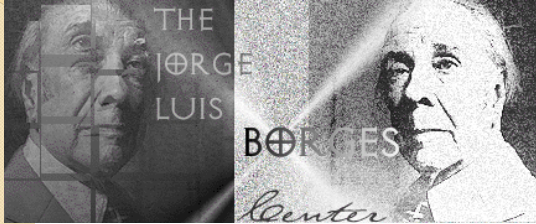


Jorge Luis Borges: “Garden of Forking Paths”



World Literature II, Abilene Christian University

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BIOGRAPHY

Jorge Luis Borges (1899- 1986)

- Born in Buenos Aires. Educated in Argentina, Switzerland, France.
- Famous in Argentina first as an “*Ultraist*” poet. Began going blind in 1955 -- ironically, when he had become Director of the National Library after Peron’s fall.
- 1980 Cervantes Prize from King of Spain. Knighted by Queen of England.
- Honorary degrees from Columbia, Oxford, U of Paris.

Struggle vs. Peron



Dictator Juan Peron and his wife Eva (“Evita”) ruled Argentina from 1946-1955 and returned to power in 1973. (Left: Buenos Aires)

Borges vs. Peron

President Peron had no use for intellectuals. He stripped Borges of his position as librarian and insulted him by offering a job as chicken inspector. Borges declined.



BORGES' ERA

20th Century

- Rise of science and logical method. But also new subjectivity in writing and art, fantasy writing, skepticism about technology (see H.G. Wells). Existential philosophy and postmodernism question all values.
- 1914-1917 World War I
- 1941 - *The Garden of Forking Paths*
- 1939-1945 World War II

Latin American novels

- In 1920s-40s, had been regional, focused on social problems, heavily political, didactic.
- The "new novel" Borges helps create is more subtle, less didactic, more given to fantasy and humor.



Borges' revolt against Realism.

- Instead of reflecting reality, his stories **undermine our assumptions about reality**. Contrast Lu Xun, James Joyce, Chekhov, others for whom realism was the way to reform literature. Each generation of **literary reformers** breaks the previous generation's achievement.
- For instance, "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" imagines a parallel universe. "The Garden of Forking Paths" imagines different futures existing at the same time.

Borges' revolt against realism



At left, a montage of Borges portraits -- in old age, manhood, and youth -- illustrates a remarks by one of his characters: "I have grown old in so many mirrors." So which Borges is real? Which mirrors told the truth?

Moderns and Reality

- Since H. G. Wells's novel *The Time Machine*, science fiction has played on the idea of history as forking paths.
- So have time-travel movies -- *Back to the Future*, *Dead Again*, *Star Trek III*, *Star Trek: Generations*, and others. TV series -- *Stargate SG-1*, *Quantum Leap*.
- Comedian Lily Tomlin: "Reality is only a collective hunch."

Moderns and Reality

- But 20th century history has undermined our sense of reality anyway, through totalitarianism, politics, advertising.

- Stalin's killing of 16 million people was unknown abroad until the fall of Communism. Supporters try to "rehabilitate" his reputation, denying that Stalin ordered the killings.
- Cf. Holocaust denial.



- Six % of Americans believe the moon landing was a NASA hoax.

Moderns and Reality

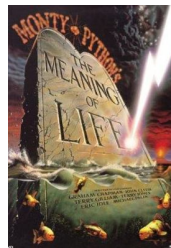
- George Orwell's *1984* was based on what Orwell knew of Stalin's secret police and propaganda.



◆ In the novel, "Doublespeak" destroys meaning: Ministry of Love is government torture department, Ministry of Peace is the government war machine, *Ministry of Truth* rewrites history to become propaganda. And Thought Police are everywhere.

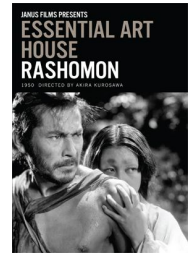
POST-modernism

- What happens after Modernism? Critics and artists reacted against its confidence that reality can be explained objectively. Individuals figure out "truth" from their own experience, and no assumptions are valid. Postmodernism is skeptical, playful. In this sense, Borges helped start postmodernism.



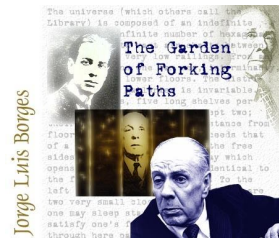
Postmodernism: beyond Relativity

- Modernism claimed that subjectivity and individual perspective kept us from knowing truth—but the truth was out there. See mysteries like *Rashomon*.
- Postmodernism says "truth" is made up as we go. Whatever is "out there" can't be known.



Some Christian critics have taken over postmodernism, using its skepticism against its skepticism.

INTERPRETATION



"Garden of Forking Paths"

- ◆ Dr. Stephen Albert tells Yu Tsun, "In the work of Ts'ui Pên, all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings. Sometimes, the paths of this labyrinth converge: for example, you arrive at this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend."
- ◆ We might compare *Choose-Your-Own Adventure* books for young people. Each page ends with a choice among forking paths.

A garden labyrinth



Renaissance nobles built garden labyrinths to mystify and entertain guests.

Idealist philosophy

- Borges also toys with concepts of reality because of philosophical Idealism--e.g., ideas of the 18th-century English philosopher [George Berkeley](#). Borges wrote on Berkeley in 1923 and later.
- Berkeley argued that [nothing exists for us unless we think it](#), and everything exists because God thinks it.

Postmoderns and Reality



- Since the 1990s, "virtual reality" and digital special effects have taught us to be skeptical about the claims of mass media to represent reality.

◆ Postmodern philosophy has combined with popular culture to promote subjectivism and a sense that "all reality is constructed."



Borges and the Postmodern Self

- Postmodernism claims that modernism relied too much on logic and science, trying to weigh and measure human nature. Postmodernism sees identity mainly as the product of culture, genetics, and accident. At the same time it distrusts "gender," "class," "race," and other systems as merely constructions, not truths.
- Borges' little spy story anticipates this way of thinking.



Borges and the Postmodern Self

Yu Tsun's self-conflicts about his own identity

- Ancestors: "the innumerable ancestors who merge within me" give him racial pride, determination to impress the Chief by saving Germans. *Race and culture are dominant.*
- Spy: must deduce facts about Madden, Runeberg; must choose his own death in order to carry out mission. *Obeying authority is dominant.*
- Knowledge: Reality itself may be multiple—in some futures, he's Stephen Albert's friend, in some, his enemy. Choice can't be based on knowledge if reality isn't stable. *Uncertainty is dominant.*
- Free will: So does he choose his fate, or does his fate choose him? Is everyone a spy and puppet? Is it possible that *all the above* are dominant?



Secret Agents and the Postmodern Self

- No wonder Borges wrote spy and detective stories. In Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, logic wins. But in spy novels and fantasies, logic is overwhelmed by relativity, uncertainty, and mysterious organizations.



EPILOGUE: CHRISTIAN LABYRINTHS FOR MEDITATION

12th-century Labyrinth: Chartres

In Greek mythology, the *Labyrinth* imprisoned the Minotaur. Medieval builders changed the term. Rather than imprison, a Christian labyrinth helps the worshipper become calm and focused.



Below: contemporary worshippers.



ACU Labyrinth



East of the Hunter Welcome Center, the Rich Welcome Plaza and Labyrinth was donated as "an outdoor quiet place where people can just enjoy the outdoors and the pond. People can go there and reflect."

Jack Rich comments that the labyrinth "is meant to represent the Christian walk, demonstrating the path between earth and heaven and the twists and turns of life."

Sources [Most aren't in MLA form!]

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- ♦ http://www.lessons4living.com/chartres_labyrinth.htm
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