

2016

## A Labyrinth of Mirrors: The Reader as the Writer and the Writer as the Reader in Jorge Luis Borges' Short Fictions

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### Recommended Citation

Rim, Andy Byung-Ho, "A Labyrinth of Mirrors: The Reader as the Writer and the Writer as the Reader in Jorge Luis Borges' Short Fictions" (2016). *Senior Projects Spring 2016*. Paper 350.  
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A Labyrinth of Mirrors: The Reader as the Writer and the Writer as the Reader in Jorge Luis  
Borges' Short Fictions

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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May 2016

## Acknowledgements

Thank you Stephen Graham, for all of the incredible help and support for this seemingly impossible task.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	23
Chapter 3.....	43
Conclusion.....	65

## Introduction

Throughout this project, I will be discussing and analyzing three specific Jorge Luis Borges short stories: “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” and “The Garden of Forking Paths.” In my personal opinion, which of course matters somewhat, these short stories are about one thing, but another person might believe that they are about another thing. Perhaps I wrote on these stories (and chose to center my project around Borges’ fictions) because I was intrigued by the dense and almost incomprehensible nature of Borges’ relatively short and often meta-fictional narratives. Perhaps I wrote on this subject because I could not initially come to a definitive conclusion on what I thought these stories signified. Perhaps I chose these stories to write about because it was, at first, a seemingly impossible task. Perhaps my decision was guided by all of those reasons. Throughout this particular project, I will be both using the word “particular” and other words like “furthermore” and “in addition” to give my senior project some more legitimacy. And although this introduction (so far) appears to be in a more personal tone as opposed to an academic one, I can assure you that the actual chapters will be feature a more academic tone as well as academic language. But at the same time, underneath this academic tone, the analyses and the process that led up to those analyses are essentially very personal, at least in the sense that everything I say will be influenced by my . The following chapters of this project are predominantly established upon my personal readings and interpretations of these impossibly deceitful stories, which was a necessity to prove my thesis that these short stories ultimately exemplify the notion that the reader of a fiction is an equally significant figure as the writer of that fiction, especially in regards to interpretation.

As I will discuss and reiterate many times in the forthcoming passages, these particular short stories that I have selected are dense and multi-faceted, both in content and form. For instance, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” blends the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and literary criticism, to ultimately create a product that is puzzling, particularly in the sense that it can be difficult for one to discern what this story is actually “about.” Throughout “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” the reader is presented with a form of literary criticism surrounding the eponymous Menard’s attempt at authoring Cervantes’ *Quixote*, and while the literary critical aspect of this narrative is evident, at least in the literal sense, the message of the criticism, or apparent criticism, is obfuscated by the often paradoxical and extreme ideas that the narrator and Menard express. And in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” Borges further displays a blending of genre, as what appears to be a World War I spy narrative quickly evolves into the discussion of a mystical labyrinth-like novel that questions the traditional philosophical perspectives regarding how time and space operate. As mentioned earlier, these three short stories complicate, and ultimately, subvert conventional literary genres in many different ways, and addressing every single form and instance of subversion would only be more confusing for the reader of this project, especially if I am attempting to elucidate whatever meaning these stories hold. Instead, one general tactic of my approach to interpreting these stories involves using certain passages as narrative cues (placed by Borges) to create and find meaning within the twisting labyrinths of Borges’ words.

Furthermore, I will be utilizing some phrases and concepts from the field of narratology; since these terms are used differently by different critics, I will give my own working definitions. First, while looking at “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” one task that I

engage in is to analyze how the story and its narrative discontinuities affect the figure of the “implied reader.” The implied reader, or the “mock reader,” as Walker Gibson refers to it, is an imaginary persona “whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language” (Gibson 2). In another sense, the implied reader is also a construct of the implied author, and vice versa, as it represents the ideal imaginary reader that the author is writing for, as well as the reader’s perception of who the author is. The term “implied author” similarly refers to the “author’s second self,” and the “picture the reader gets of this presence” from the writing (Booth 86).

Another term that I will use frequently is “contextually aware reader.” The contextually aware reader possesses information that may not necessarily be included within the actual text, such as knowledge of the author’s life, writing process, or the history of that author’s reception. For example, a contextually aware reader for these Borges short stories would likely have knowledge of Borges’ own life, his philosophical interests, various statements that Borges had made in interviews, etc. In turn, this knowledge could help the reader when attempting to elucidate the meaning of the text. On the other hand, a contextually unaware reader may not know anything of Borges, and in turn, that reader’s initial interpretation of the text may end up being completely different from the previously mentioned contextually aware reader.

Finally, the last term that needs defining is “narratee.” The narratee is essentially another “imaginary” figure, similar to the implied reader and implied author, albeit in a more fictional sense. As Gerald Prince states, the narratee is a figure “for whom the narrator multiplies his explanations and justifies the particularities of his narrative” (9). In other words, the narratee is the theoretical figure that the narrator of a story speaks to, and

in turn, the narratee is most likely the figure that is closest to truly understanding the narrator's words and intentions.

Making use of these concepts, I hope to express my particular readings of these Borges stories, and using myself as a "test subject," analyze how Borges' idiosyncratically meta-fictional narratives affect the reader-author relationships that inform every reading of every text. As with any form of literary analysis, my conclusions will be debatable, particularly since this project will be a representation of a relatively personal reading of Borges' text. While Borges states in his introduction that the "eight stories in this book require no great elucidation," I will attempt, nevertheless, to elucidate them (Borges 67).

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that in some place, at some time, some person, whoever it may be, possibly could have (or not have) picked up a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, and done exactly what I have done.



## **Chapter I: On “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” the Role of the Reader, and Who the Reader Should Be**

### I.

As expected from a Borgesian work of short fiction, Jorge Luis Borges’ “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” prominently features many instances of meta-fiction and manipulation of the “traditional” narrative format, such as Borges’ insertion of himself as the fictionalized narrator, or the story’s evident mimicking of a more objective format, like that of a literary review or critique. The overarching narrative of “Tlön” involves this fictional Borges narrator conducting a sort of literary review of a specific section of a text that is “a literal (though also laggardly) reprint of the 1902 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*” (which was brought the narrator’s attention by Bioy Casares, who is also a real-life friend of Borges), a statement that indicates a certain sense of dubiousness, given its status as a “laggardly” reprint of a more esteemed text (Borges 68). Furthermore, throughout the story, it is revealed that this reprinted encyclopedia features an entry that is nonexistent within the original version, pertaining to a country named “Uqbar,” which is particularly intriguing given the fact that “no one had ever been in Uqbar” (Borges 70). After discussing and analyzing the encyclopedia’s various descriptions of Uqbar’s philosophies and lifestyles, the story jumps to a postscript written seven years later detailing how the whole world of Tlön and Uqbar was itself a fictional construct created by a “secret benevolent society” whose intention was “to invent a country” (Borges 78). And in a final turn of events, after the writings on Tlön become public, it appears as though the philosophies of Tlön have begun to invade the narrator’s “real” world, to the degree that “Tlön’s (conjectural) ‘primitive language’ has filtered into our schools...a fictitious past has supplanted in men’s memories that other past” (Borges 81).

The injection of the overtly fictional into something resembling reality further recurs throughout the short story, especially in regards to the Tlönian philosophies and the narrator's reading of this replicated encyclopedia. In a sense, due to the review-like format of this story, the narrative can be viewed as the Borges character's reading of the encyclopedia containing Tlön, which in turn reflects upon the reader's reading of Borges' reading of the text. Given the breadth of all the information and references presented in this story, the stance of the commentaries on theories and philosophies can become hard to discern, especially since many of these passages appear to be paradoxical. One explicit instance of paradox involves the Tlönian concepts of materialism. As the narrator states, due to the extremely foreign and unique nature of Tlön, some "thinkers have formulated this philosophy [of materialism] (generally with less clarity than zeal) as though putting forth a paradox," but it is then stated that the "language of Tlön resisted formulating this paradox" (Borges 75). However, instead of just being difficult to understand, these paradoxical terms make it so that the reader must view these passages as narrative cues to construct a meaning or a truth for this chaotic muddle of information. Furthermore, the multiple genres featured in "Tlön" may complicate the decision in defining a certain narrative cue, an issue that ultimately challenges the concept of the ideal reader, as initially, it is equally as hard to conclude who the ideal reader for this story actually is.

II.

These acts of manipulation can make it difficult for a reader to discern the specific genre of this short story, and furthermore, what this story is actually about. However, as is the case with almost any piece of fiction, "Tlön" has many narrative cues that can alleviate the reader's sense of uncertainty to a degree, or at least attempt to guide the

reader through a particular reading of the piece, although the success of this “particular reading” ultimately depends on the contextual knowledge of the reader.

As referenced earlier in the introduction, the notion of the contextually aware reader is heavily questioned and explored throughout this story, and even within the foreword to this collection of stories. This question regarding the necessity of a contextually aware reader is first introduced within the foreword of the collection of stories that “Tlön” is featured in, with the foreword being a section that might not particularly hold significance in relation to the narrative, at least to the reader. In a more general sense, Borges’ foreword to this collection of stories, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” appears to answer this question instantly. In this section, Borges’ immediately states that the “eight stories in this book require no great elucidation” (Borges 67). The immediacy of this statement clearly indicates that Borges’ position on the “deceitful” nature of his stories is one of disregard. To further this disregard, Borges downplays the elusiveness of his fictions by explicating the elusive factors of each of his short stories: for instance, he blatantly states that in “The Circular Ruins,” “all is unreal” (Borges 67). In the case of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” Borges more explicitly notes the false nature of the subject matter: “I have chosen to write notes on *imaginary* books” (Borges 67).

Those notes are “‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ and ‘A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain’” (Borges 67). Initially, all of these elements appear to provide the reader with the sort of “guide” on how to read the following narratives. But, in regards to “Tlön,” or any other story in this collection, Borges does not necessarily mention the fusion of the real and the fictional that is featured prominently in this story, with fictional elements like the titular encyclopedia being juxtaposed with “real,” existing elements,

like the inclusion of Bioy Casares. By only stating that he has “chosen to write notes on imaginary books,” Borges sort of refutes this particular subterfuge of combining the real and the fictional. In a sense, he is withholding information from the reader by simplifying his narrative mannerisms.

These narrative mannerisms and cues manifest themselves within varying elements of this story, such as recurring images, references to literature and literary figures, etc. In regards to Borges’ employment of imagery, the initial image of the “mirror” that is raised in *Tlön* is a characteristic example of the seemingly non-significant and innocuous nature of this story’s narrative cues. In the very first line of the story, the narrator states “I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia” (Borges 68). The mentioning of mirrors arouses the reader’s interest, because it strongly connotes the theme of reflection, which corresponds with the whole notion of this story’s shaping of the reader’s experience. As suggested previously, the contextually aware reader and the contextually unaware reader are ultimately going to have very different reactions and conclusions to this text. The imagery of the mirror definitely embodies this notion, as this story acts as a mirror, with the “meaning” of this story reflecting upon who the reader is and what they previously know about this text and author. The reader must ultimately decide exactly what this story is. Borges may include moments of narrative doubt and absurdist premises, but the objective format of this story is the final point of decision that the reader must triumph over to make a decision (I use the word triumph because all the misdirection of objectivity, like the further inclusion of an inherently objective and “trustworthy” text like an encyclopedia, makes the reader openly work to construct meaning in this text).

Borges' widely known fascination with labyrinths is a recurring theme and image that is explored throughout in his early short fictions. In this particular story (as well as many other of Borges' fictions), the concept of the labyrinth manifests within this story, mainly because the story itself is an enigma that the reader must figure out for himself, or herself. Furthermore, the "mirror" appears to be the goal and end of this particular labyrinth, as in the end, it is the reader's own disposition and knowledge that elucidates the purpose and essence of this story.

Of course, since it can be easy to lose oneself by analyzing all of the meta-fictional aspects and literary references within "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," one must not forget about the more literal subject matter of the titular false encyclopedia. Yet at the same time, one cannot necessarily address this large number of these plot points and literary references simply because some of them do not necessarily pertain to this discussion of the implied reader and readership. While all of the narrative mannerisms that Borges exerts are obviously significant aspects of this short story, the actual content surrounding Tlön must be significant, as for one, "Tlön" is the title of the story. Past this cursory observation, the elements of Tlön also appear to exist in this meta-fictional realm, similar to the nature of this story. In regards to literary references, in the middle of this section, the narrator references two real texts, the *Tao Te Ching* and *1001 Nights*, in conjunction with the notion of literary criticism practiced in "Tlön": "Literary criticism often invents authors: It will take two dissimilar works – the *Tao Te Ching* and the *1001 Nights*, for instance – attribute them to a single author, and then in all good conscience determine the psychology of that most interesting *homme de lettres*" (Borges 77). Essentially, this statement is explicating this idea that the narrator's particular school of

literary criticism takes various works and attributes a constructed author based on an imposed psychology that is created by these critics' interpretations of a text. This sentiment clearly parallels the statement of Tlön's tendency to attribute all books to a single author. Interestingly, the sentence about literary criticism comes directly after the narrator explicates Tlön's belief in the single author. This juxtaposition appears to commentate upon and critique literary criticism, to an extent. Since the absurdity of Tlön's fictional authorship is (or should be) apparent the reader, by referencing real literature and actual modes of thinking, Borges the narrator is basically showing the reader a sense of absurdity behind this psychoanalytic aspect of literary criticism, as it performs the same action that some absurd fictional world does as well.

While the message about literary criticism is clear here because of the juxtaposition, the purpose of this criticism/satire is somewhat unclear. First, when analyzing this purpose, one must decide if this statement is reflective of Borges the narrator, Borges the real life figure/author, or both, as the identity of the speaker of this criticism can determine the purpose of this message. Unfortunately, this decision is an impossible one, as a reader cannot discern this distinction with full certainty. Additionally, this distinction is further blurred since "Borges" functions both as the author of the story as well as the fictionalized narrator. In a fictional work, it might be difficult to determine if the author is speaking directly and personally through their narrator, but in this case, this dynamic is subverted because the author is seemingly the narrator (even if they are only similar by name). Therefore, it is difficult to discern whether this statement is one of real criticism, or some sort of "in-character" ironic statement.

This ambiguous nature of this statement upon literary criticism becomes conflicted when looked at in conjunction with a comment by the narrator on page 71: “I experienced a slight, astonished sense of dizziness that I shall not describe, since this story is the story not of my emotions but of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius” (Borges 71). Refusing to describe his emotions and only focus on the encyclopedia implies a sense of objectivity for the following narrative, and furthermore, that there most likely will not be any personal interjections from the narrator. Yet the statement on literary criticism essentially refutes this previous statement of objectivity, as this comment on literary criticism can be viewed as an opinion, and more importantly, a brief departure from being “of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius.” Given Borges’ desired objectivity, this statement is uncalled for and out of place. However, it is not to say that it is not consistent with the themes of this story, as this critique is in line with the recurring theme/imagery of the “mirror” (which hold multiple connotations) by reflecting the absurdity of Tlön upon the absurd elements of real life. In this sense, perhaps the disruptiveness of this statement stems from our sense that Borges the author speaking, and it could possibly be classified as a statement of criticism, if Borges the author is in fact the speaker here (a fact that can only be speculated upon by the reader). Still, the statement’s contextual inappropriateness appears at least be a sort of narrative cue.

Now, in regards to both these narrative cues and the concept of the contextually aware reader, the question remains whether or not these cues are meant for the unaware reader, and furthermore, if it would be possible for this particular reader to receive and correctly interpret these cues. In a sense, it would be possible, yet the aforementioned cues would not be enough. There would be a sense of doubt arising from Casares’

mistakes or Borges' syntax, but these elements do not unveil the satirical nature of this narrative. Additionally, if this particularly short story were removed from its context and presented "as is" (in the sense that it is presented to an unaware reader without being attached to the overarching title of *Ficciones* and assuming that the reader is unaware of Borges' reputation as a meta-fictional writer), it can be assumed that some completely unaware reader may not be able to discern Borges' objective with this short story. While the absurdity of the content and the various previously mentioned instances of narrative/authoritative doubt can alert a reader of the true nature of this piece, they are just a few components of this complex fictional construct. Without the more explicit element of the title of the collections, *Ficciones*, and even the history surrounding Borges' meta-fictional writings, a completely unaware reader may not be able to recognize the specific manner in which this story functions, in regards to the reader. The story is as the title states: a fiction, and a reflection of the titular, and in a sense, it is this title of *Ficciones* that determines a large portion of the reader experience, as it literally informs the reader as to what sort of content is featured within this collection. Additionally, as opposed to the narrative voices featured within these stories, the title of *Ficciones* is probably the only instance of Borges the author (and the real life figure) speaking directly to the audience without any form of subterfuge.

Another more obvious example of the necessity for contextual awareness is once again located within the foreword, in which Borges states that composing "vast books" is a "laborious madness and an impoverishing one," and instead states that the "better way to go about it is to pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them" (Borges 67). There is an unmistakable aura of irony and absurdity



that surrounds this statement, as one cannot necessarily say pretending that books exist are better than actually having a book. Furthermore, Borges later describes himself as a “more reasonable, more inept, and more lazy man” to justify his writing on imaginary books, like in *Tlön* (Borges 67). Again, his statement of being “more reasonable” is a continuation of the absurd comment that imagining books is better. But also, the admission of laziness and ineptitude is definitely a narrative cue for how to read this passage. An author would most likely want to present themselves in a favorable light to the reader, yet this heavy self-deprecation is contradictory, as the author appears to be “lazy” and “inept” to the reader, which in turn partially refutes the quality of the preceding stories. Of course, knowing Borges’ vast literary knowledge, one can discern that he is neither lazy nor inept, and thus this statement raises the dubiousness of the foreword as a “sincere” or “authentic” foreword. Yet to discern this refutation of Borges’ proclaimed laziness, one must have some knowledge of Borges’ life outside of this text. If a reader had absolutely no knowledge of Borges’ life, the irony of this statement could easily be missed. Therefore, the particular awareness of the contextually aware reader is challenged again, especially since one needs some context to even understand the passage that is supposedly giving context straight from the author himself.

While the act of combining reality and fiction in “*Tlön*” is featured within this passage from the foreword, it is not necessarily explicitly discussed within the section (another instance of Borges “withholding information”). One strong instance of this particular combination in “*Tlön*” is Borges’ references to real people. His prominent inclusion of and references to Bioy Casares, as well as various other real-life Argentinian figures, clearly exemplifies this combination. Bell-Villada conjectures that the

“Argentine readers who first encountered this story, with its allusions to well-known authors who may have been personal acquaintances, must have found themselves strangely disoriented and have felt some perplexity as to the truth of Borges’s text” (139). In this sentiment, it is significant that Bell-Villada specifically states “Argentine readers,” as some, if not many, of these figures can easily be unrecognizable by readers of other nations. To the (Argentine) reader who knows all of these figures, these references in “Tlön” would definitely be narrative cues, but for another reader (a reader from the U.S., for example) who has no knowledge of these figures, the cue is missed. The “certain hesitation” that Bell-Villada thinks that the Argentine reader experienced at these moments will not have been felt by the hypothetical U.S. reader, thus, in each scenario, changing the reader’s experience and interpretation of the text. On a side note, perhaps these Argentinian references are an example of Borges writing with a reader construct in mind (which is, as Ralf Schneider says, the “intended, or ideal, reader”) (Schneider 482).

The concept of Borges writing for an intended reader is particularly interesting, given the numerous and subtle narrative cues, as well as the many very specific (sometimes region specific) references; this figure of the intended reader becomes one of great specificity and contextual awareness (it almost appears as though Borges was writing to/for himself). Even the narratee must be almost completely aware of everything Borges is talking about, as by 1947 (date of postscript), in the narrative and within this created reality, the narratee has to have already experienced the extensive spread of Tlön.

The ending also becomes self-reflective when it is considered within this context regarding the specificity of the intended reader. Borges ends the piece by stating that the inevitable spread of Tlön “makes very little difference to me; through my quiet days in

this hotel in Adrogué, I go on revising...an indecisive translation in the style of Quevedo of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urne Buriall* (81).” Essentially, after this fantastical and ridiculous phenomenon of the fictional taking over reality, Borges simply drops the matter and proceeds to go on with his life, without care for the events. As mentioned previously, the imagery of the mirror that Borges the narrator places in the first sentence of the story can be translated to represent how this story functions as a mirror: the contextual awareness of the reader ultimately determines what the reader derives from this story. In the end, the reader is only left with an experience based on what they already know in relation to Borges, his writing style, the references, etc. By simply disregarding everything in this last sentence, it is as if Borges is also metaphorically walking away from the reader, only to leave the reader with their own thoughts.

Basically, it appears as though it “makes very little difference” to Borges as to what the reader actually experienced/discerned. On the other hand, this lack of care could function as a sort of narrative cue, in which the reader must recognize that the whole story has a sort of “nothingness” to it. Possibly one should be guided by the narrator’s sentiment and not dwell too hard on the story, and treat it with the simplicity that Borges expresses in the foreword. And thirdly, this ending could be a meta-fictional statement that mirrors what the reader does/is doing after the story ends: walking away and doing something else.

The descriptions of Tlön language and philosophies also contain elements of ideas of philosophers, like Mauthner and Vaihinger, as pointed out by Nuria Morgado. Specifically, Vaihinger has a concept stating that “human beings can never really know the underlying reality of the world, and that as a result we construct systems of thought

and then assume that these match reality: we behave ‘as if’ the world matches our models” (392). This philosophy can be seen in a number of Tlön’s construct of language, especially in the section that states that this language has no concept of nouns: “there is no noun that corresponds to our word ‘moon,’ but there is a verb which in English would be ‘to moonate’ or ‘to enmoon’” (Borges 73). Aside from the absurdity of this notion, this unique system is an exemplification of a system of thought that is assumed to match reality. It is another instance of the “mirror,” as the whole construct of our language is ultimately arbitrary and absurd: it only exists because we created the words and how they function (it is not a pre-existing, natural system, but is instead a human construct). To further this mirror, Cabrera states that while “this philosophy of language may at first seem ridiculous, it springs from a mutual desire to use language to order, shape and construct our realities” (23). Tlön’s language is no more absurd than ours, in concept; it is only absurd because we already have a definitive system/construct.

### III.

Now, if the reader read these passages about language and already knew either Borges’ interest in these philosophies/philosophers, or the philosophers themselves, or both, the reading experience would differ from that of a reader who is not knowledgeable about these subjects. To the unaware reader, the passage may appear to just be absurd (which could be a narrative cue in and of itself). And hypothetically, the reader who is aware of Borges’ stylings as an author but is unaware of this philosophical aspect may understand the irony and humor in these concepts, but he/she also may not grasp the “mirror-like” aspect of this description of language. These two examples of readers with different levels of contextual awareness appear to indicate a requirement for contextual

awareness, or at least the encouragement of an active reader. But in the end, the reader's response makes little difference to Borges, as his role as an author has finished; there is no further interaction with the reader past the text. While a significant degree of contextual awareness is required for a reader to "get" the story, even a reader with no awareness can at the very least be presented with a fiction that might leave them annoyed and confused. And even if the 100% contextually aware reader (a status that perhaps can only be attained by Borges himself) understands all of the references, it would still not give that reader the clear answer to the question, "What is the point of this story?," as the numerous and scattered narrative elements/topics (like references to philosophy, apparent literary criticism, combination of fact/fiction, etc.) create a polymorphous text, in which one part may look like a satire on the reader-author relationship, but another part seems like it could be sincere literary criticism. In its denseness of context, it may appear that one at least should be very contextually aware, yet it is evident with the references to mirrors and confusing passages that interpreting this fiction devolves almost completely upon the reader, and that it is oxymoronically extremely transparent in its shrouded nature.

For instance, one evident and glaring instance of *Tlön* functioning as a meta-fictional construct is contained within the section in which Borges discusses the literature and books of *Tlön*. Even without reading into the specifics of the passage, its meta-fictional nature is strongly implied, as a fiction author writing about literature itself (in any manner) is significant. Preceding this portion on literature, Borges the narrator states that we "must always remember that on *Tlön*, the subject of knowledge is one and eternal" (Borges 76). With this sentiment in the reader's mind, Borges proceeds to state

that “the concept of plagiarism” does not exist, and “that all books are the work of a single author who is timeless and anonymous” (Borges 76-77). These notions, along with the fact that Tlön’s “fiction has but a single plot, with every imaginable permutation” are completely absurd ones to the reader, as plagiarism is clearly an existing concept/action and a unified fiction with an infinite number of plots is simply impossible. Perhaps one could discern common Borgesian themes and interests of “unoriginality” and “infinity” from these sentences, but only if one were contextually aware enough reader. Instead, to a reader who may not have any knowledge these statements just appear to be absurd concepts that follow the other absurdities featured in the narrative. There appears to be some sort of sense of satire or critique due to the previously mentioned fact that this is a case in which an author is referencing and writing about his own craft, but there also seems to be no definitive explanation for these statements. Instead, there are only glimpses of the “meaning” behind these statements, some of which necessitate one to be contextually aware. Perhaps some parts of the story serve to further the meta-fictional aspects more than others (like the mirrors symbolizing the necessity of the self to “complete” and understand the text), but in general, the narrator’s detailing of Tlön is demonstrative of this story’s more fictional qualities.

As done multiple times throughout this chapter, one can easily refer to and label certain narrative elements as “absurd,” particularly the philosophies surrounding the world of Tlön. This labeling only serves to address the story in a meta-fictional context, and consequently, is somewhat diminutive towards the non-meta-fictional aspect of these narrative points. So instead of simply classifying some facet of this story as absurd, it would behoove one to “suspend one’s disbelief” and also examine Borges’ narrative in a

fictional context. Even though this story clearly has numerous meta-fictional qualities, *Tlön* ultimately is a fictional narrative, and should also be treated as such.

For instance, much of the Tlönian life appears to be paradoxical. At one point, the narrator himself points out the paradoxical nature of Tlön's schools of thought: "Every mental state is irreducible...therefore, [one might deduce] that on Tlön there are no sciences – or even any 'systems of thought.' The paradoxical truth is that systems of thought do exist, almost countless numbers of them" (Borges 74). Furthermore, as the narrator begins to list the differing systems of thought, he also notes that the "metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility – they seek to amaze, astound," a disposition that contradicts the purpose of a metaphysician. In another case, on the topic of materialism, the narrator mentions that because the people of Tlön cannot understand the concept of materialism, some "thinkers have formulated this philosophy...as though putting forth a paradox" (Borges 75). The reader is exposed to Tlön from these descriptions of paradoxes and idiosyncratic modes of thought, as Borges, both the author and narrator, establishes a world for the reader to be immersed in through these descriptions, no matter how objective or "untraditional" the format of the delivery may be.

This immersion into the fictional is furthered when Tlön's reliance upon paradoxes is juxtaposed with the fact that encyclopedia entries about Tlön were fabricated, as revealed in the postscript: "A secret benevolent society...was born; its mission: to invent a country" (Borges 78). First, with this newfound realization of Tlön's authenticity, the paradoxical nature of Tlön has significance added to it. Since it is evident that the whole construct of Tlön was made to specifically create a fake country,

this significance surrounding the paradoxes arises from the clear intent behind the creation of Tlön. Given this intent, it can be assumed that every part of it was crafted to fulfill a particular vision. Within this context of intent, the notion of the paradox reflects upon the whole falsified construct of Tlön, especially because the concept of an encyclopedia with fictitious information is itself a paradox. With this realization, the immersion of Tlön itself is immediately broken, but consequently, the immersion of the world external to the encyclopedia (otherwise identified as the world of the narrator) is retained and extended. Yet Borges does not ignore the Tlönian world, and instead ends up blurring the world in which the reader is immersed in by introducing the influx of Tlönian life into the narrator's "real" world at the end of the story. While this act of combining the two worlds may seem to counter any immersion experienced by the reader, it cleverly qualifies the reader's previous (assumed) acceptance of Tlön as a "real" fictional world, while also maintaining the authenticity of the narrator's own world. Again, as with the meta-fictional narrative cues, this hypothetical reader's immersion is assumed, and therefore, not static or definite for all readers, since some readers may have been immersed in this world while some may have not been so immersed. In the same way that the parallel between the paradox of Tlön and the paradox of a fake encyclopedia may be more evident and concrete, the notion of "immersion" that exists in fiction is subjective. To parallel the image of the mirror, whatever this immersion entails is dependent upon the reader, as it is ultimately the reader's own conscience and knowledge that determines how immersed that reader is.

In a final reference to the imagery of the mirror that is presented at the beginning of the story, the reader's experience and conclusion of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is



almost entirely dependent upon that reader's contextual knowledge of what narrative elements the story contains as well as the form of the narrative itself, which ultimately results in this story acting as a mirror, allowing for the reader to discern only what they could already discern. In the context of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the image of the mirror appears to be representative of the aforementioned truth regarding the author-reader relationship. All of the narrative cues, combination of the real and the fantastic, the imagery of mirrors and labyrinths, etc., exposes this notion that even if an author writes fiction with an intended meaning/purpose and a specific implied reader in mind, those personalized concepts cannot always be discerned by the actual reader, and in turn, the reader partially creates their own meaning from a text using their own knowledge and predispositions. Further, given this analysis of Borges' imagery of mirrors and seemingly confusing narrative actions, it may appear to be easy to just say that this story was written to explicate the disconnect of the author-reader relationship, but again, that is only one reflection. This explanation only accounts for the meta-fictional qualities of the piece, and sort of ignores the widely featured fictional portions that portray the world of Tlön.

One way of interpreting the fiction (and not just the meta-fiction) is to postulate that that Tlön is, at least in part, a representation of Fascism and Totalitarianism. If a reader (such as myself) has knowledge that Borges "was very wary of the ideologies that pragmatically manifested...Marxism, Fascism, and all their variants," then Tlön's consumption of the narrator's world at the end of the story seems to parallel this notion of being completely overtaken by ideology (Bloom 2). The fact that the narrator is a fictionalized version of Borges himself, as well as his apparent wariness of Tlön's overtaking ("Contact with Tlön, the *habit* of Tlön, has disintegrated this world") further

parallels the real Borges' dislike of large ideological machines, such as Fascism (Borges 81). Of course, this is simply one interpretation, but at the concurrently, this parallel between Tlön and Borges' political leanings is more visible to the reader who had this knowledge of Borges' life and ideologies.

The mirror, as well as this short story, is strikingly related to another Borgesian fascination, the concept of infinity: to a reader, an infinite number of truths regarding this story are possible, and the ambiguity/subterfuge surrounding this story at least serves to accentuate an infinite number of readings for a number of individuals.

## Chapter II: On the Readership and Authorship of “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*”

### I.

Borges' short fiction, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” clearly engages in a unique narrative structure, as the narrative consists of an unnamed author/narrator who reviews and critiques a particular work of the titular Pierre Menard, who of course is a completely fictional, twentieth-century author. Menard's fictional biography is further explored with the narrator's analysis of what he calls “[Menard's] most significant writing of our time,” which ultimately turns out to be a word-for-word replication of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Borges 90). While the idea of someone copying an existing work is already somewhat ridiculous, as well as the notion that the copied text can be praised highly, Borges further states that Menard's *Quixote* only consists of “the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of Part 1 of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of Chapter XXII” (Borges 90). While the text in those chapters may be Cervantes' words verbatim, this statement by the narrator greatly signifies that Menard's *Quixote* is not even an “exact” replication of the original novel, as Menard's work only contains a fraction of what Cervantes originally wrote, which only raises one of the many conundrums and paradoxes that is harbored within this short story. Many of these paradoxical concepts are raised directly by the content of the narrative itself, as the narrative essentially consists of the narrator responding to Menard's *Quixote*, as well as interspersing these responses with personal letters from Menard that explicate the latter's philosophies and methods (as both an author and a reader) that enable him to create the definitive version of *Don Quixote*.

Similar to other short fictions written by Borges, these reviews, letters, and commentaries, no matter how absurd the content might appear, are all enumerated in a mock-solemn tone that furthers the ridiculousness of whatever literary work he is introducing and exploring. Of course, even given the seemingly absurd nature of the narrative, the significance of this narrative's content is apparent, especially when it is juxtaposed to the fact that Borges himself is an author that is more or less directly writing upon the subject of authorship. This direct acknowledgment of the subject matter, as well as the exaggerated eccentricities of both Menard and the narrator, also allows for the reader to perceive the underlying literary critical themes that Menard's writing suggests. Namely, this discourse consists of the topic of authenticity in authorship, e.g. "Can an author claim ownership of a text that has been copied from another author? Do texts require a certain type of writer?" These are just some of the questions that permeate the entire text. Yet similarly, while the elements of literary criticism are apparent by the nature of the subject matter, the seriousness of this story's status as literary criticism appears to be as tentative as the claims which that particular criticism are making about the subject of authorship and readership, as Borges' idiosyncratically opaque writing style can allow for a reader to discern a combined sense of rigidity and fluidity that ultimately can provide an instance of elucidation and further obfuscation.

## II.

While the basic concept surrounding Menard's character is that he is a post-Cervantes author who writes the exact same text as Cervantes did, his method does not necessarily appear to be plagiaristic in nature, as one might expect. Instead, according to the narrator in a fairly detailed passage, it appears that Menard had attempted more than

just looking at a text and copying it down. The narrator states that “Menard’s method was to be relatively simple: Learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602-1918 – *be Miguel Cervantes*” (Borges 91). It appears from this effort that instead of just copying down *Don Quixote*, Menard believed that this copying had to be justified in some manner, specifically, to experience Cervantes’ life and to “be Miguel Cervantes.” Menard’s method initially appears to be a bit cursory and superficial, especially in regards to his desire of “becoming” Cervantes. For instance, the four things that are listed in his process encompass only a general outline of Cervantes’ life: in fact, these are so general that they can describe a number of people from that particular time and place. Even Menard realizes the non-specificity of this process, as it is stated that “he discarded it as too easy,” and the narrator even recognizes the ridiculousness of this method, or at least the reader’s reaction: “Too impossible, rather!, the reader will say” (Borges 91). The narrator proceeds to say that while this “undertaking was impossible from the outset,” which reinforces and validates the reader’s assumed notion of improbability, it also “was the least interesting” (Borges 91). For Menard, the more “interesting” approach apparently was to continue “to be Pierre Menard and coming to the Quixote *through the experiences of Pierre Menard*,” a sentiment that is not only arguably “more interesting,” but particularly, more “authentic,” in the sense that Menard was not just trying to imitate someone else’s life but also was attempting to discover the *Quixote* from a more contemporary and personal perspective.

Even then, this distinctive process would not necessarily allow Menard to fulfill his wish of wanting “to compose *the Quixote*,” as opposed to “*another Quixote*, which surely is easy enough” (Borges 91). Coming to discover the *Quixote* “through the

experiences of Pierre Menard” would not replicate Cervantes’ own discovery of the *Quixote*, and in turn, Menard’s text would not be “*the Quixote*” that Cervantes wrote, and to an extent, owns. This sense of ownership can be discerned from Menard’s belief that *the Quixote* exists without Cervantes (the original author), which at this point does not exist. Only Cervantes’ *Quixote* had been written when Menard came up with this idea, and perhaps “*the Quixote*’s” esteem stems from both its text/content, as well as the name behind the book. Essentially, the phrase “*the Quixote*” implies a strong association with Cervantes, and furthermore, this association appears to be definitive, as texts are usually not thought of as having subsequent authors. “*The Quixote*” additionally connotes a sense of inherent and inseparable ownership. For instance, in a general sense, before Menard (or anyone) attempted to write *Don Quixote*, the only authored version of *Don Quixote* that existed was the version that Cervantes himself had written in the seventeenth-century.

Furthermore, this sense of association can be discerned from the notion that a subsequent author for such an established novel initially does not even possible, as by doing so, Cervantes’ ownership of his text is essentially being revoked. An author writing a work that someone else had already written is a previously unheard of idea. However, this idea of a text not having subsequent authors only exists within a literal context. Texts can be thought of having subsequent authors when the original text’s content is changed through various means, such as editing, translating, etc. The classification of “author” for individuals other than the original author who edit or change the text later is arguably tenuous, as the term “author” strongly implies a sense of invention: according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “author” can mean “creator, cause, or source,” as

well as “creator of nature, the universe, etc.,” which all subsequently imply the sense of creation, invention, and perhaps most importantly, originality. A subsequent author’s status of authorship is then tenuous because when a subsequent author’s contribution is compared with the preexisting author’s work, the subsequent contribution may appear very minimal, at least in terms of content. Yet this is not to say that these subsequent authors provide no service for the existing texts that they work on/contribute to. If someone is making revisions for a newer edition of a text, it can be assumed that to create a successful revision or update, that person must have an understanding of the original text’s various contexts, as well as an appropriate understanding of the context of their own present. This modern context can include elements like changes in language, cultural differences, etc. Basically, this figure of the subsequent author usually appears to have some form of functional.

Menard essentially meets this qualification of the subsequent author, as it is pretty evident that he understands his context and justification for writing the *Don Quixote*. To reiterate, a significant part of Menard’s justification relies on his personal historical context. Because it is stated that he is “coming to the *Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard*,” which would differentiate the creation of *Don Quixote* in a historical context, Menard can view himself as a viable subsequent author given these historical, cultural, linguistic, etc., differences between himself and Cervantes (Borges 91). And by having these differences, it is evident that Menard presumes that his *Quixote* can be different/definitive given the differences in the figures of each “creator” (Menard is not/cannot be Cervantes and vice versa). Of course, Menard’s position as a subsequent author is a bit different than that of an editor or translator: instead of adding or modifying

an existing text while still retaining the original author's name, Menard is attempting to completely recreate, or from his perception, create, someone else's existing work.

Ultimately, Menard's role as a subsequent author is a paradoxical one. This paradox arises from the fact that Menard is clearly a secondary author to Cervantes who does not want to consider himself a secondary author of the *Quixote*.

A secondary author must also be a contextually aware reader, as they are working with someone else's material. And throughout this story, it is abundantly clear that Menard is an extremely active, almost ideal, contextually aware reader. For instance, Menard's whole initial process to prepare to write *Don Quixote* thoroughly exemplifies this concept of the active reader. It is stated that Menard initially would learn "Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918," and furthermore, in an extreme for both the contextually aware reader and writer, "be Miguel de Cervantes" (Borges 91). If Menard were to be successful in somehow actually becoming Cervantes, he would literally be the perfect figure to then "create" the *Quixote*. But obviously, to do so, he must be an active reader, i.e. be able to read like a writer, as well (in regards to being contextually aware). This sense of activeness is evident with his desire to immerse himself within Cervantes' time, location, religion, etc. Similarly, Menard acknowledges the significance of context for this endeavor in his letter, in which he states that composing "the *Quixote* in the early seventeenth century was reasonable, necessary, perhaps even inevitable," and that composing such a work "in the early twentieth [century]...is virtually impossible" (Borges 93). While there is some truth to the notion that a historical context affects what type of texts and novels are created, Menard's statement that creating a work like *Don*



*Quixote* in the twentieth century “is virtually impossible” is perhaps a bit of an exaggeration. The *Quixote* is a product of seventeenth century Spain in the sense that the novel is largely a parody of chivalric literature that was popular at that time; but conversely, it is reckless to say with certainty that it is impossible for this text to originally appear later. This particular statement also puts emphasis on a text’s relationship with its historical context: in fact, it almost appears as though Menard is saying that the type of texts that are produced is wholly reliant upon the historical context (he even states that the *Quixote* was “reasonable, necessary, perhaps even inevitable”). While the historical context definitely does have some effect on what is written, this sentiment by Menard is clearly hyperbolic.

However, as hyperbolic as Menard’s belief about history and the *Quixote* may be (and as easy it is to dismiss it as just an absurd statement), this belief evidently functions as a sort of justification for his writing of the *Quixote*. By attributing the creation of *Don Quixote* almost solely to history (as he states that its occurrence was practically inevitable in the seventeenth century), Menard essentially separates and removes Cervantes from the novel. Similarly, earlier in his letter, Menard expresses that the “*Quixote* is a contingent work; the *Quixote* is not necessary” (Borges 92). This idea of contingency definitely parallels with the previous statement the *Quixote* being an inevitable product of its times in the sense that Cervantes was not an integral part in the creation of the novel, which is clearly implied by Menard’s calling the *Quixote* “contingent,” and furthermore, this statement appears to reinforce Menard’s agenda. If the *Quixote* were simply both contingent and reliant on its historical context, then the specific figure of Cervantes becomes irrelevant to the creation of this novel, which in turn allows for Menard to

become the author of the *Quixote*, at least in his own perception. Ultimately, even this logic presents a paradox, as this justification contradicts itself. If it is virtually impossible to create the *Quixote* in Menard's present, then it should be impossible for Menard to create it, especially if he is going to be "coming to the *Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard*": the author may be insignificant, but according to Menard, the work is also strongly reliant upon the historical context of the seventeenth century, something that Menard could never authentically replicate/experience (Borges 91). But at the same time, it is possible for him to write the *Quixote* and claim ownership, as he does in the story, while also being validated by the narrator, which seemingly implies a sense of invention and creation for Menard's *Quixote*.

Menard's refutation of Cervantes' significance to the creation of the *Quixote* and his attributing it to history further brings up the subject of authorship, and specifically, what sort of ownership of a text it entails. Once an author writes and publishes a work, the text is generally thought of as belonging to that particular author. In this scenario, the idea of authorship almost seems to be synonymous with ownership, given that some person created or invented a particular text. But this ownership is not necessarily strict. Someone else's textual words can be taken and reappropriated: a common example of this would be quoting and citing someone's work. The action of quoting may not necessarily take away the original author's ownership of their text, but it also exemplifies that authorship does not entail such a full and definitive sense of ownership. The fact that Menard himself can even attempt to write the *Quixote*, and write two full chapters of the novel, suggests that perhaps no one text can be so attributed to one person, in a more philosophical sense, as nothing can be truly defined as "original." All works borrow from

pre-existing works, whether it be themes, characters, language, narratives, or even something from that work's contemporary historical context. As Menard states at the end, "Every man should be capable of all ideas, and I believe that in the future he shall be," which includes new as well as old ideas, no matter how unoriginal they are (Borges 95). By having Menard set out to write something that already exists, albeit with a different approach, perception, and philosophy, it appears as though Borges is commenting upon the overall lack of originality in writing, and how that unoriginality further distances ownership of a text from the authors themselves.

### III.

As discussed earlier, the term "authorship," in relation to an author and their text, connotes a sense of ownership, in the sense that if an author had written a text, then theoretically, that text completely belongs to that author. Of course, in "Pierre Menard," the aforementioned explications of Menard's philosophies regarding this author/text relationship have sort of rendered the definitiveness of this relationship as being a bit more tenuous (as evident with his emphasis on the "contingent" nature of the *Quixote*, as well as his belief that the historical context of the seventeenth century solely created the novel). Similarly, perhaps in a less excessive and conclusive manner, Menard realizes the distance between the author and their own text through the concept of originality, or in this case, unoriginality. Again, as Menard states at the end of the story, "Every man should be capable of all ideas, and I believe that in the future he shall be" (Borges 95). This particular statement conjures an image of infiniteness, mainly because if all men were capable of all ideas, then the figure of the author would consequently be infinite. The concept of the infinite author presents a paradox, as do many components of Borges'

short fictions. The infinite author would firstly suggest that there exists only one singular author, mainly because if a singular collective can embody all ideas, then individual thought becomes redundant and unnecessary (a concept that is also well featured in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”). Conversely, the infinite author could also mean that no author exists, in the sense that if everyone is able to invent and communicate all ideas, then the figure of the author (the individual creator) becomes redundant, as all perspectives would be the same and consequently result in a lack of individual thought, and therefore, of individual authors.

Since Menard’s quote at the end regarding how every “man should be capable of all ideas” exemplifies that Menard is a strong proponent of this “infinite author” concept, one can discern from the context of this story that Menard perhaps is a personification of this ideal (Borges 95). Because Menard himself is attempting to create a text that has already been created, his attempt can also be viewed as an extension of this philosophy, and if Menard is successful in this venture, then it can be assumed that the notions of the *Quixote* belonging to either Cervantes or Menard would be completely eradicated. However, even though Menard’s statement and notion pertaining to unoriginality/ownership has a certain degree of truth behind it (similar to his concept of historical context and literature), again, such a statement cannot be made in such an absolute manner. One can definitely realize that all texts contain and utilize elements that have been featured in at least some preceding texts, but Menard simply takes this common truth to an extreme that ultimately misrepresents this whole concept.

In fact, the narrator explicitly, albeit indirectly, identifies a contradiction to this sentiment of infinity within Menard’s *Quixote*. Much before Menard expresses his ideal

of the infinite author, the narrator judges that Menard's version of the text is different, perhaps even superior: "Menard's fragmentary Quixote is more subtle than Cervantes'" (Borges 93). In addition, the narrator states that while Cervantes "crudely juxtaposes the humble provincial reality of his country against the fantasies of the romance," Menard's version conversely "chooses as his 'reality' the land of Carmen during the century that saw the Battle of Lepanto and the plays of Lope de Vega" (Borges 93). Within this comparison, the narrator is essentially stating that perhaps Menard's version is more careful and intricate/meaningful, as opposed to Cervantes' "crude" juxtaposition. Essentially, the narrator is praising Menard's ability to look at all of seventeenth century Spain and cherry-pick what is "contemporarily" viewed as the most historically significant, as opposed to Cervantes, who most likely experienced much more mundane events than any of these now romanticized battles or plays. Initially, just stating that there is a difference between the two texts heavily indicates that Menard's concept of the inconsequential author is disproved, as this suggests that individual vision and perception is evident in the resulting text. Furthermore, it is extremely significant that the narrator decides to compare the two authors' writing on these specific differences, as it directly concerns the topic of historical context. As Menard himself conclusively believes, the *Quixote* is supposedly a completely reasonable and even inevitable product of the seventeenth century. However, from this critique, it is clear that the narrator believes that Menard's view on the seventeenth century is much more clever and interesting than Cervantes' then-contemporary perspective, and of course, Menard's view on the seventeenth century was clearly made from an early twentieth century perspective, as it is stated that Menard "chooses his reality." Without a removed and complete understanding

of the seventeenth century (something that can only be attained in a post-seventeenth century time), Menard would not have been able to “choose” a reality. Additionally, the narrator’s particular usage of “choose” insinuates that Menard, while writing the *Quixote*, had the ability to view the seventeenth century and carefully construct the historical nature of the novel, as opposed to Cervantes’ more immediate and contemporary construction. For instance, instead of Cervantes’ meager juxtaposition of “the humble provincial reality of his country,” Menard chooses more historically “significant” realities, as he views the seventeenth century as the time of the “Battle of Lepanto and the plays of Lope de Vega.” Menard’s change of historical context evidently exposes Menard’s romanticizing of seventeenth century Spain, an action that ironically goes against Cervantes’ satirical take against the romanticized chivalric literature of his time; consequently, Menard’s version seems less authentic in comparison to Cervantes’ “humble” novel, as Menard’s romanticizing of history conflicts with Cervantes’ parodying of historical romances.

Additionally, Menard’s viewpoint of seventeenth century Spain would most likely be impossible for a seventeenth century contemporary to comprehend, as this generalization appears to factor and choose from all events of that time, something that is only available to those who succeed the seventeenth century. Menard’s ability to choose shows that even though all authors utilize unoriginal elements within their works, authors are ultimately separated by their individual perspectives: in this particular scenario, Cervantes probably could not have replicated Menard’s own perspective on the *Quixote*, and vice versa. The author is someone who is intrinsically significant to his or her own work, and this significance cannot simply be attributed to the author’s historical context,

as Menard posits. And even though it is clear that history had influence in the creation of the *Quixote*, if it had not been for Menard's own personal vision and perception, the narrator would not have discerned the difference between the two texts, going as far to say that while he was "leafing through Chapter XXVI," he "recognized [Menard's] style, could almost hear his voice" (Borges 92). From this passage, and the story as a whole, it appears as though Borges is expressing that the author is a figure that exists in a complex duality of both the personal and the impersonal. Menard's *Quixote*, no matter how exact the words are to Cervantes' original or how absurd the production is, cannot be the exact copy because of the author himself, and the individual and unique perceptions/contexts that are inherent to the author as well as external, like this story's widely featured context of history.

#### IV.

In regards to the subject of authorship and ownership that this story ultimately encompasses, it appears as though this whole discussion of the individual author exemplifies the tentative, complex, and at times contradictory nature of this relationship. At the very least, the fact that Menard was even able to pursue such an undertaking is exemplary of how an author's ownership of their text is less than absolute. Furthermore, the narrator's almost excessive praise of Menard's *Quixote* suggests that the author is insignificant in comparison to what others do to their texts, which indicates a sense of removal between the author and their text. However, at the same time, the narrator's excessive and grandiose praise conjures, through its irony, a sense of caution (most likely from Borges) with respect to the absoluteness of the author's insignificance. When the narrator compares two exact quotes from both Cervantes and Menard, he dismisses

Cervantes' line as "mere rhetorical praise of history," whereas the narrator states that Menard's version "defines history not as a *delving into* reality but as the very *fount of* reality," the irony becomes very apparent (Borges 94). Once this irony is realized, Menard's seemingly high stature as the author of the *Quixote* is somewhat diminished, and consequently, the absoluteness of this story's statement on the removal of the author is diminished as well. One can discern from this caution that, like many other concepts featured throughout this short story, the ownership of a text cannot extend beyond what the author has written: once a reader exists, like Menard, what happens to that author's text cannot be controlled by the author, and in a sense, is not "owned" by the author.

Throughout the whole of this narrative, the evidently complex and often contradictory nature of Pierre Menard's attempt to write the definitive *Don Quixote*, as well as the figure of Menard himself, are continuously introduced and developed, with each instance being concluded almost as quickly as it is introduced. As I have previously discussed, certain passages within the short story clearly appear to hold some sort of statement or underlying significance that is relevant (albeit opaque and exaggerated) to the field of literature. For instance, Menard's comment suggesting the notion of the "infinite author" and the state of unoriginality in literature raises questions about the concepts of authorship and the extents of ownership that an author holds over their text. Of course, in traditional Borgesian fashion, the conclusive realization to this subject is never explicitly elucidated to the reader. Instead, this realization, if there actually is a singular realization, is clouded in a fog of seemingly ironic exaggeration and contradictory notions that encompasses the entirety of the narrative, which again, was evident in the portions regarding the ownership of a text. In many of these instances of



uncertainty, multiple elements of the narrative itself, such as the content of the story, the narrator, and the characters (namely Menard), operate in conjunction with one another to create this almost indiscernible message (or perhaps, messages). In a continuation of Pierre Menard's particular representations of authorship, within the section in which the narrator compares two "identical" passages from both Cervantes' and Menard's *Quixote* and overtly praises Menard's usage of historical context, it is further stated that the "contrast in styles is equally striking" (Borges 94). Furthermore, the narrator proceeds to observe that Menard's writing features an "archaic style...[that] is somewhat affected," as well as acknowledging the reality that Menard is a French man writing in a non-native language: "[Menard is] not a native speaker of the language in which he writes...Not so the style of his precursor, who employs the Spanish of his time with complete naturalness" (Borges 94). One of the more striking observations that can arise from this passage pertains to the last portion regarding Cervantes' naturalness in his command of the Spanish language. As the narrator states, Cervantes was not only a native speaker of Spanish, but perhaps more importantly, a native speaker who "employs the Spanish of his time." The narrator having to specify Cervantes' Spanish as being of his time indicates a further sense of Menard's removal from an integral facet of the original *Quixote*. It is evident that Menard's status as a non-native Spanish speaker hinders him from understanding and utilizing the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of the language, as even the usually "Menard-favoring" narrator notices. But furthermore, the fact that the preexisting *Quixote* was written in a predominantly different style of Spanish than the more modern Spanish that Menard must have been familiar with suggests that there can exist some type of difference between the two texts, even if the words printed on the page are literally an

exact replica of one another. From this difference arises the question regarding the necessity of “authenticity” for a work, as well as what this concept of authorial authenticity actually pertains. This subject of authenticity will be discussed later.

Yet even in this scenario in which it appears as though the narrator is criticizing Menard’s *Quixote*, this criticism conversely appears to bolster the narrator’s previous commendations of the subsequent novel. By recognizing Menard’s more modern and tenuous grasp of the Spanish language, it allows for someone like the narrator to state that Menard’s version of the *Quixote* can be perceived as a different text from Cervantes’ original. Similarly, the narrator states that Menard harbors an “archaic style,” which again exemplifies the somewhat significant nature of Menard’s own historical context and identity, as Menard’s style would not be identified as “archaic” unless there was a modern context to identify a style as archaic. From this comment it appears as though Menard’s text is almost inseparable from and defined by Menard’s own historical context. Furthermore, the recognition of this style as being archaic almost appears to classify Menard’s particular style of writing as a novelty, in the sense that Menard’s style is identifiable because of the self-aware nature of Menard’s writing, in regards to the historical context. As it is mentioned that Menard approach to the *Quixote* was to come to it “*through the experiences of Pierre Menard*,” it would be inherently impossible for him to completely block out any of his modern context, as by definition, the experiences of Pierre Menard completely exists within his contemporary space (Borges 91). Therefore, Menard’s seemingly unnatural archaic style is ironically the component that both hinders the content of his *Quixote* and also allows for his version to exist as a wholly different

*Don Quixote*, if not the definitive *Quixote*, as he has been attempting throughout this whole endeavor.

But again, because the *Quixote* that Menard had partially written is composed of the exact same words that are utilized in Cervantes' original *Quixote*, only a contextually aware reader, such as the narrator, would be able to recognize these extremely nuanced differences. In fact, just as Menard is the ideal candidate to write the *Quixote* because he represents the idealized contextually aware reader, the narrator is also the perfect, and possibly only, person to judge and identify the differences between the two texts because of how invested and knowledgeable he is of Menard's work ethic and philosophies, which are clearly discernable from the many personal letters from Menard that the narrator quotes throughout the story. This personal connection between the two characters is what allows for the narrator to realize these differences between the two texts, and it can be assumed that a reader who does not have this extensive and personal knowledge of Menard and his methods would most likely not be able to discern any differences, especially because the two texts, on print, appear to be exactly the same. The narrator's status of being a perfectly aware and active reader for Menard's work appears to be an instance, at least initially, of Borges offering a brief moment of elucidation for the reader. As this passage exemplifies, the narrator being able to discern a difference between two identical texts seems to be indicative of the somewhat absurdly inherent strength and influence that a name/the figure of the author has upon a work. Because the narrator has extensive prior knowledge of who Menard is and his methods (as well as who Cervantes was, to an extent), his perception of the text is dramatically affected, as evident by his completely different critiques of the same exact text. Furthermore, perhaps

this passage also reflects upon the strength of the contextually aware reader (as opposed to the contextually unaware reader), or perhaps even the necessity of one in certain cases, especially when it is realized that the narrator could not have made any of his comments on the two texts if he did not possess the contextual knowledge of Menard.

However, at the same time, the replicative nature of Menard's text must also be considered. No matter how much contextual awareness some reader possesses, within this particular scenario, the narrator is still examining two texts that contain the exact same writing. In turn, the exact similarity of the texts diminishes the message regarding the significance of the contextually aware reader as the ridiculous nature of Menard's text essentially conflicts with the more straightforward and non-ironic act of using contextual awareness to critique a text. Basically, the absurd nature of Menard's *Quixote* consequently makes the narrator's seemingly significant role as the contextually aware reader almost pointless. While it definitely is helpful for the narrator (for whom it almost seems like the novel was specifically written for), any other person who maybe does not have any access to Menard's personal letters and thoughts would not be able to tell the difference between the two texts, perhaps except for the name of the author. This concept definitely mirrors the situation of actual readers, as some will be more contextually aware than others, and those who are more aware will have a different perception of the text compared to those who have less or no contextual knowledge. Therefore, by having the narrator discuss and analyze something as extreme as an exact replica of a text, it appears as though Borges is exemplifying the fact that readers can interpret texts differently, based on their contextual awareness.

Similarly, by having the narrator respond to an absurd text, Borges does not seem to be advocating either side; instead, Borges appears to be actively testing various hypotheses regarding contextual awareness. It even seems like Borges is possibly trying to downplay the necessity of complete contextual awareness, as the narrator is essentially blinded by his awareness of Menard to the point where he cannot really step back and observe that without this knowledge, it is basically a plagiarized version of the *Quixote*. In this case, Borges' use of extreme examples raise a sense of irony, which consequently appears to caution against any type of "definitive" reader; much like Menard and the narrator, a fully contextualized reader is simply an ideal, a figure that can never be truly and fully achieved, as it is merely an extension of the author. In a similar fashion, Borges' fictions are largely composed of these extremely opaque and nebulous contradictions, and while this particular passage seems to be somewhat of an elucidation on the topic of authorship and the role of the readers, it ultimately seems to function as a sort of narrative cue for the reader to take the extremes and discern more "moderate" stances on these topics, especially since these more moderate messages from extreme examples have been observed and discussed previously (as seen with the significance of historical context, the infinite author and unoriginality, and authorship and ownership). As mentioned previously, Borges' messages at first appear to be rigid extremes that are actually exhibiting more fluidity than what the reader might initially perceive. Ultimately, Borges' sly opaqueness is the perfect cover when exploring these literary subjects of authorship, ownership, and readership: it forces the reader, in any capacity, to become an active reader by having the reader engage with the text, the author/context (if they choose to), and engage with themselves, and the fact that none of Borges' statements are

conclusive only adds to burden on the reader to create an answer without having any answer key to validate it.

### Chapter III: On “The Garden of Forking Paths”

#### I.

Similar to “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” or any number of Borges’ short fictions, the narrative format of “The Garden of Forking Paths” follows the familiar Borgesian tradition of featuring multiple levels of narration and various forms of writing that allow for these levels of narration, like letters, fictional books, etc. But while this particular short story does contain these Borgesian elements, unlike “Tlön” or “Pierre Menard,” “The Garden of Forking Paths” does not necessarily appear to directly deal with themes of literary criticism, at least in regards to subject matter. Instead, “Garden” utilizes these familiar Borgesian narrative mannerisms to compose a story that incorporates an arguably more “traditional” narrative content relative to previous two stories, in the sense that the story does not directly involve examining a work of (fictional) literature, and the narrative also does not appear in form a literary critique/review, as was the case with both “Tlön” and “Pierre Menard.” In regards to familiarity, this story begins with some unnamed narrator summarizing “page 242 of *The History of the World War*,” in which Captain Liddell Hart (a non-fictional figure), states that torrential rains caused a delay in a planned attack against the Serre-Montauban line, of which the delay “entailed no great consequences” (Borges 119). However, as the narrator then states, this delay may have entailed some consequences, as the rest of the story comes in the form of a statement that was “dictated, reread, and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun,” who is a “former professor of English in the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao” (Borges 119).

After the anonymous narrator establishes this initial historical narrative frame, the rest of “The Garden of Forking Paths” is comprised of this statement by Tsun, which can be examined in specific sections based on a particular narrative arc. First, Tsun’s narrative starts out, albeit in the middle (“The two first pages of the statement are missing), as a spy narrative in which Tsun reveals that he is a spy for the German forces, and that to send a message to the German “Leader” regarding a bombing location, Tsun must kill a man named Stephen Albert, whose last name is “the name of the exact location of the new British artillery park on the Ancre” (Borges 119,120). Essentially, by killing Albert (who coincidentally is an Englishman who is a Sinologist, an exact mirror of Tsun), Tsun hopes to transmit the name of the artillery park through a newspaper headline, as the German Leader apparently “was vainly awaiting word from us in his arid office in Berlin, poring infinitely through the newspapers” (Borges 120). The second distinctively noticeable narrative section of this story pertains to the titular garden of forking paths. Within this section, Tsun meets with Albert, a man who happens to hold immense knowledge about Tsun’s great-grandfather, Ts’ui Pen, who created a labyrinth/novel that ultimately challenges perceptions of time/space in both fiction and real life, which is reminiscent of the more “traditional’ Borges subject of matter of literature, infinity, etc. The epitome of Pen’s philosophy is succinctly described by Albert: “in all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts’ui Pen, the character chooses – simultaneously - all of them” (Borges 125). And of course, as quickly as the spy narrative first transitioned to this narrative about the garden of forking paths,



the story almost immediately transitions back to the spy narrative, which itself acts almost as a brief conclusion.

As is the case with the previous Borges short stories, there are simply too many nuances and caveats that dwell in contradictions and ambiguity to address in detail. Therefore, I will attempt to traverse this maze-like narrative and elucidate upon/analyze what appear to be some of the more strikingly (or seemingly striking) significant moments of the story, to which these moments will then be utilized to explore the narrative's connection to the concept of time and space, as well as ultimately discerning the fine line between Borges' "truthfulness" in regards to Pen's/his theory on fictional time and space, as well as their theories on how time and space functions in the real world.

## II.

While it is stated in the very beginning by the unknown narrator framing the following text that the "two first pages of [Tsun's] statement are missing," the reader does receive some context as to why Tsun goes into this incredibly introspective and personal monologue, as it is stated that Tsun had just got of the phone with a certain Captain Richard Madden, who's "presence in Viktor Runeberg's flat meant the end of our efforts and...our lives as well," which clearly sets Madden as Tsun's main antagonist (Borges 119). Therefore, the succeeding introspections by Tsun are a bit more understandable, as he is apparently being faced with the possibility of death. However, at the same time, the following monologue is extremely personal, and to the reader, it clearly serves as a vehicle for exposition surrounding the character of Yu Tsun, but the very personal of this exposition seems a bit out of place when viewed within the context

of the meta-narrative that was set up from the very beginning of the story. For example, his moment of exposition literally begins with his childhood: “Despite my deceased father, despite my having been a child in a symmetrical garden in Hai Feng – was I, now, about to die?” (Borges 120). This offhand comment of his father/childhood only appears more out of place since this statement is supposed to be one detailing the events during a war between “July 24, 1916” and “the morning of the twenty-ninth,” specifically one that refutes Liddell Hart’s claim that this time period “entailed no great consequences” (the unknown narrator says that “the statement which follows – dictated, reread, and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun...throws unexpected light on the case”) (Borges 119). Furthermore, Tsun’s mentioning of his childhood in a “symmetrical garden” at first appears to have no immediate relevance to his question of “was I, no about to die?,” which raises both a sense of significance and a sense of suspicion towards this phrase’s significance. Tsun’s mentioning of having experienced a symmetrical garden obviously forms some sort of parallel with the titular image of the a garden of forking paths, which makes it seem to be a detail of significance.

Even the opposite of this parallel is true. If the imagery of a “symmetrical garden” and a “garden of forking paths” is compared, they can be viewed as opposites of each other: a garden of forking paths is suggestive of a structure that is constantly chaotic/changing (“forking”), whereas a symmetrical garden is indicative of a more familiar and unchanging. Regardless of their correctness, both interpretations of these parallels propose a sense of significance towards Tsun’s exposition because of the fact that this story’s title also raises the concept of a geometrical garden. But again, within the context in which Tsun is writing this text, the statement of this childhood garden appears

out of place, and consequently, its aforementioned significance is put in a light of skepticism. This symmetrical garden is mentioned nowhere else in the text/story, and even though it is Tsun's ancestor who created the titular garden of forking paths, Tsun's symmetrical garden does not seem to have any immediate significance to what he was writing about at the time. It has no connection his possible death (i.e. "How is having lived in a symmetrical garden pertinent to his death?"), and in this context, this significance appears to be superficial, a significance created only in name.

Another sort of paradoxical bit of information that is presented later in this monologue is Tsun's conflicting desire to perform the murder of Stephen Albert. In the same monologue, Tsun states that ideologically, he "did not do it for Germany," but instead, he performed this act of espionage "because I sensed that the Leader looked down on the people of my race – the countless ancestors whose blood flows through my veins" (Borges 120-121). Not only does this particular notion elucidate the particular complexities surrounding Tsun's intended actions, but it also allows for the reader to realize the fact that Tsun's intent in fulfilling this potentially life-threatening assassination is a completely personal one, as it is evident that he holds no direct allegiance to the German cause. Furthermore, in regards to the man he "must" kill, Tsun refers to Albert as a man who "is no less a genius than Goethe," a sentiment that clearly exemplifies his respect for Albert, and in turn, a continuation of his hesitation in committing the murder (Borges 121).

Tsun's mentioning of this anonymous "Leader" figure similarly presents a conflicting image, this time in a historical sense. As it is stated in the opening narration, the events that Tsun are detailing occur within the time frame of "July 24, 1916...until

the morning of the twenty-ninth, and given the geographic descriptions of the Allied offensive/Tsun's espionage for the Germans, as well as the quote from Liddell Hart's *The History of the World War*, it is apparent that Tsun's narrative transpires during World War I (Borges 119). Yet Tsun's capitalized labeling of this German figure as "Leader" connotes the World War II image of the Führer/Hitler. Also, Tsun's comments regarding the Leader's feelings of racial superiority towards Asian people (like himself) only furthers the implication of the leader being some Hitler figure, or as improbable as it may seem, Hitler himself. When these notions are coupled with the fact that this short story was originally published in 1941, the Leader's status as a Hitler figure becomes a bit more plausible. Of course, while there seems to be several consistent and extremely obvious pieces of evidence in support of this, one cannot conclusively state that the Leader figure is Hitler, as it does not make sense within the temporal context of this narrative; but instead, the Führer implication can be realized by the reader, as Tsun's juxtapositions of the Leader's character definitely conjures this image. Therefore, the paradoxical nature of Tsun's actions/intentions only furthers after this recognition of the Leader, as this very negative connotation placed on the Leader of this operation can make Tsun's intention of proving to the Leader that "a yellow man could save his armies" appear more perplexing, as in this context, "evil" is being combatted with a more unwilling "evil" (Borges 121).

According to him, Tsun is essentially committing a murder that he does not want to commit to disprove his Hitler-like Leader's notions of his own race, while at the same time not wanting to help the German cause while he is helping them: "I did not do it for Germany What do I care for a barbaric country that has forced me to the ignominy of

spying?” (Borges 120-121). Ultimately, Tsun’s extremely convoluted intentions and relationship with his “employer” makes it seem as though he is a character who is almost completely slave to circumstance, and in turn, the situations that have been raised by the narrative, as he performs actions that he does not want to do, but simultaneously needs to, and arguably, has to.

### III.

The section regarding mazes and labyrinths essentially begins, after he arrives at his destined train station, in which Tsun asks some nameless boys on the platform if this stop is indeed the correct stop, which the boys confirm. Yet without any initiation, one of the boys asks if Tsun is traveling to Albert’s house, which could be attributed to both Tsun’s oriental appearance and the possibility that these boys know of Albert’s status as a sinologist (although none of this is ever explicated). Furthermore, in another act of apparent prescience, one boy states that to reach Albert’s residence, “you’ll to get lost if you follow that road there to the left, and turn left at every crossing” (Borges 122). These directions of turning left at every crossing (or “fork”) not only conjures an image of traversing a labyrinth, but as John M. Bennett identifies, the directions also “describe a square: for if one keeps turning to the left, one arrives at one’s place of origin” (Bennett 714). This notion of creating a square, and with it, the act of turning left at every fork, parallels Tsun’s previous claim that he had been a “child in a symmetrical garden.” This obvious parallel perhaps gives some justification/explanation for Tsun’s earlier out-of-context remark regarding his childhood, but even then, this similarity seems to be unknown to Tsun, as the reader receives no indication of his awareness regarding this parallel. Even to the reader, at least at this point, it is simply a relevant coincidence. But

simultaneously, the concept of arriving at the place of one's origin challenges the function of a maze/labyrinth, as arriving at one's origin is conceptually counterintuitive to how maze's work because the origin is never really the goal of the maze. Instead, the completion of a maze entails reaching an end point that is definitely not the original starting point. This act of arriving at the origin suggests that, in the literal context of the narrative, the outcome of this leftwards maze is both familiar yet unexpected, perhaps just like Albert's familiarity with Tsun's ancestor's works, especially since these directions are leading Tsun to Albert's house.

Furthermore, as he proceeds further to Albert's house, Tsun also introduces more direct mentioning and ponderings of the significant concept of labyrinths. Tsun, in an act of exposition, informs the reader that his great-grandfather Ts'ui Pen, who "was governor of Yunan province...renounced all temporal power in order to write a novel containing more characters than *Hung Lu Meng* and construct a labyrinth in which all men would lose their way" (Borges 122). As this statement gives some preliminary insight into the subject of Pen's novel/labyrinth (which will obviously be discussed in the succeeding sections), Tsun's assertion that Pen attempted to create an unsolvable labyrinth "in which all men would lose their way" suggests that this labyrinth is infinite, as even in a labyrinth the possibilities are finite, and therefore, an unsolvable labyrinth must be one that contains an infinite number of possibilities. In accordance with this image, Tsun enters a sort of trance in which he imagines "a labyrinth of labyrinths...ever-widening labyrinth that contained both past and future and somehow implied the stars," to which he admits that he was completely consumed with this pondering of labyrinths: "Absorbed in those illusory imaginings, I forgot that I was a pursued man; I felt myself, for an

indefinite while, the abstract perceiver of the world” (Borges 122). This brief scene is particularly significant as it exemplifies the concepts of a labyrinth in a very performative manner. Men get lost consumed in labyrinths, and in a sense, Tsun himself is lost and consumed at the mere thought of a particular labyrinth, going as far as to forgetting the possibility of his imminent death/current predicament. By having Tsun become “lost” at simply the thought of a labyrinth, the significance and power of the labyrinth (in relation to this narrative) is realized. However, unlike Pen’s fabled infinite labyrinth, Tsun’s entrapment in his own personal labyrinth is ultimately contrasted, as his entrapment is ephemeral, which is slightly ironic, as this trance was initiated by pondering Pen’s infinite labyrinth.

After this moment of pondering, Tsun almost immediately meets Stephen Albert. Given Albert’s status as Sinologist, Tsun initially mentions that he had heard Chinese music playing from Albert’s house: “the music I had heard was coming from that gazebo, or pavilion, and the music was Chinese” (Borges 123). Similarly, it is quickly revealed that Albert has great knowledge of Tsun’s aforementioned great-grandfather Ts’ui Pen, as well as Pen’s labyrinth. In both of these instances, the parallel-relationship between Tsun and Albert is apparent, as it is stated that Albert is an English man who is a Sinologist/academic of the Chinese culture (“[Albert] had been a missionary in Tientsin ‘before aspiring to be a Sinologist’”), and that Tsun is conversely a Chinese man who has a doctorate in English as well as being a “former professor of English in the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao” (Borges 119, 123). Both of these figures are exact opposites and mirrors of each other in regards to their professions, yet are similar in the sense that both possess immense knowledge of each other’s respective cultures and language. This parallel

between the two men is reminiscent of Tsun's previous statement regarding his childhood being spent in a symmetrical garden, a notion that would further the imagery of this symmetrical garden. Perhaps "symmetrical" is not quite the right word for their characters, but "mirrored" or "paralleled," are more appropriate, and both are connoted by the image of a symmetrical garden, as in comparison to Tsun, Albert appears to be a symmetrical copy of Tsun, at least in regards to both race and academic profession. Furthermore, both Tsun's relationship with Pen, as well as Albert's extensive knowledge of Pen, further contributes to this concept that Tsun and Albert are somewhat paralleled characters. Perhaps the symmetrical garden holds no great bond with these character's parallelism, but at the very least, this loose connection does exemplify the seemingly significant motif of symmetry and parallelism: figures that are alike.

In another instance parallel, Tsun states that when he first physically approached Albert, he "could not see [Albert's] face because the light blinded me. He opened the gate and slowly spoke to me in my own language" (Borges 123). Similarly, at this initial meeting, Albert refers to Tsun as "Hsi P'eng," which definitely suggests that Albert has mistaken Tsun for someone else, and furthermore, someone that Tsun is also familiar with, as he states that he recognized P'eng as being "the name of one of our consuls" (Borges 123). Both of these interactions feature a form of mistaken identity/misrepresentation of each party, as Tsun is greeted in his own and, in this context, foreign language without any visual indication of the speaker's race. Of course, at this point, both Tsun and the reader know that Albert is an Englishman, but Tsun's inclusion of these details regarding the lack of face and language spoken by Albert suggests that these two details somewhat surprised him, as they can misrepresent Albert's



identity. Albert's initial view of Tsun is similarly mistaken, primarily because Albert completely misinterprets the reason of Tsun's visit. While it is known to the reader that Albert is a forthcoming victim of Tsun, Albert instead believes that Tsun's appearance indicates, "the compassionate Hsi P'eng has undertaken to remedy my solitude" (Borges 123). This initial confused meeting suggests that Albert and Tsun are further symmetrical in the sense that both characters show a moment in which they are in doubt/hold a false image of the other.

In regards to the work itself, as both Stephen Albert and Yu Tsun state, Ts'ui Pen's novel at first appears to be "nothing save chaotic manuscripts," and in Yu Tsun's words, "an indeterminate heap of contradictory drafts," in which the contradictions manifest themselves in Pen's narrative as a whole: "in the third chapter the hero dies, in the fourth he is alive" (Borges 124). But at least according to Albert's analysis of the novel, it seems as though the chaotic and contradictory nature of Pen's work is purposeful and rhetorical, which is realized from Pen's line stating "I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths" (Borges 125). As Albert concludes, the chaos of Pen's work is not simply a product of some random contradictory manuscripts, but instead, the agent of the work's thesis: "Almost instantly, I saw it – the garden of forking paths was the chaotic novel; the phrase 'several futures (not all)' suggested to me the image of a forking in *time*, rather than in space" (Borges 125). From this, one can discern the nature of what the "forking paths" entail, as Pen's mentioning of "several futures" implies a sense of time, just as Albert observes. The significance of this imagery and its relation to time is further elucidated to the reader, as Albert goes on to state that in "Ts'ui Pen's novel, *all* the outcomes in fact occur; each is the starting point for further

bifurcations,” a concept that provides some explanation for Pen’s contradictory narratives (i.e. the hero is dead and then alive in the next chapter) (Borges 125).

When Albert first introduces Pen’s infamous labyrinth to Tsun he denotes that Pen’s initial intention was apparently not to create a novel that was a labyrinth, but to create them independent of each other: “Pen must at one point have remarked, ‘I shall retire to write a book,’ and at another point, ‘I shall retire to construct a labyrinth...it occurred to no one that book and labyrinth were one and the same” (Borges 124).

Another sort of significant detail surrounding this discovery is that Albert is the sole person who has ever “been chosen to unveil the diaphanous mystery...more than a hundred years after the fact” (Borges 124). Albert’s particular syntax of being “chosen” to solve this mystery appears to be significant as well, as it parallels the sort of notion set by the fragmented letter left by Pen: “*I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths*” (Borges 125). In this context, it almost seems as though Albert had no agency or individual will in solving Pen’s labyrinth, but instead, it seems like it is Pen who had somehow claimed some of that agency from Albert, as Pen’s power of “choosing” is evident in his letter, particular when he states that he only leaves his garden “to several futures (not to all)” (Borges 125). If so, Albert’s syntax of “chosen” is purposeful, the reader can be lead to view Albert as some sort of extension to Pen’s infinite literary universe, as Albert’s status of being chosen suggests that Albert was one of the infinite futures “which themselves proliferate and fork” that was chosen by the same man who Albert describes as controlling fiction: “each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others” (Borges 125).

Additionally, it is shown that Pen's letter, which was not directly related to the product of the labyrinth, was the second half of evidence that led Albert to solve the mystery, as he states that two "circumstances lent me the final solution...a fragment of a letter I discovered" (Borges 125). Given the letter's content surrounding Pen's will to leave the garden to several futures, it almost appears as though Albert was one of these several futures that Pen had specifically dictated. While Albert does only discuss this particular phrase of choosing in a fictional context, Albert's previously mentioned notion of being chosen to solve this mystery immediately allows for the reader to recognize Albert is simply a product of the cycle that he is talking of. In other words, it allows for the reader to further analyze Albert, as well as all the characters of this story, in a meta-fictional context. But simultaneously, this line between literary criticism and philosophy is incredibly opaque, as while the reader can recognize Albert's status as a fictitious character who was born out of the literary process he himself described, Albert does not recognize himself as a fictitious character. Therefore, when he believes that he was chosen by Pen (based on Albert's discovery of the letter), for Albert, the theory sort of transcends the literary realm and manifests itself in the real world, i.e. Pen supposedly choosing Albert to decipher his puzzle. The haziness between literary criticism and "real-world" philosophy arises from this fact that while it is clear that Albert is a fictional character who has been selected from the infinite garden of forking paths and time, it is ultimately unclear as to whether his discovery is a product of his own volition, or if Pen somehow held agency over Albert's discovery. Basically, these meta-fictional qualities the reader's comfortable suspension of disbelief, as it is evident that these characters' and

ideas' relationships with the reader's "real" world are greatly obfuscated by the story's meta-fictional elements.

When Albert finally elucidates to Tsun what he believes the whole point of this labyrinth is, it comes right before the end of the story, and in a sense, it is a sort of climax, as both Tsun and the reader apparently will understand the nature of this literary work. And as expected, Albert conclusively states that the "explanation is obvious: *The Garden of Forking Paths* I san incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as conceived by Ts'ui Pen" (Borges 127). Perhaps in a more metaphysical sense, as Albert goes on to discuss, Pen's particular universe is unique in the sense that Pen believed "in an infinite series of times," as opposed to "Newton and Schopenhauer," whose believed in "a uniform and absolute time" (Borges 127). At least in this context, Pen can be viewed as a philosophical innovator. But again the lines between literature and philosophy become blurred, as Albert's conclusion can also be interpreted as a general truth that is inherent to pretty much all works of literature: anyone's fictive narrative can be described as being an "image of the universe as conceived by" the person that created that narrative (Borges 127). By performing the aforementioned action of choosing between forks in the path while creating fiction, that particular person performing the choosing automatically creates their own image of the universe that has been conceived by them. Even though Albert has repeatedly lectured on the significance and experimental nature of Pen's work, as well as lauding its meta-fictional qualities, this conclusion almost appears to diminish the experimentation conducted by Pen's novel, since Albert reduces it down to a truth that can be applicable to any novel. In a sense, this realization of disappointment seems to quell the almost metaphysical notion of Albert

being specifically chosen by Pen, as this conclusion reduces Pen from being some omniscient figure to “just” an author, particularly an author who has done something that almost all authors have done.

#### IV.

As one may discern from reading this story, the concept of Ts’ui Pen’s infinite novel, as well as Albert’s interpretation of the novel, are both mirrored and incorporated into the narrative involving Tsun and Albert. For instance, the whole nature of their relationship can be dictated by Albert’s assertion that Pen apparently “believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times,” a philosophy that is not only reflected all throughout his literary garden of forking paths, but also within Pen’s philosophy of how time functions, and with it, how life functions (Borges 127). This application to life is further apparent when Albert compares Pen’s views on time with those of “Newton and Schopenhauer,” who unlike Pen, believed “in a uniform and absolute time” (Borges 127). From this comparison, it is apparent that Pen believed that his particular theory of “infinite time” dictated not only the universes that are presented within fictions, but also the space and world in which he existed. Therefore, especially given Albert and Tsun’s extensive interaction regarding Pen’s infinite universe, the reader can be forced into viewing Tsun’s own reality within the context of Pen’s infinite perspective.

When these characters are viewed under this lens, multiple recurring themes and images that are relevant to Pen’s philosophy become apparent. For example, one of the more explicit images that alludes to the concept of infinity appears when Tsun states that he “*who is to perform a horrendous act should imagine to himself that it is already done,*

*should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past,*” which is in regards to Albert’s (then) impending murder (Borges 121). Essentially, it seems as though Tsun is justifying his horrendous act by saying that horrendous acts will always exist: “I foresee that mankind will resign itself more and more fully every day to more and more horrendous undertakings” (Borges 121). This particular justification suggests a concept of time that parallels Pen’s own theory, as it implies that man’s “horrendous undertakings” have already been determined, which in turn is similar to the various paths in Pen’s garden that hold all possibilities, and in which all possibilities have already been determined. If anything, Tsun’s justification of his actions immediately draws further parallel with Pen and his ideologies, as Tsun clearly demonstrates a propensity towards believing that time is not linear and uniform (particular when he states that the future can be “as irrevocable as the past”).

As it is apparent by now, this entire narrative that is dictated by Tsun has been initially framed by some anonymous narrator and organizer, who frames Tsun’s narrative within the context of a historical narrative surrounding World War I. However, given all of these recurring images and themes that are parallel to Pen’s thesis on literature and time, such as Tsun’s previously mentioned statement on “horrendous undertakings,” it almost appears as though Tsun’s narrative is retroactively framed by Pen’s garden of forking paths. This sense of narrative framing initially arises from the fact that the majority of Albert and Tsun’s discussion on Pen’s philosophy (which itself is a significantly extensive segment of the story) pertains to Pen’s theoretical methods of composing and understanding fiction, which is clearly exemplified with his novel, in which “*all* the outcomes in fact occur,” as opposed to the traditional method in which one

“chooses one [outcome] and eliminates the others” (Borges 125). From this discussion, it is perhaps the realization that in “all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others” that wholly epitomizes the experiment behind Pen’s labyrinth. Of course, the experiment lies within Pen’s refusal to choose and eliminate these alternative and branching fictional choices. But while Pen’s experiment can be clearly discerned by the reader without much exertion, the knowledge of this experiment ultimately produces a more nebulous effect that clouds over both the reader and this Tsun’s narrative. Initially, by explicitly featuring such an untraditional and striking method of viewing and interpreting fiction, the reader is openly invited, and perhaps even forced, to observe the narrative on a meta-fictional level.

This particular meta-fictional level is independent of the narrative framing featured in the beginning, and it instead manifests itself in the form of viewing the narrative through Pen’s specific perception of fiction (as it most likely is very significant when a fictional work explicitly tells the reader a method of understanding the medium itself). One important distinction between both Albert and Tsun’s understanding of Pen’s philosophy and some reader’s understanding is that some reader most likely can understand that all of Tsun’s interactions and actions are fictional, and when their fictional statuses are viewed through the lens of Pen’s philosophies, the reader can probably discern that on a meta-fictional level, Tsun’s narrative was created in the same manner of choosing and eliminating fictional paths. In a sense, this would signify that Pen’s theory on time is true for not just literature, but furthermore, this particular universe, a notion that is suggested by Pen’s aforementioned juxtaposition with Newton

and Schopenhauer, two figures who both theorized on the functions of the “real” world, as opposed to just literary theory.

Now, given the reader can realize that the fictional Tsun and Albert can theoretically be created by cutting down from several futures, the problem involving the permeation of Pen’s theory arises. At the meta-fictional level in which the reader recognizes that the basis of this story is fictional and “made-up,” Tsun’s narrative is undoubtedly a product of someone choosing and eliminating several futures. At this level, the reader can clearly realize that it is Borges himself who is making these cuts and choosing how Tsun and the narrative progress. However, on a fictional level, it almost appears as though someone is also making these choices and dictating on how the narrative progresses. Moments such as Tsun’s assertion of irrevocable futures definitely appear to be some sort of allusion to Pen’s work, or at the very least, some sort of remembrance of it. Yet the strongest (yet still inconclusive) bits of evidence regarding the dictation of this narrative are the number of striking coincidental or parallel elements that appear throughout Tsun’s mission. For instance, when Tsun is pondering the directions to Albert’s house, some random boys, without being approached, simply give Tsun the direction to Albert’s house: ““Are you going to Dr. Stephen Albert’s house?” one queried. Without waiting for an answer another of them said...”(Borges 122). In this scenario, it almost appears as though Tsun is simply being ushered into the next significant plot point (him meeting Albert is essentially a climatic and large portion of the story).

Similarly, almost everything about Albert’s character is extremely and explicitly mirrored in regards to Tsun, as he is an English Sinologist (whereas Tsun is a Chinese English professor), and it is also suggested that he is the only person to have extensive



and immediate knowledge of Tsun's great-grandfather's (Pen) work. Just as the boys on the platform appear to function as some plot device, Albert similarly seems to exist in a similar manner, simply given these extremely specific coincidences. Similarly, based on Tsun's statement, another specific coincidence seems to lie in the fact that the concept of labyrinths and mazes apparently permeate the world around him, as his childhood "symmetrical garden," the boys' directions to "turn left at every crossing," and ultimately, the whole interaction with Albert: from all of these parallels, it almost seems as though Tsun's own life, at that particular moment at least, is being entirely dictated by Pen, or Pen's philosophies. Therefore, when Tsun's narrative is framed by Pen in this meta-fictional context, these mere coincidences and rushed plot points (like that of the boys giving directions) appear to be blatant acts of choosing a future, which in turn suggests that Tsun's life further exists in Pen's model of time and the universe, and that every point of his life can be dictated.

Furthermore, in an act of unknowing (at least for these two characters) self-realization, Albert later applies Pen's notion of infinite possibilities in temporality to their own reality and situation, as he acknowledges that in "most of those times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others, I do and you do not; in others still, we both do. In this one, which the favouring hand of chance has dealt me, you have come to my home; in another, when you come through my garden you find me dead" (Borges 127). This comment not only recognizes upon the meta-narrative of the story itself, but it also signifies the power of Pen's fictional text upon the reader. When the reader themselves realize that all of fiction can be viewed as a construct that is made from an infinite amount of choices that are ultimately chiseled to a more finite structure by the

author, the circumstances of Yu Tsun and Albert's portrayed meeting is put into question. When the infiniteness of a fictional universe is applied to Borges' own fiction, namely this short story, one must realize that this is only one of the several possibilities, or "futures" as Pen puts it, that are viable for this narrative.

Conversely, the lack of infinite possibilities of Tsun and Albert's stories definitely signifies a dividing point between Pen and Borges, at least in regards to authorship. Whereas Pen is attempting to convey all of his realities at the same time, Borges recognizes the truth in Pen's infinite theory yet chooses to perform the aforementioned action of chiseling from the block of marble that is the infinite fictional multiverse. This difference between the two authors raises the question regarding a specific purpose of authorship: what does it mean to be an author who writes in an infinite sense? As Albert and Borges both point out, all authors of fiction perform the same task in regards to the infinite possibilities, as in "all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others" (Borges 125). In this very specific context, it appears as though Pen is not an author, as in a sense, he is not necessarily exerting his authorial authority of choosing and eliminating and instead falling victim to the ubiquitous and inherent presence of the infinite. Generally, while Pen's novel is justifiable with a certain truth (the truth of infinities), it, like other Borgesian stories, is ultimately an extreme that exemplifies a truth that affects all literature and written works. Furthermore, it appears as though even Pen himself cannot compensate for all possibilities, as he states that "*I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths*" (Borges 125). If the titular garden is the novel itself (Albert posits that "the garden of forking paths was the chaotic novel"), then Pen himself is performing the "authorly

task” of choosing and eliminating, whether it be because some timelines are better than others, or he actively realizes that he, and his novel, cannot exist in all timelines simultaneously, just as Albert and Tsun cannot exist in all possible times.

However, while Pen and Borges’ authoritative dominance in the fictional realm is abundantly apparent, the ubiquity and dominance of Pen’s philosophy in Tsun’s life cannot be completely confirmed, as in the end Pen’s work is still theoretical. Albert does state that life could be dictated in these manners, as he realizes that in some times, “we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others, I do and you do not,” but at the same time, this was in relation to how Pen viewed the world, and not an explicit assertion that this was the truth in regards to how Tsun’s universe functions (Borges 127). In a sense, it is, as in this meta-fictional context, he is a character whose journey can definitely be claimed as a product of choosing futures, but conversely, when Tsun and his universe is viewed without Pen’s framing, the hesitation in applying Pen’s method to the narrative is strengthened, as the reader is not necessarily given any confirmation of Pen’s philosophies holding true to the “real” world. If anything, this meta-fictional frame that Pen’s work puts on Tsun’s narrative almost makes it appear as though that Borges is actively attempting to perform Pen’s (and possibly his own) beliefs about fiction, as under this meta-fictional lens, these coincidences and parallels are somewhat obtuse and glaring: there is a perceived lack of subtlety to them. It almost seems as though these glaring obtrusions are moments in which the reader can better identify Borges’ particular choice among the infinite others that he could have made, almost as if these are his markings to remind the reader that he is the one who has dictated this story’s past and irrevocable future.



### **In Conclusion: Death of the Author, Birth of the Reader**

As it is (hopefully) abundantly clear by now, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” and “The Garden of the Forking Paths,” are all stories that embody the ultimate paradox for fiction: they were all written both for the reader, and not for the reader. These stories are for the reader because the narratives all bring out the performative side of the reader, allowing for the reader (or possibly forcing the reader) to create meaning and read actively, in the sense that reader must apply their own selves and knowledge to create meaning out of something that seems intentionally designed to frustrate interpretation. While there may be narrative cues, it is not as those cues lead to the definitive answer; if anything, my own readings of these stories show that one must decide which cues are relevant to the meaning that one wants to find.

Conversely, these stories are not for the reader for the same exact reason, as the reader’s forced dependence upon himself or herself to discern everything makes whatever “truth” there impossible to find. Borges presence in these stories is similarly paradoxical. His presence is very clear when a reader is examining these narrative cues, but when a reader wants Borges to confirm their elucidation, it is almost as if he has purposefully disappeared completely.

Of course, this is not to say that interpretations of Borges’ stories cannot be comparatively more, or less persuasive because of this subjectivity. In fact, as mentioned many times throughout this project, there are multiple instances of intersubjective truths. For instance, the themes surrounding mirrors and labyrinths, as well as what they signify, are recognizable through a very objective sense, as those interpretations have been noted by multiple critics from various times and places. Unlike the phenomena mentioned in

the “Tlön” chapter of an Argentinian reader recognizing Borges’ Argentinian references and a non-Argentinian not recognizing those references, recurring symbols like the labyrinth conduce to different readers discerning the same understanding. Perhaps this combination of difference and unity in interpretation epitomizes the concept of the infinite reader as being the overall experience that all readers share, of agreeing and disagreeing with each other, of interpreting skillfully or clumsily. If anything, thinking of the reader within the context of the infinite reader makes the reader a type of creator, similar to the creator status of an author. By having to rely on oneself to construct and invent meaning, the reader, particularly a reader of these Borges fictions, must author something that is both personal and something that has been repeated many times by others. In this sense, the reader is not so different from the author, as both ultimately create a product that is personal, original, and unoriginal.

Similarly, the aforementioned absence of Borges reveals an inherent flaw of the infinite reader. Even though the concept of the infinite reader embodies meanings and interpretations created by all readers, none of these readers could achieve an exhaustive, all-encompassing reading. To understand completely, one would have to be an ideal reader, “one who would understand perfectly and would approve entirely the least of [the author’s] words, the most subtle of his intentions” (Prince 9). The ideal reader entails “perfect” contextual awareness, and no one can be perfect. Yet we as readers try to be every time we read and analyze a story.

And here arises another inherent flaw in this author-reader relationship: authors also cannot be perfect in the representation of their intentions. If a reader is confused by a certain passage or the author’s syntax, the author essentially cannot directly and

immediately clarify the confusion for the reader. Just as Borges' narrative cues can be helpful in discerning a definitive meaning, providing such cues is essentially the most an author can do within their text. In this context, Borges' disappearance exemplifies the subjective nature of the written word, and furthermore, an acknowledgement of the written word's failure to completely and truthfully represent the author's thoughts and intentions. And with the author gone, if the reader does want to attain the most comprehensive and accurate meaning of a text they can, the reader must attempt to read the text as though they were the person that wrote it.

So just like any of Borges' short fictions that engage in this dense and complex discourse, these three stories all utilize extreme tactics that cover up a more reasonable and general truth. While it is clear that the role of the reader is performative and creative for these short stories, in the sense that they must read like they were the author, Borges himself is also being performative, as by planting all of these contradictory and confusing narrative cues, and then vanishing when the reader is struggling to find a sense of direction. Consequently, the reader (either consciously or unconsciously) experiences this universal breakdown of communication between author and reader that is inherent to the medium. When we choose to explore the labyrinth that is fiction, the only way we can get to the end is by finding the mirror.

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