Cannon 炮
5	Foot-soldier 兵	Foot-soldier 卒

The initial board position is shown below.



The red governor and black general are like kings that can move only one step horizontally or vertically (not diagonally), and they must remain in their 3×3 grid, or castle (indicated with a diagonal X) the entire game. The guards and councilors can are likewise confined to the castle, and can only move one step in a diagonal direction. The assistants and elephants move diagonally like bishops, but may not cross the river. The remaining pieces can cross the river. Horses move like knights in western chess, chariots and cannons like rooks, and foot-soldiers like pawns. However pawns can only move one step forward until they cross the river. Once they cross they have the option of moving one step laterally (in either direction), or one step forward. Never may they retreat, and unlike in western chess they are not promoted once they reach the end of the board. All pieces except for the cannons can capture any opposing piece that they land on. The cannons however can only capture if there is one intervening piece (of either color) for them to jump over, and they can only jump over the intervening piece if they are capturing another.

of them. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork. Here, then, is the explanation of the novel's contradictions. Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger calls at his door; Fang resolves to kill him. Naturally, there are several possible outcomes: Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they both can escape, they both can die, and so forth. In the work of Ts'ui Pên, all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings. Sometimes, the paths of this labyrinth converge: for example, you arrive at this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend. If you will resign yourself to my incurable pronunciation, we shall read a few pages."

His face, within the vivid circle of the lamplight, was unquestionably that of an old man, but with something unalterable about it, even immortal. He read with slow precision two versions of the same epic chapter. In the first, an army marches to a battle across a lonely mountain; the horror of the rocks and shadows makes the men undervalue their lives and they gain an easy victory. In the second, the same army traverses a palace where a great festival is taking place; the resplendent battle seems to them a continuation of the celebration and they win the victory. I listened with proper veneration to these ancient narratives, perhaps less admirable in themselves than the fact that they had been created by my blood and were being restored to me by a man of a remote empire, in the course of a desperate adventure, on a Western isle. I remember the last words, repeated in each version like a secret commandment: *Thus fought the heroes, tranquil their admirable hearts, violent their swords, resigned to kill and to die*.

From that moment on, I felt about me and within my dark body an invisible, intangible swarming. Not the swarming of the divergent, parallel and finally coalescent armies, but a more inaccessible, more intimate agitation that they in some manner prefigured. Stephen Albert continued:

"I don't believe that your illustrious ancestor played idly with these variations. I don't consider it credible that he would sacrifice thirteen years to the infinite execution of a rhetorical experiment. In your country, the novel is a subsidiary form of literature; in Ts'ui Pên's time it was a despicable form. Ts'ui Pên was a brilliant novelist, but he was also a man of letters who doubtless did not consider himself a mere novelist. The testimony of his contemporaries proclaims—and his life fully confirms—his metaphysical and mystical interests. Philosophic controversy usurps a good part of the novel. I know that of all problems, none disturbed him so greatly nor worked upon him so much as the abysmal problem of time. Now then, the latter is the only problem that does not figure in the pages of the *Garden*. He does not even use the word that signifies *time*. How do you explain this voluntary omission?"

I proposed several solutions—all unsatisfactory. We discussed them. Finally, Stephen Albert said to me:

"In a riddle whose answer is chess, what is the only prohibited word?"

I thought a moment and replied, "The word *chess*."

"Precisely," said Albert. "*The Garden of Forking Paths* is an enor-

[u] ***The Thousand and One Nights***, also known as the *Arabian Nights* is a compilation of numerous Arabian and Persian folk stories and legends. These include the "Tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," "The Tale of Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp," and "The Seven Voyages of Sinbad." "What delights above all in the *Arabian Nights* is its form." writes the British author A. S. Byatt in her tale "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" [2]: "Story is embedded in story, story sprouts out of the midst of story . . . The collection resembles both a group of Russian dolls, formally similar, faces and colours different, and a maze or spiderweb with threads and passages leading in all directions, both formless and orderly at once."

Borges describes the structure of the *Thousand and One Nights* in his essay "When Fiction Lives in Fiction" (1939), a work about infinities [3, p. 161]:

> The story that introduces the series is well known: the king's heartbroken oath that each night he will wed a virgin who will be decapitated at dawn, and the fortitude of Scheherazade, who distracts him with wondrous tales until a thousand and one nights have revolved over their two heads and she presents him with a son. The need to complete a thousand and one segments drove the work's copyists to all sorts of digressions. None of them is as disturbing as that of night 602, a bit of magic among the nights. On that strange night, the king hears his own story from the queen's lips. He hears the beginning of the story, which includes all the others, and also—monstrously—itself. Does the reader have a clear sense of the vast possibility held out by this interpolation, its peculiar danger? Were the queen to persist, the immobile king would forever listen to the truncated story of the thousand and one nights, now infinite and circular. . . In *The Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade tells many stories; one of them is, almost, the story of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

In 1936 Borges also wrote a review entitled "Translators of *The Thousand and One Nights*," [3].

mous 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. That is the tortuous method preferred, in each of the meanderings of his indefatigable novel, by the oblique Ts'ui Pên. I have compared hundreds of manuscripts, I have corrected the errors that the negligence of the copyists has introduced, I have guessed the plan of this chaos, I have re-established—I believe I have re-established—the primordial organization, I have translated the entire work: it is clear to me that not once does he employ the word 'time.' The explanation is obvious: *The Garden of Forking Paths* is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as Ts'ui Pên conceived it. In contrast to Newton[v] and Schopenhauer,[w] your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces *all* possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us. In the present one, which a favorable fate has granted me, you have arrived at my house; in another, while crossing the garden, you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost."[x]

"In every one," I pronounced, not without a tremble to my voice, "I am grateful to you and revere you for your re-creation of the garden of Ts'ui Pên."

"Not in all," he murmured with a smile. "Time forks perpetually toward innumerable futures. In one of them I am your enemy."

Once again I felt the swarming sensation of which I have spoken. It seemed to me that the humid garden that surrounded the house was infinitely saturated with invisible persons. Those persons were Albert and I, secret, busy and multiform in other dimensions of time. I raised my eyes and the tenuous nightmare dissolved. In the yellow and black garden there was only one man; but this man was as strong as a statue . . . this man was approaching along the path and he was Captain Richard Madden.

"The future already exists," I replied, "but I am your friend. Could I see the letter again?"

Albert rose. Standing tall, he opened the drawer of the tall desk; for the moment his back was to me. I had readied the revolver. I fired with extreme caution. Albert fell uncomplainingly, immediately. I swear his death was instantaneous—a lightning stroke.

The rest is unreal, insignificant. Madden broke in, arrested me. I have been condemned to the gallows. I have won out abominably; I have communicated to Berlin the secret name of the city they must attack. They bombed it yesterday; I read it in the same papers[y] that offered to England the mystery of the learned Sinologist Stephen Albert who was murdered by a stranger,[z] one Yu Tsun. The Chief had deciphered this mystery. He knew my problem was to indicate (through the uproar of the war) the city called Albert, and that I had found no other means to do so than to kill a man of that name. He does not know (no one can know) my innumerable contrition and weariness.

[v] Isaac **Newton** (1643–1727) was an English mathematician, astronomer, and natural philosopher who developed the method of calculus, as well as formal theories of motion, optics, and gravitation.

[w] Arthur **Schopenhauer** (1788–1860) was a German philosopher, whose seminal work *The World as Will and Representation* argues that the universe is shaped by a universal will.

[x] Borges was fascinated by the concept of *time*, as is evidenced in his other works including the essays "A History of Eternity" (1934), "Circular Time" (1941), and "A New Refutation of Time" (1947). (All three appear in Borges [3]). In "A History of Eternity" he quotes a passage from an earlier work, *The Language of the Argentines* (1928), which describes an experience he had one evening during a random walk through the streets of Barracas:

> the serenity of the night, the translucent little wall, the small-town scent of honeysuckle, the fundamental dirt—is not merely identical to what existed on that corner many years ago; it is without superficial resemblances or repetitions, the same. When we can feel this oneness, time is a delusion which the indifference and inseparability of a moment from its apparent yesterday and from its apparent today suffices to disintegrate.

The notion of time described in the "Garden of Forking Path" where each reality branches into alternate versions of simultaneous reality presages the *many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics*, introduced by the physicist Hugh Everett in 1957, 16 years after the publication of this story. Under Everett's theory, with each elementary measurement of a quantum mechanical system, our universe forks into a number of branches, with one branch for every possible measured outcome. This theory forms the basis for the new paradigm of quantum computing.

[y] This is potentially a paradox, in that the Chief could not have known that Albert was the target location until after news of the murder of Stephen Albert had been published.

[z] Note Alpert's fate parallels those of Ts'ui Pên (line 128) and the fictitious Fang (line 252). Likewise, Dr. Tsun himself would be killed by a hangman, presumably another stranger.

Study Questions

The following questions are provided to help you make sense of the story. You are not required to answer them, but it may be helpful to discuss them.

1. Why are the first two pages of the manuscript missing? Where they never written, lost, intentionally destroyed? How does the absence of these pages affect our understanding and appreciation of the rest of the story?

2. How do the author's references to puzzles and games, like mazes, riddles, and chess, relate to the more serious matters in this story, such as war, free will, life, death, and the nature of the universe?

3. An explicit reference is made to the *Thousand and One Nights*, a recursively narrated work of literature. In what ways is Borges's story "The Garden of Forking Paths" recursive? What other recurring patterns are evident.

4. What purpose is gained by giving each major character in the story a different nationality?

5. The story refers to both historical and fictional persons (Captain Liddel Hart, Hans Rabener (alias Viktor Runeberg), Goethe, Newton, Schopenhauer, Captain Richard Madden, Ts'ui Pên), places (the county of Staffordshire, the towns of Ashgrove, Fenton, and Albert, the cities of Berlin and Tsingtao, the river Ancre, the province of Yunnan), literary works (the *Annals* of Tacitus, the *Thousand and One Nights*, the *Hung Lu Meng*, the *Lost Encyclopedia*, Ts'ui Pên's *Garden of Forking Paths*, not to mention the confession letter of Dr. Yu Tsun) and events (the Battle of the Somme, the bombing of Albert, the assassination of Dr. Stephen Albert). Which of these elements are real and which are imaginary? How does the blending of real and fictional persons, places, literary works, and events advance the theme of *The Garden of Forking Paths*?

6. In lines 297–307 we learn that the word "time" is paradoxically omitted intensionally from Ts'ui Pên's *Garden of Forking Paths*. Is anything of equivalent importance missing from Borges's *Garden of Forking Paths*, and if so, why?

7. What new questions does the text of the story prompt *you* to ask?

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