"El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan"
and Bergsonian Duration

WILLIAM E. O’DONNELL

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

1 All quotations that appear in this study come from the translated edition of *Ficciones* edited by Anthony Kerrigan that is listed in the works cited. The story itself is translated by Helen Temple and Ruthven Todd.
The purpose of this study is to analyze this short story from a Bergsonian point of view. The results will reveal Borges’s vision of the universe and our existence.

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

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

1 Bergson believed that those theories which make a distinction between the spatial and the temporal were ill-equipped to explain our existence, especially the relationship between the mind and the body. This dualism lead to “the impossibility of understanding how the spirit acts upon the body or the body upon the spirit” (1991, 221).
it resides on both sides of what chronological or mathematical time refers to as the "present":

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In order to truly appreciate Borges's literary genius, the structure of "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" must also be examined. I have formulated two conclusions: 1) the structure is an example of Bergsonian duration, and 2) the story, with Ts'ui Pen's infinite novel as the centerpiece, is an infinite *mise-en-abyme*. Since Borges believed mathematical time to be an illusion, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" does not unfold chronologically. As previously stated, it begins with the historical past. Then a deposition follows, which relates certain past events. However, the deposition is the present for anyone who is reading it. In addition, the deposition also contains the future, which will be revealed to readers if they continue to read. Furthermore, at the same time that it is the future for those who have not read it, it is the past for those who have already read it, as well as for Borges and his characters. Then Ts'ui Pen's ancient novel is introduced into the narrative, which is obviously the past. Nevertheless, this novel is the present for Yu Tsun (and the reader) when Albert discusses it with him. What Borges achieves by this mixture is a structure that represents reality, something that the traditional chronological narrative fails to do. He fictionalizes an infinite present. Robert Roland Anderson observes that in much of his fiction, Borges creates "an infinite present, in which the future's only reality exists as a present expectation, and the past is but present memory" (315). This recalls Bergson's description of duration: duration is on both sides of the "present"; what he refers to as his "present" has one foot in his past and another in his
future. Albert Bagby concurs: "No one has lived in the past and no one will live in the future; the present is in the form of all life" (105). Hence, the structure of “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” exemplifies Bergsonian duration.

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

It is frequently stated that Borges’s fiction is not simply fiction. Rather, it provides a means of pondering the mysteries of existence; it is a forum for the author to fictionalize various philosophies that he adheres to; and it provides the outlet for communicating the essence of our universe as envisioned by the mind of one of the greatest literary figures the world has ever known. “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” is truly an infinite work containing infinite possibilities. However, as Borges often said himself, infinity is devastating to reason and frightening. Once the reader can surpass this fear and enter the labyrinth with Borges, the true artistic beauty of his works will be evident. And, as Bergson postulated, the union of mind and body, which can lead to true freedom, will be possible.4

SUNY COLLEGE, FREDONIA

Works Cited


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

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

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