

John M. BENNETT: "The Garden of Forking Paths"

Reference Guide to

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# SHORT FICTION

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## THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS (El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan) by Jorge Luis Borges, 1941

"El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" ("The Garden of Forking Paths") was published for the first time in a small collection of the same name, in 1941, and again in a larger collection of Borge's stories, *Ficciones (Fictions)* in 1944. It was translated by Donald A. Yates in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (1964). It is a story in which every phrase functions on several levels of meaning, and in which the central metaphor, that of an infinite book never completely written, serves as a paradigm of Borges's own conception of the ideal literary work. The story opens with an introductory paragraph by an "editor" making a reference to a specific page in a history of World War I, and goes on to refer to a manuscript, lacking its first two pages, which supposedly elucidates the events described in that history. The rest of the story consists of a "transcription" of that manuscript. At the very opening, the authorship or point-of-view of this story is multi-layered and the events occurring in it are seen from more than one perspective simultaneously.

Although the central metaphor of the story turns out to be a book, which, among other things, is a tautological metaphor for the story itself, it is first presented as a garden. The manuscript's narrator is a Chinese man living in England during World War I and working as a German spy. He, Yu Tsun, has been found out by Captain Richard Madden, who is pursuing him. Before he is caught, Yu Tsun must send a message to Germany about the location, in the city of Albert, of a British artillery park, so the Germans can bomb it. He chooses to send that message by murdering a man named Stephen Albert, a name he finds in the telephone book, but who, seemingly by coincidence, turns out to be a sinologist with an interest in the work of Yu Tsun's distant ancestor. The narrator would be caught, and the murder reported in the newspapers, thus alerting the Germans as to the whereabouts of the artillery park. He succeeds, is caught by Madden, and the city of Albert is bombed. This spy story, however, appears to merely float on the surface of the narration, and seems quite incidental to its real content. The story is very much like the observation Albert makes to the narrator, in the course of their conversation, about the book by Yu Tsun's ancestor in which the one word that never appears is its central theme: time. This story, which slyly purports to be less ambitious than that novel, is referred to here, I believe, and "time," and humankind's consciousness of it, is its own central theme.

That theme is presented first, however, not as time, but as an idea of a labyrinthine garden, which was purportedly designed or conceived of by the narrator's ancestor in China. It is clear from a number of references in the story that this garden is presented as a kind of metaphor for the world, and perhaps for the world's origin: the Garden of Eden certainly comes to mind. The narrator, entering

Stephen Albert's Chinese-style garden, with its labyrinthine paths, says it is "like those of my childhood." The instructions he receives about how to get to the garden, to keep turning left, are instructions often used to guide one through a labyrinth, but they also describe a square: for if one keeps turning to the left, one arrives at one's place of origin. It is also significant that early in the story, the moon is described not as "full" but as "circular," which in this context is a clue to the circular nature of the world here presented. In using the location of a reproduction of an ancient Chinese garden as a means of communicating to the German military, the narrator has superimposed his own distant, ancestral past upon the present, as if time were circular, or in some way complete, total.

The garden presents another image, however, which is not circular, but labyrinthine, and it is this image that is predominant in the story. The "garden of forking paths" of the narrator's ancestor turns out to have been not a garden, but a labyrinthine and infinite book that he had started to write but never completed, and which had been lost. Stephen Albert had the manuscript of the book, which to most readers seemed a confused mess of disconnected fragments, contradictory plots, and rough sketches. What the ancestor had tried to do, however, was present an image of the world in which all possible outcomes of all possible events co-existed simultaneously, as if reality were not a single chain of events, but a swarm of all possible events, all occurring in the present, and of which a human being was only fragmentarily aware. This image of time and reality is referred to frequently by the narrator: at the very start of the story, for example, he speaks of thinking that "everything happens to one precisely, precisely now." Further on, as he plans the murder of Albert, he says that the person planning a horrible act must imagine that he has already done it, that the "future is as irrevocable as the past." He also speaks of feeling "vulnerable, infinitely so," and of feeling an "intangible swarming," and that the "afternoon was intimate, infinite."

The "plot" of this story, then, that of the characters acting in history, is quite deliberately treated as an incidental part of a much larger picture. That picture, as represented by the book and the garden, is one of a universe in which any particular "story" is merely one string of events in an innumerable forking of events, of possible different outcomes, all of which may exist, and exist at the same time. No particular sequence is of any greater importance. The story as a whole reflects, and is immersed in, this model of the universe. The pathos is, that it is perceived from the viewpoint of the human dilemma, or perhaps tragedy: that the individual can only be aware of a tiny fragment of it all, and at best only sense that "intangible swarming" of the larger reality. As Yu Tsun's ancestor put it, "I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths."

The primary response to this model of the universe (in which all time and space are conflated into the present, and all possible outcomes of all possible events occur, in an infinite web or net) seems to be one of fatigue and

hopelessness: the narrator's last line states, "no one can know . . . my innumerable contrition and weariness." This would seem to be the response, as in many of Borges's stories, to the loss of belief in the idea of an individual's having any kind of true free will or uniqueness. And yet the characters in these stories all have a kind of persistence and autonomy about them in spite of the world they think they have discovered: they are all in pursuit of something, intent on understanding or on following through to the end a particular process of thought or investigation. Yu Tsun, the narrator in "The Garden of Forking Paths," intent on completing his mission as a German spy, comes to understand his place in the universe; Stephen Albert is in pursuit of an understanding of an ancient labyrinthine book; and Richard Madden is in pursuit of a German spy. All of them complete their goals, in a sense. The paradox is that their goals are none of them quite what they had imagined them to be, and there is a resultant sense of tragedy or disillusionment: Albert dies, Madden does not understand the meaning of Albert's death, and Yu Tsun experiences a great "contrition and weariness." The greater understanding that really occurs in this story is the reader's, perhaps; a kind of global or non-individuated understanding, as if knowledge, and humankind, did not exist in individuals, but as a kind of supra-knowledge, the consciousness of the swarm or whole, which is perhaps what Yu Tsun sensed when he felt that "intangible swarming" in the "intimate, infinite" afternoon.

—John M. Bennett

### THE GARDEN PARTY by Katherine Mansfield, 1922

Katherine Mansfield published *The Garden Party and Other Stories* in 1922, the same year that T.S. Eliot published *The Waste Land*, and James Joyce published *Ulysses*. Mansfield's collection similarly represents the mature progress of her artistry. It contains some of her finest work, and illustrates the artistic usefulness of her New Zealand background. The title story, "The Garden Party," tells of a lavish occasion. The marquee has been erected, the flowers arranged, the women of the household dressed, and the guests are about to arrive when the news is brought: a young man, a carter, who lived in the poor cottages in the road below the house, has been killed in an accident. The sensitive Laura wishes to abandon the party, but practicality prevails. The grieving household is ignored until the party is over, when Laura, still in party attire, is sent with a basket of sandwiches and cream cakes to comfort the grieving family. Anthony Apiers, the eminent Mansfield biographer, once asked Mansfield's sister Vera about the veracity of the tale. Had there been a garden party, and was there an accident? She is said to have replied, "Indeed there was. . . . And I was the one who went down with the things." Such is the tenuous relation between fact and fiction.

The fictional version, however, demonstrates the immediacy with which Mansfield absorbs the reader into her stories. The story begins, "And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden party if they had ordered it. Windless, warm." The narrator piles on detail, acutely observed: gardeners are

mowing and sweeping, there are dark flat rosettes where the daisy plants had been, and the green bushes are bowed with roses. Laura's voice is heard rather than described, and character is swiftly depicted in a brief interchange with her mother and sister. Laura is young, but old enough to feel gauche. The workmen look impressive and she "wished now that she was not holding that piece of bread and butter. . . . She blushed and tried to look severe and even a little bit short sighted as she came up to them." Laura, the artistic one, was to supervise the placement of the marquee.

Mansfield, no less than James Joyce, demonstrates a preoccupation with the growth of an artistic sensibility. Laura must negotiate the difficult terrain between the values inculcated by her upper-middle class upbringing and those of a working class which lie, largely, outside of her experience. She must do so in a sparsely populated New Zealand where utility and practicality are, of necessity, revered. Thus, it is the workmen who dictate the placement of the marquee: "Against the karakas. . . . And they were so lovely, with their broad, gleaming leaves, and their clusters of yellow fruit . . . Must they be hidden by a marquee? They must." Nevertheless, Laura experiments with the working-class role. Class distinctions were absurd, and she preferred the broad-shouldered workmen who care for the smell of lavender to the silly boys who came to Sunday night supper. To show how much she despised stupid conversation Laura took a big bite of bread and butter: "She felt just like a working girl."

The adolescent oscillation of Laura's emotions allows the development of a tightly controlled tension in "The Garden Party." Beneath Laura's sadness and genuine emotion lies the grotesquely humorous incongruity that must attend the death of a man who has had the bad taste to get himself killed on the day of a garden party. Godber's man tells his tale with relish, and Laura's extravagant wish to stop the party is beyond comprehension. After all, warns sister Jose, "If you're going to stop a band playing every time some one has an accident, you'll lead a very strenuous life." Laura is equally astonished by her mother's behaviour. On being told that a man has been killed, her mother says, "Not in the garden?" Mansfield's humour at such times is Wildean; her characters demonstrate a similar incapacity to distinguish between the relative importance of deaths and cups of tea. Only Laura wonders if the grieving widow will like a basket of sandwiches and cream puffs.

It is, then, to Laura that the glimpse of transcendence is given. Urged to view the dead body of the young man, Laura discovers him remote and peaceful, given up to his dream: "What did garden parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. . . . All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content." The unique moment passes, and Laura returns to character. On such occasions one is expected to cry, or to say something: "Forgive my hat," she says.

Later, only Laura's brother understands. Mansfield's own brother, of course, died on 7 October 1915 as the result of a hand grenade accident in World War I. In January 1916 she wrote in her journal: "Now—now I want to write recollections of my own country. Yes I want to write about my own country until I simply exhaust my store. . . . My brother & I were born there . . . in my thoughts I range with him over all the remembered places."

—Jan Pilditch