

## HONG LOU MENG IN JORGE LUIS BORGES'S NARRATIVE

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*Debo a la conjunción de un espejo y de una  
enciclopedia el descubrimiento [...]*  
Jorge Luis Borges

Cao Xueqin's *Hong Lou Meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) represents the highest achievement of the classical narrative during the Ming-Qing period of China.<sup>1</sup> Studies of the text have long become an important subject for scholars worldwide. In 1937, Jorge Luis Borges dedicates one of his essays on world literature to *Hong Lou Meng*, which displays a curious observation of this masterpiece.<sup>2</sup> Based on German scholar Franz Kuhn's translation, Borges presents the Chinese novel as "[...] la novela más famosa de una literatura casi tres veces milenaria [...] Abunda lo fantástico" (4: 329). Known as a master of fictitious narrative himself, Borges seems not ready to

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<sup>1</sup> The English versions of the title and author of *Hong Lou Meng* in the references include the following: *Hung Lou Meng* and Tsao Hsue Kin (by Borges), *Hong Lou Meng* and Cao Xue Qin (by Xiao, and Scott), and *Hung Lu Meng* and Tsao Hsueh Chin (by Balderston). Others use the translation *Dream of the Red Chamber* or the original title *The Story of the Stone*.

<sup>2</sup> Borges wrote this series of essays for the journal *El Hogar* in Argentina.

present any further understanding of *Hong Lou Meng* in the essay. He reviews the first three chapters of the novel in an abstract and somehow schematic way:

El primer capítulo cuenta la historia de una piedra de origen celestial, destinada a soldar una avería del firmamento y que no logra ejecutar su divina misión; el segundo narra que el héroe de la obra ha nacido con una lámina de jade bajo la lengua; el tercero nos hace conocer al héroe (...) (4: 329)

Then, he comes to admit that he feels confused by the “grand view” of *Hong Lou Meng*’s narrative: “[I]a novela prosigue de una manera un tanto irresponsable o insípida; los personajes secundarios pululan y no sabemos bien cuál es cuál. Estamos como perdidos en una casa de muchos patios” (4: 329). For a *Hong Lou Meng* scholar, this statement may sound “irresponsible and insipid,” for how could a reader of this famous novel completely ignore the love story of Baoyu and Daiyu, and the fate of the Garden of Total Vision (Da Guan Yuan)?<sup>3</sup> and, how could a critic praise the author to be great (un gran escritor), and at the same time say that he has not quite understood the work? Besides, Borges’s review of *Hong Lou Meng* shows an emphasis on the fantastic factors such as “historia de una piedra de origen celestial,” and “el héroe de la obra ha nacido con una lámina de jade bajo la lengua” (4: 329). Meanwhile, these fantastic issues appear mostly in the outskirts of the novel, as a lead toward the main story happened in real world.<sup>4</sup> For a Western reader who has no knowledge of the novel, Borges’s summary can be misleading and damaging. However, if one sets aside the possibility that Borges somehow misreads this novel, it is interesting to notice that the manner with which he presents *Hong Lou Meng* coincides with his perception of the nature of classical literature.

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<sup>3</sup> There are different translations of the name of the garden in *Hong Lou Meng*. Dore Levy uses “The Garden of Total Vision.” Other scholars such as Scott and Xiao use the translation “The Garden of Grand View.”

<sup>4</sup> Borges’s “Olaf Stapledon,” a synthetic biography of the writer of fantastic worlds appeared the same day in *El Hogar* as his essay on *Hong Long Meng*. This fact also may suggest that Borges has read the Chinese novel solely as fantastic literature.

In another essay, "Sobre los clásicos", Borges suggests that the classical works are not defined by self-sufficient merits but by reading, by the reader's choice. "Clásico es aquel libro que una nación o un grupo de naciones, o un largo tiempo han decidido leer como si en sus páginas todo fuera deliberado, fatal, profundo como el cosmos y capaz de interpretaciones sin término" (2: 151). He also claims that the limitation of a work is due to the limitation of its readers' range. For example, "Para los alemanes y austríacos el *Fausto* es una obra genial; para otros, una de las más famosas formas del tedio" (2: 151). If one takes into account such a point of view, it is not quite strange, then, to find that Borges's essay on *Hong Lou Meng* does not provide much comment or analysis essential to further understand the Chinese classics, for the central idea in this short essay is in fact about a western writer being amazed by a novel containing more than one hundred chapters and more than three hundred characters. Different from most of the *Hong Lou Meng* scholars, Borges's focus is not on certain specific aspects of the novel, such as its characters, plots, narrative strategies, or historical contexts, but on the general fact that a novel can have so vast a textual construction. The amazement becomes even stronger considering that the novel is distanced from him by time, space, and language. Borges should not be criticized here as a professional *Hong Lou Meng* scholar, for the sake of *Hong Lou Meng* and many other classical works, because he is first a writer. For example, to the Arabic treasure *One Thousand and One Nights*, Borges suggests that this work is so great that it is not necessary to have read it (completely), because it is already part of our memory.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, this statement is not about weighing the literary quality of a masterpiece, but rather about an observation of its general and global value. These classics are quoted as a cultural reference in Borges's own literary product, including his fictions. His short story "The Garden of the Forking Paths" ("El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," 1941) is such a piece, in which both *Hong Lou Meng* and *One Thousand and One Nights* are mentioned

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<sup>5</sup> "Es un libro tan vasto que no es necesario haberlo leído, ya que es parte previa de nuestra memoria [...]" ("Las mil y una noches," 3: 241).

(1: 475 and 1: 477). This story, written four years after that introductory essay on *Hong Lou Meng*, provides us a chance to view another and more detailed interpretation of Cao Xueqin's great novel, and the writing of the "total vision" from a master's mind.

"The Garden of Forking Paths" is one of Borges's most famous short stories. The story starts with an incident of a British artillery mentioned in Liddell Hart's *A History of the World War*, and proposes that a deposition from a spy provides explanations to that incident. The spy is named Yu Tsun, a Chinese scholar from former German colony Tsing Tao (Qing Dao), who works for the German intelligence in England during the World War. Yu Tsun needs to pass a message from England to his supervisor in Berlin, about the location of some British artillery. Knowing that he is exposed and that a British intelligence agent is after him, Yu Tsun heads to a house that he has selected apparently at random in a phonebook. It is the address of Stephen Albert, a Sinologist, who has been working to solve an ancient mystery in Chinese culture left by Yu Tsun's great-grandfather Ts'ui Pên. Ts'ui Pên is said to have written a novel more complex than *Hong Lou Meng*, and to have built a garden with forking paths, but he is murdered before he can complete his work and reveal the location of his creations. Albert talks with Yu Tsun about the mystery, as he finds out that Ts'ui Pên's enormous novel and his garden of imminent forking paths are eventually one same work, a labyrinth of time. Yu Tsun then kills Albert, and confesses his motive: the British artillery is located in a city by the same name, and when Albert's murder makes the news, German intelligence will figure out the secret, and bomb the French city of Albert.

This story takes the shape of a spy thriller. Its narrative apparently follows a generic mode of the criminal fiction, according to which the central task of the narrative is to live the mystery and "delay" the solution for the pleasure of reading the text, as Roland Barthes observes: "Truth is brushed past, avoided, lost . . . The dynamics of the text is thus paradoxical: it is a static dynamics: the problem is to *maintain* the enigma in the initial void of its answer" (75). From the beginning of the narrative until the last paragraph of the text, Yu Tsun's motive re-

mains mysterious. The reader is kept in the dark about his mission in the war as the narrative focuses on his efforts to escape from his pursuers. His escape as a narrative matter forms a “delay” for the mystery of his action, maintains the suspense over his fate, and bridges the gap between his initial motive – to serve a cause in World War I in Europe, and the denouement of his efforts – the destruction of a cultural mission about ancient China. It is during the escape that Yu Tsun is led by the Sinologist Albert into another mystery, the garden of the forking paths from China. Therefore, this escape is where the story differentiates itself from most popular criminal fiction, and from where the reader can detect the metaphysical sense of the text: “Bajo árboles ingleses medité en ese laberinto [chino] perdido [...] Absorto en esas ilusorias imágenes, olvidé mi destino de perseguido [por la policía]” (1: 475).

At this point, the narrative also “escapes,” along with Yu Tsun, from a modern spy story into an examination of an Oriental cultural product. Yu Tsun’s encounter with the garden of forking paths, an enigma in both Chinese studies and the history of his own family, takes about two thirds of the textual space, and forms the core of the narrative. On first introducing the enigma in the story, Borges uses *Hong Lou Meng* as a reference for the general image of a mysterious Chinese artwork:

Algo entiendo de laberintos: no en vano soy bisnieto de aquel Ts’ui Pên, que fue gobernador de Yunnan y que renunció al poder temporal para escribir una novela que fuera todavía más populosa que el *Hung Lou Meng* y para edificar un laberinto en el que se perdieran todos los hombres. Trece años dedicó a esas heterogéneas fatigas, pero la mano de un forastero lo asesinó y su novela era insensata y nadie encontró el laberinto. (1: 475)

This is the only time in the narrative that *Hong Lou Meng* is mentioned. A reader can choose to believe that the mentioning of Cao Xueqin’s novel is pure coincidence, and that Borges may have possibly cited other classical works instead. However, there is at least one more coincidence for the reader’s consideration, since, similar to what we have seen in his essay “*Hung Lou Meng*

de Tsao Hsue Kin," the Chinese classic is still viewed as a novel with too many characters. Therefore, it is arguable that the large number of characters in *Hong Lou Meng* is a fact that attracts, and confuses the reader-writer Borges, and is taken by him not only as a major characteristic of the novel's narrative, but also as an important poetical component of his own story. Besides, the "garden" in Borges's story is represented by at least three different images, and the connections among these images also remind the reader of *Hong Lou Meng*.

Through the mystery of Ts'ui Pên, Yu Tsun's great-grandfather, Borges shows different levels of access towards a distant yet profound culture. The first image of garden which appears in the narrative is Stephen Albert's residence, a physical imitation of a Chinese garden that helps Yu Tsun recall his ancestor. It has avenues, pavilions, Chinese music, lanterns, vases, books, and, not a Chinese but a Western researcher in it. The depiction shows an outsider's view of Chinese culture, with a display of "unfamiliarity" from sporadic and trivial samples of artworks. This simulation of a Chinese garden-residence is not only a symbol of a mixture of culture, but also a platform for a "narrative hybrid": it is a site for both a story of Chinese study and for a wartime crime; it is a connection between the past and present across two continents and across civilization and barbarism, and most importantly, it is the conjunction in the narratives for the other two "gardens" — Yu Tsun's imaginative work of his ancestor's creation, and Albert's research and solution to that garden's mystery. The narrative of the last two gardens represents a trajectory of the text's further reach onto a metaphysical level. The garden of forking paths is a complex notion carrying different outlooks and physical natures for each of the two main characters. For the Sinologist Albert, it is an academic challenge in such fields as literature, history, and philosophy. For Yu Tsun, the imagined garden is a multi-universe, or in the words of critic David M. Balch, "implications of the many-worlds view of physical reality" (59), in which "[i]t is by the act of observation that the wave function, the total number of probabilities, collapses into one" (60). As Yu Tsun probes, it does not obey the physical rules:

[I]o imaginé inviolado y perfecto en la cumbre secreta de una montaña, lo imaginé borrado por arrozales o debajo del agua, lo imaginé infinito, no ya de quioscos ochavados y de sendas que vuelven, sino de ríos y provincias y reinos... Pensé en un laberinto de laberintos, en un sinuoso laberinto creciente que abarcara el pasado y el porvenir y que implicara de algún modo los astros. (1: 475)

This perception illustrates an artwork un-locatable in either “time” or “space” from a common sense, since there is no limit, border, or direction.

Interestingly, some *Hong Lou Meng* scholars hold visions similar to those of the narrator in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” in their access toward the Garden of Total Vision in the narrative of *Hong Lou Meng*. For example, Mary Scott observes that the image of garden has a rich and complex set of associations in the narrative:

A garden, whose most important feature is the harmonious relationship between its building and its topography, reflects the subtler, less immediately perceptible order and harmony in the larger universe, in which the strict symmetries of human society are subsumed in larger harmonies, which are given verbal expression as an infinite number of complementary pairs: yin yang ... light and shadow, solid and void [...]. (88)

She indicates further that the Chinese garden uses limited means to express the consonance of human beings with the universal order which may reflect the infinite, and that “in order to give the impression of unlimited visual space, the actual physical space is divided so that there are no uninterrupted lines of sight and no point from which the garden as a whole can be surveyed” (88). On measuring the meta-structure of *Hong Lou Meng*'s narrative, Xiao Chi also suggests

a large part of the narrative turns out to be a garden in which the narrator emulates his characters' perambulations along a maze occasionally punctuated by a pavilion or a bridge at the water's edge. [...] The encapsulated realm of the narrative, like its subject the garden, reflects the same leitmotif, that is, the alternation

between denseness and sparseness, solid and void, convex and concave, bright and dark – in sum, yin and yang.” (171-72)

Scott's and Xiao's points of view show that the image of the Garden of Total Vision and the image of *Hong Lou Meng's* textual structure can coincide in a sense that they both resemble an ambition of universal representation. Meanwhile, these scholars' approaches to the Garden's significance have also been reflected not only in what Borges perceives of *Hong Lou Meng* in his short essay, but also in what he conceives of as a “garden of forking paths” in his story. First, Borges's comment on *Hong Lou Meng's* narrative mode as “una casa de muchos patios” insinuates interruptions of sights and space, with which agrees Scott's illustration for the garden of “no uninterrupted lines of sight” or point of overlook. Second, what the garden means for the story of Borges is what Mary Scott has indicated in her study of *Hong Lou Meng*; she says that the garden is “a dominant image” in the narrative that consists largely of an account of life (83). Then, the manner of “forking paths” or conjunctions in multiple levels of the narrative can be observed in both the short story and in *Hong Lou Meng* through the representation of the garden: it is both a residence and a display of natural views, an imagined dream work, a labyrinth of fate for its characters, and a metaphysical object for literary study as well as universal reflection. Furthermore, as Borges states in his story about how the garden is created by the act of writing, the Garden of Total Vision is also created by Cao Xueqin along with the writing of his novel. In addition, both gardens are not only created by the authors of the texts, but also by certain characters in the texts. Such a character is Jia Bao Yu in *Hong Lou Meng*, as Scott points out: “Baoyu ‘creates’ Daguayuan in his dream,” and also by “naming many of the most important places in it” (92); and in Borges's story, it is Yu Tsun's ancestor Ts'ui Pên.

Borges does not merely mention Ts'ui Pên's name as author of a book, but also illustrates him as part of a great and mysterious culture:

Gobernador de su provincia natal, doctor en astronomía, en astrología y en la interpretación infatigable de los libros canónicos, ajedrecista, famoso poeta y calígrafo: todo lo abandonó para componer un libro y un laberinto. Renunció a los placeres de la opresión, de la justicia, del numeroso lecho, de los banquetes y aun de la erudición y se enclaustró durante trece años en el Pabellón de la Límpida Soledad. (1: 476)

It is notable that, although Ts'ui Pên's image does not exactly resemble Cao Xueqin, the author of *Hong Lou Meng*, there is at least some coincidence between the two. For example, the knowledge of astrology, canonical books, the chess game, and of lyric poems that Ts'ui Pên possesses, is what Cao Xueqin displays with the writing of *Hong Lou Meng*. Ts'ui Pên's self-sacrifice for thirteen years for creating his novel, as quoted in the above, is also echoed by Zhiyanzhai's preface to *Hong Lou Meng*, in which he claims that every word of Cao's novel is written with blood, and the author's ten years' work is quite unusual (Miller 216). Ts'ui Pên writes in a society in which, as Borges indicates, "la novela es un género subalterno; en aquel tiempo era un género despreciable" (1: 478), while this is also the fate of Cao, as his novel was considered corrupting and erotic, and had to circulate in a private and secret mode during his time. Moreover, like Cao Xueqin, whose name cannot be separated from this one sole work, the image of Ts'ui Pên is molded not only by a brief biographical introduction, but also by an illustration of his work that represents the third image of the garden, that of both a book and a labyrinth.

In Borges's story, the third image of the garden is brought up by the Sinologist Albert, who solves the mystery of the location of Ts'ui Pên's work and announces: "el jardín de senderos que se bifurcan era la novela caótica" (1: 477). This statement can be made again for the Garden of Total Vision in *Hong Lou Meng*, and it reflects a multi-universe onto the act of writing. Borges describes in his story that the publication of Ts'ui Pên's mysterious book was madness. "El libro es un acervo indeciso de borradores contradictorios" (1: 476). This chaotic image echoes Borges's feeling of Cao's novel as he himself claims in the 1937

essay, that on reading it he seems to be lost in a labyrinth, and that the text is ruled by a desperate carnality, abundant dreams, and the confusion of reality and dreams, from which he even detects something comparable to Poe, Kafka and Dostoevsky.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the sense of chaos in *Hong Lou Meng* is also a major issue for its critics, whose probes diverge into different directions. For example, Zuyan Zhou believes that chaos is a philosophical outcome from Taoism and Buddhism in *Hong Lou Meng*, while Lucien Miller notices that the narrator's uncertain whereabouts sets a base for the chaotic nature of the narrative (224-25). Other critics, such as Jeanne Knoerle, believe that the abundant non-event scenes including poetry writing separate *Hong Lou Meng* from the classic norm of the novel, and makes for its narrative lack of coherence (Xiao, 162). Some comments on this Chinese novel, including Borges's at one point, are disparaging, but they in fact imply the nature of a narrative with juxtapositions, unexpected by a Western reader, of different times and types of events. *Hong Lou Meng* is unquestionably a vast convolution of reality and dream, narrative and poetry, romance and popular life, comedy and tragedy, and garden and labyrinth. This narrative mode is somehow signaled in the story by Borges which, in addition to transformations of times and mysteries, also contains a conjunction of different genres such as criminal mystery, represented as the major clue in the text, epic history, represented by Liddell Hart's book that initiates the mystery, and metaphysical writing, represented by Ts'ui Pên's creation in the core of the mystery.

As revealed in the above, the three images of garden in the mystery story, the simulation of a Chinese garden in an English residence, the imagined multi-universal garden, and the unity of labyrinth and text, all carry reflections of *Hong Lou Meng*. In other words, the *Hong Lou Meng* depicted as a classical master-

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<sup>6</sup> "La [certidumbre de un gran escritor] corrobora en el décimo capítulo, no indigno de Edgar Allan Poe o de Franz Kafka [. . .] Una desesperada carnalidad rige toda la obra. [...] los sueños abundan: son más intensos porque el escritor no nos dice [...] y creemos que se trata de realidades [...] (Dostoievski, hacia el final de *Crimen y castigo*, maneja ese procedimiento una vez, o dos veces consecutivas)" 4: 329).

piece with a huge number of characters can be the ultimate reference for Borges's mysterious garden.

Now, what is *Hong Lou Meng*? Readers who have certain knowledge about the novel would agree that it is a world and not only a world. People most commonly believe that it is an encyclopedic work. For example, Dore Levy calls it "a microcosm of society" (103). Lin Yu Tang summarizes that "[It] displays a ubiquitous knowledge of all aspects of Chinese life—official corruption, court etiquette, religious and superstitious practices, ... poetry, food, wine games, card and dice games, music, painting, medicine, astrology ... Confucian philosophy and Taoism—all presented with expert knowledge" (27). Borges may not have expressed exactly the same feeling when he narrates about the Sinologist's admiration towards Ts'ui Pên's achievement by saying "A mí, bárbaro inglés, me ha sido deparado revelar ese misterio diáfano" (476). Nevertheless, the universal and encyclopedic image that these scholars figure for *Hong Lou Meng* is also the image that Borges uses to depict what he believes to be great literature in his story: "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan es una imagen incompleta, pero no falsa, del universo" (1: 479).

As to the general textual structure, *Hong Lou Meng* presents the old Chinese puzzle of a box inside a box, as Xiao indicates: "The tale of the Stone embraces the misfortune of Zhen Shiyin, whose story embraces the 'core' of the narrative" (157). A similar structure is followed, though in a rather miniature way, by the narrative of "The Garden of Forking Paths," in which *A History of the World War*, a historic book by Liddell Hart—not Borges's fictitious creation—provides an event that embraces Yu Tsun's deposition of his task of espionage, and the spy's deposition embraces a mystery that involves an ancient Chinese novel and labyrinth, in which the core of the entire narrative, as in *Hong Lou Meng*, is a garden.

Besides *Hong Lou Meng*, another factor that connects the three notions of garden in the story is Yu Tsun, whose experience as both protagonist and narrator in the text involves both a scheme in a world war and a mystery of a garden. His major task as

narrator is to mislead the reader to avoid the revelation of the answer to the mystery until the end of the narrative. If the reader only sees this text as a crime mystery then, the secret Chinese garden, *Hong Lou Meng*, and the solution to the ancient mystery about a *Hong Lou Meng*-like novel would merely be considered as elements that help carry the narrative to a generic end—the solution of Yu’s plot and crime. However, Daniel Balderston insightfully points out that Yu Tsun’s name comes from an unusual source: “[in “The Garden of Forking Paths”], the name of the Chinese spy, Yu Tsun, is that of a character, a student, in Tso Hsueh-Chin’s *Dream of the Red Chamber* [*Hong Lou Meng*]” (42). Scholars commonly agree that what Cao Xueqin mentions in *Hong Lou Meng* as “Chia-yu-tsun-yen, ‘fictive language and vulgar words’, is a homophone for the second half of the [first] chapter title and points to the story in chapter 1 of the character “Chia Yu-tsun” (Miller 217). Balderston also notices the function of this character in the narrative, when he quotes Manuel Ferrer in his study that “despite his seeming extended absence, this Yu Tsun is the one who is behind the whole development and plot of the novel” (42). Balderston does not delve further Yu Tsun’s role in the narrative, but rather examines Sun Tzu, the author of *Art of War* (Sun Zi Bing Fa), whom he believes to have more things to do with Yu Tsun’s spying scheme and the structure of Borges’s story.<sup>7</sup> In fact the character Yu Tsun in “The Garden of Forking Paths” is like Jia Yu Tsun in *Hong Lou Meng*, in a way that his own story ceases to bring up the story of a garden that explores a different dimension of the narrative. In Borges’s story, once facing the mystery of the garden, the character Yu Tsun stops being a mastermind. When Stephen Albert is presenting the grand enigma and its possible answers all at once based on his research, Yu Tsun cannot plot and succeed as he does in espionage, nor has he a position in the representation of the mysterious garden. Like Jia Yu Tsun in *Hong Lou Meng*, Yu Tsun is

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<sup>7</sup> Balderston suggests: “No one has remarked, however, on another near homophone (at least to the Western ear) to Yu Tsun’s name, that of the author of a work written more than two thousand years ago, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu.” Balderston believes that since Sun Tzu’s work contains a chapter on use of spies, “Yu Tsun was no doubt educated in Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*” (42).

visible in this part of the narrative due to his connection with other characters in a net of relationship: Yu Tsun is reader of Stephen Albert, whose research makes Yu Tsun think of his home country and his roots; meanwhile, this researcher of the Chinese garden is a target of Yu Tsun's brutality; Ts'ui Pên, the author of the garden, subject of the research, who shares Albert's fate of being murdered, is Yu Tsun's great-grandfather; and Albert, on guiding the other in the examination of the mystery of Tsui Pen, becomes fatally trapped himself in a scheme during the World War, to which he himself may have never paid attention, and thus fulfills a spy's mission. So Yu Tsun sighs:

Yo oía con decente veneración esas viejas ficciones, acaso menos admirables que el hecho de que las hubiera ideado mi sangre y de que un hombre de un imperio remoto me las restituyera, en el curso de una desesperada aventura, en una isla occidental. [. . .] Desde ese instante, sentí a mi alrededor y en mi oscuro cuerpo una invisible, intangible pululación. (1: 478)

This expression of Yu Tsun's feeling gathers all times and spaces that involve all the characters. In addition to his envisioning the whole of time-space in the narrative, it is noticeable that his meditation, at the moment of the final revelation of the garden's secret, shows a tracing of time and reversal of space to that of the narrative in the whole text. It does not go from a modern war into an old empire, and into an interesting novel, but gazes from inside a mysterious ancient text to a current crisis. At this point, Yu Tsun returns to the center of the narrative, and resumes his control of the story. Therefore arguably, like Jia Yu Tsun, whose story resurfaces in the ending part of *Hong Lou Meng*, Yu Tsun's position in the narrative is secondary to his role in the narrative, a fact that, along with his name, reminds the reader of the connection between Borges's story and *Hong Lou Meng*.

The above examination of the reflections of *Hong Lou Meng* in the narrative of "The Garden of Forking Paths" may raise a question: does Borges mean to re-structure or re-imagine the ancient Chinese masterpiece in a cunning and concise way through this

narrative? Or, is this story a poetic cultivation of a concept that *Hong Lou Meng* represents? To consider these questions, another story by Borges may be taken as reference, in which the author also shows fascination with mysteries in the act of writing and an ancient masterpiece. "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" is a story from the same collection, in which Borges depicts a writer who challenges Cervantes by re-writing *Don Quijote*. He writes it exactly as Cervantes does, yet he is not imitating or copying, he is doing an original work with an experience completely different from that of the original author. The representation of writing has an interesting function in this story, as it is in fact not about a pseudo re-writing but rather consists of an access to the poetics of a classical work. Robert Chibka points out that Pierre Menard rewrites the *Quixote* "by gesturing toward it, not (re)presenting it," and that Stephen Albert takes the same way to interpret Ts'ui Pên's work by "merely alluding indirectly to the idea" (116). The question Chibka does not consider is that, if behind the story of Pierre Menard stands the *Quixote*, then what may be standing behind Ts'ui Pên and Stephen Albert? Meanwhile, if in a way the writing of "The Garden of Forking Paths" can be valued as a poetic access to *Hong Lou Meng*, then it is necessary to consider how this poetic access is made, for it is not via a "re-writing" of a same book, as depicted in "Pierre Menard," but via the "writing" of another book comparable to *Hong Lou Meng*, and via the detection of mysteries. So far, the character Yu Tsun and Albert each has a mission in mystery: to pose an enigma in the Europe of World War I, and to solve one from ancient China; and to study Borges's possible mission with the text, mystery again is a focus.

The Sinologist Albert confronts not one but two mysteries of the garden: the location of Ts'ui Pên's labyrinth, and the method with which to read his manuscripts. The first mystery is solved when Albert suggests that the book and the labyrinth is one same work. The other mystery surfaces on the first one's solution, regarding how to understand Ts'ui Pên's novel which is "chaotic," "contradictory," and "shapeless" (1: 476). This is a core mystery in the story and is similar to the mystery that Borges implies in his essay on *Hong Lou Meng*, in which he com-

plains that Cao Xueqin's novel is like a labyrinth—"una casa con muchos patios." In the story, the second half of Albert's presentation to Yu Tsun concentrates exclusively on this mystery, and reveals how he finally understands the manuscripts of Tsui Pen. But Albert's understanding is not from the stand of a reader, but from that of a writer. Namely, he understands how the novel is written instead of what is written. The Sinologist sees that such a novel is not just any labyrinth, but "un invisible laberinto de tiempo" (1: 476), in which "la imagen de la bifurcación en el tiempo, no en el espacio" (1: 477). Time is the factor that decides the writing of Ts'ui Pên's unique narrative, as the author suggests through Stephen Albert, that "*El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* es una enorme adivinanza, o parábola, cuyo tema es el tiempo [...] A diferencia de Newton y de Schopenhauer, su antepasado [Tsui Pen] no creía en un tiempo uniforme, absoluto. Creía en infinitas series de tiempos, en una red creciente y vertiginosa de tiempos divergentes, convergentes, y paralelos" (1: 478-79). That is to say, it is an illogical move (the forking, converging, and parallel) of time that produces so many stories and characters in Ts'ui Pên's work. Meanwhile, the same can be suggested for the narrative of *Hong Lou Meng*, as Zong Pu points out: "The time in *Hong Lou Meng* is an old mystery; the characters' ages are not clear [...]. The order in which the events happen is not clear either, for [the order] is not lineal or multi-lineal, but spreads to all directions" (5).<sup>8</sup> This "spatial" image of time that Zong Pu illustrates is also indicated by Knoerle, that "time is the dynamic element and space is incidental [in *Hong Lou Meng*]" (88), and by Xiao, who believes "the thematic significance of the garden of the novel built in the 'timescape' [of *Hong Lou Meng*] is clear" (176). The notion of "timespace," and the idea of "bifurcating in time" imply similarly a "time as space" for a vast textual building, and Borges's discussion of time in a mode of forking paths eventually resonates with the *Hong Lou Meng* scholars who propose time as a key to the novel's secrets.

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<sup>8</sup> This article is originally in Chinese; the English translation is mine.

“Value based in aesthetics produces an enclave immune to time and causation” (Xiao, 176). This statement for *Hong Lou Meng*’s narrative actually agrees with Borges’s core idea about Ts’ui Pên’s book and garden, which forms the aesthetic base for Borges’s story. Xiao Chi points out that the time in the narrative of *Hong Lou Meng* does not follow common logic:

[D]estiny always takes free will as its core determining factor. For destiny to be realized, in this sense time also must move along through the inner logic of becoming. . . The Stone does not really rely on such an inner logic. On the contrary, as Haun Saussy observes, narrative time sometimes takes a special form since the plot of this novel unfolds like a riddle: “asking and answering a riddle takes time, during which possible solutions are tried out, refined or rejected.” (171)

This approach mirrors what Borges describes in “The Garden of Forking Paths”, about a novel’s writing, that its progress does not obey the one-universe rule: “En todas las ficciones, cada vez que un hombre se enfrenta con diversas alternativas, opta por una y elimina las otras en la del casi inextricable Ts’ui Pên, opta –simultáneamente– por todas. *Crea*, así, diversos porvenires, diversos tiempos, que también proliferan y se bifurcan.” (1: 477, original emphasis). In this statement, Borges proposes an indefinite time as his definite answer to the question of how a huge and complex narrative construction can be done. As a writer amazed by a novel of so many characters, Borges probably already realizes that time is a central and problematic issue in the narrative. It is then arguable that what Borges figures out in his story, with the representation of a mysterious garden-novel, may be what used to puzzle him during the reading of *Hong Lou Meng*, as shown by his essay. Therefore, if “The Garden of Forking Paths” does carry a mission for Borges, it would be a challenge to the mystery of *Hong Lou Meng*, on how *Hong Lou Meng* can be written. Albert’s proposal that “time” is a key to the mystery of Ts’ui Pên can also imply Borges’s return to his questionable reading of *Hong Lou Meng*. Borges would try to detect not what specific stories *Hong Lou Meng* tells, but rather how it manages to tell all its stories. If the essay on *Hong Lou Meng* reveals

how Borges reads the masterpiece with some difficulty, the story can be an evidence of how he understands it in a metaphysical way. Time, as a narrative matter in "The Garden of Forking Paths," reflects Borges's vision of fiction; it apparently refers to a Chinese novel, but provides insight into all of literature. Maybe without the problematic reading of *Hong Lou Meng*, Borges would have written this story in a quite different way, and the story is, without question, more valuable in every sense.

*Hong Lou Meng* is not a central image in the story of "The Garden of Forking Paths," but the way in which Borges presents an Oriental masterpiece through different mysteries in the story can be related, from various perspectives, to his previous perception of *Hong Lou Meng's* textual grandeur. Harold Bloom notes that "for Borges, any encyclopedia existent or surmised, is both a labyrinth and a compass" (434). Such is the role for *Hong Lou Meng* in Borges's "The Garden of the Forking Paths," not only because it is an encyclopedic novel, but also because it has a dual function in Borges's narrative: as a "labyrinth," it provides the image for a metaphysical garden, and as a "compass," it provides the reader a lead to the solution(s) of his garden's mysteries.

Although this story by Borges is famous for being a crime fiction or a metaphysical mystery, it is arguable that behind all the interests to create suspense and tension through genre, there remains an effort by Borges to understand *Hong Lou Meng*, to try to fathom how Cao Xueqin sets a narrative through a time system that can afford such a large number of characters—a fact that symbolizes the novel's size and value. The above examination finds that there are multiple parallels between the study of *Hong Lou Meng* and the significant thematic issues of Borges's story, as Borges's aesthetic approach to an imagined ancient Chinese novel is joined by *Hong Lou Meng* researchers on the narrative of meta-garden and meta-fiction. I have no further knowledge of whether Borges has studied Cao Xueqing's novel on later occasions, but the mystery of the garden of forking paths re-illustrates his understanding of *Hong Lou Meng* well beyond the limitation and confusion shown in his essay written four

years before. Borges does not candidly imagine what *Hong Lou Meng* is; he goes to an extreme to imagine a book that exceeds *Hong Lou Meng's* grandeur, and as a result, such a book frees itself to a metaphysical realm, out of the bonds of time or space, and becomes an invisible labyrinth. It may be one of the story's merits to show us how literary representation is more fascinating than plain statement of a truth. This imagination of a book/labyrinth can be seen as an artful use of the author's knowledge of a Chinese masterpiece, while poetically it also provides an ultimate acknowledgement to *Hong Lou Meng's* undoubted achievements.

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