

# THE QUARTERLY REVIEW OF THE MICHIGAN ALUMNUS

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# THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS

BY JORGE LUIS BORGES

Translated from the Spanish by DONALD A. YATES

ON PAGE 252 of Liddell Hart's *History of World War I* you will read that an attack against the Serre-Montauban line by thirteen British divisions (supported by 1,400 artillery pieces), planned for the 24th of June, 1916, had to be postponed until the morning of the 29th. The torrential rains, Captain Liddell Hart comments, caused this delay, an insignificant one, to be sure.

The following statement, dictated, re-read and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun, former professor of English at the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao, throws an unsuspected light over the whole affair.

The first two pages of the document are missing.

\* \* \*

. . . and I hung up the receiver. Immediately afterwards, I recognized the voice that had answered in German. It was that of Captain Richard Madden. Madden's presence in Viktor Runeberg's apartment meant the end of our anxieties and—but this seemed, *or should have seemed*, very secondary to me—also the end of our lives. It meant that Runeberg had been arrested or murdered.\*

We have had from DONALD A. YATES, A.B. '51, A.M. '54, two contributions to the *QUARTERLY REVIEW*, "The Locked Room" in the Spring, 1957, number, and "Fitzgerald and Football" in the Autumn, 1957, issue. Mr. Yates, formerly a teaching fellow in Romance Languages, is now Instructor in Spanish at Michigan State University. He has the permission of JORGE LUIS BORGES to translate the latter's writings. Señor Borges, one of Argentina's leading authors, occupies in that country a position similar to that of our Librarian of Congress.

Before the sun set on that day, I would encounter the same fate. Madden was implacable. Or rather, he was obliged to be so. An Irishman at the service of England, a man accused of professional laxity and perhaps of treason, how could he fail to seize and take advantage of such a miraculous opportunity: the discovery, capture, maybe even the death of two agents of the German Reich?

I went up to my room; absurdly I locked the door and threw myself on my back on the narrow iron cot. Through the window I saw the familiar roofs and the cloud-shaded six o'clock sun. It seemed incredible to me that that day without premonitions or symbols should be the one of my inexorable death. In spite of my dead father, in spite of having been a child in a symmetrical garden of Hai Feng, was I—now—going to die?

Then I reflected that everything happens to a man precisely, precisely *now*. Centuries and centuries and only in the present do things happen; countless men in the air, on the face of the earth and the sea, and all that really is happening is happening to me. . . .

THE ALMOST intolerable recollection of Madden's horselike face banished these wanderings. In the midst of my

\* An hypothesis both hateful and careless. The Prussian spy Hans Rabner, alias Viktor Runeberg, attacked with drawn automatic the bearer of the warrant for his arrest, Captain Richard Madden. The latter, in self-defense, inflicted the wounds which brought about Runeberg's death. Editor's note.

hatred and terror (it means nothing to me now to speak of terror, now that I have mocked Richard Madden, now that the noose yearns for my throat) it occurred to me that that tumultuous and doubtless happy warrior did not suspect that I possessed the Secret. The name of the exact location of the new British artillery installation on the English Channel. A bird streaked across the grey sky and blindly I translated it into an airplane and that airplane into many (against the French sky) annihilating the artillery station with vertical shells. If only my mouth, before a bullet silenced it, could cry out that secret name so it could be heard in Germany. . . . My human voice was very weak. How might I make it carry to the ear of the Chief? To the ear of that sick, hateful man who knew nothing of Runeberg and me save that we were in Staffordshire and that he was waiting for our report in his arid office in Berlin, endlessly examining newspapers. . . .

I said out loud: *I must flee*. I sat up noiselessly, in a useless perfection of silence, as if Madden were already lying in wait for me. Something—perhaps the mere vain show of proving my position was helpless—made me look through my pockets. I found what I knew I would find. The American watch, the nickel chain and the square coin, the key ring with the incriminating key to Runeberg's apartment, the notebook, a letter which I resolved to destroy immediately (and which I did not destroy), a cigar, two shillings and a few pence, the red and blue pencil, the handkerchief, the revolver with one bullet. Absurdly, I took it in my hand and weighed it in order to inspire courage within me. Vaguely I thought that a pistol report can be heard at a great distance. In ten minutes my plan was perfected. The telephone book listed the only name capable of transmitting the message; the man I chose lived in a suburb of Fenton, less than a half hour's train ride away.

I am a cowardly man. I say it now, now that I have carried to its end a plan whose perilous nature no one can deny. I know its execution was terrible. I didn't do it for Germany, no. I care nothing for a barbarous country which imposed upon me the humility of being a spy. Besides, I know of a man from England—a modest man—who for me is nothing less than Goethe. I talked with him for scarcely an hour, but during that hour he was Goethe. . . . I did it all because I sensed that the Chief felt little respect for those of my race—for the innumerable ancestors who merge within me. I wanted to prove to him that a yellow man could save his armies. And, equally as important, I had to flee from Captain Madden. His hands and his voice could assail my door at any moment. I dressed silently, bade farewell to myself in the mirror, went downstairs, scrutinized the peaceful street and went out.

THE STATION was not far from my home, but I judged it wise to take a cab. I argued that in this way I ran less risk of being recognized. The fact is that in the deserted street I felt myself visible and vulnerable, infinitely so. I remember that I told the cab driver to stop a short distance before the main entrance. I got out with voluntary, almost painful slowness; I was going to the village of Ashgrove but I bought a ticket for a more distant station. The train left within a very few minutes, at eight-fifty. I hurried; the next one would leave at nine-thirty. There was hardly a soul on the platform. I went through the coaches; I remember a few workers, a woman dressed in mourning, a young boy who was reading with fervor the *Annals* of Tacitus, a wounded and happy soldier. The coaches jerked forward at last. A man whom I recognized ran in vain to the end of the platform. It was Captain Richard Madden. Shattered, trembling, I shrank into the far corner of the seat, away from the dreaded window.

From this broken state I passed into an almost abject felicity. I told myself that the duel had already begun and that I had won the first encounter by frustrating, even if for forty minutes, even if by a stroke of fate, the attack of my adversary. I argued that this slightest of victories foreshadowed a total victory. I argued that it was not slight, since without the precious edge the train schedule afforded me, I would be imprisoned or dead. I argued (no less sophisticatedly) that my cowardly felicity proved that I was a man capable of carrying out the adventure successfully. From this weakness I took strength that did not abandon me. I foresee that man will resign himself each day to more atrocious undertakings; soon there will be no one but warriors and brigands. I give you this counsel: *The author of an atrocious undertaking ought to imagine that he has already accomplished it, ought to impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past.* Thus I thought as my eyes of a man already dead registered the fluidity of that day, which was perhaps the last, and the diffusion of the night.

The train ran gently along, past ash trees. It stopped, almost in the middle of the fields. No one announced the name of the station. "Ashgrove?" I asked a few lads on the platform. "Ashgrove," they replied. I got off.

A lamp illuminated the platform, but the faces of the boys were in shadow. One questioned me, "Are you going to Dr. Stephen Albert's house?" Without waiting for my answer, another said, "The house is a long way from here, but you won't get lost if you take this road to the left and at every crossroads turn again to your left." I tossed them a coin (my last), descended a few stone steps and started down the solitary road. It went downhill, slowly. It was of unpaved earth; overhead the branches were tangled; the low, full moon seemed to accompany me.

For an instant, I thought that Richard Madden in some way had penetrated my

desperate plan. Very quickly, I understood that that was impossible. The instructions to turn always to the left reminded me that such was the common procedure for discovering the central point of certain mazes. I have some understanding of labyrinths; not in vain am I the great grandson of that Ts'ui Pên who was governor of Yunnan and who renounced worldly power in order to write a novel that might be even more popular than the *Hung Lu Meng* and to construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost. Thirteen years he dedicated to these heterogeneous tasks, but the hand of a stranger murdered him and his novel was incoherent and no one found the labyrinth.

Beneath English trees I meditated on that lost maze: I imagined it inviolate and perfect at the secret crest of a mountain; I imagined it erased by rice fields or beneath the water; I imagined it infinite, no longer composed of octagonal kiosks and returning paths, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms. . . . I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, in one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way the stars.

Absorbed in these illusory images, I forgot my destiny of one pursued. I felt myself to be, for an unknown period of time, the abstract perceiver of the world. The vague, living countryside, the moon, the remains of the day worked on me; as well as the slope of the road which eliminated any possibility of weariness. The lateness of the day was intimate, infinite.

THE ROAD descended and forked among the obscure meadows. A sharp, almost syllabic music approached and receded in the shifting of the wind, wrapped in leaves and distance. I thought that a man can be an enemy of other men, of other moments of other men, but not of a country: not of fireflies, words, gardens, streams of water, sunsets.

Thus I arrived before a tall, rusty door.

Between the iron bars of the window I made out a poplar grove and a pavilion. I understood immediately two things, the first trivial, the second almost unbelievable: the music came from the pavilion, and the music was Chinese. For precisely that reason I had openly accepted it without paying it any heed. I do not remember whether there was a bell or whether I knocked with my hands. The sparkling of the music continued.

But from the rear of the inner house a lantern approached: a lantern that rose like a heavenly body and now and then shone like a ring on the fingerlike trunks, a paper lantern that had the form of a drum and the color of the moon. A tall man bore it. I didn't see his face for the light blinded me. He opened the door and said slowly, in my own language: "I see that the pious Hsi P'êng is undertaking to correct my solitude. You no doubt wish to see the garden?"

I recognized the name of one of our consuls and I replied, disconcerted, "The garden?"

Something stirred in my memory and I uttered with incomprehensible certainty, "The garden of my ancestor Ts'ui Pên."

"Your ancestor? Your illustrious ancestor? Come in."

The damp path zigzagged like those of my childhood. We came to a library of Eastern and Western books. I recognized bound in yellow silk several volumes of the Lost Encyclopedia, edited by the Third Emperor of the Luminous Dynasty but never printed. The disc on the gramophone revolved next to a bronze phoenix. I also recall a rosy-hued jar and another, many centuries older, of that color of blue which our craftsmen copied from the potters of Persia. . . .

STEPHEN ALBERT observed me with a smile. He was, as I have said, very tall, sharp-featured, with grey eyes and a grey beard. There was something of a priest

about him and something of a seaman. He told me that he had been a missionary in Tientsin "before aspiring to become a Sinologist."

We sat down; I on a long, low divan, he with his back to the window and a tall circular clock. I calculated that my pursuer, Richard Madden, would not arrive within that hour. My irrevocable determination could wait.

"An astounding fate, that of Ts'ui Pên," Stephen Albert said. "He was governor of his native province, learned in astronomy, in astrology and in the tireless interpretation of the canonical books, chess player, famous poet and calligrapher: he abandoned everything in order to compose a book and a maze. He renounced the pleasures of both tyranny and justice, of his populous couch, of his banquets and even of erudition—all to close himself up for thirteen years in the Pavilion of the Limpid Solitude. When he died, his heirs found nothing save chaotic manuscripts. His family, as you may be aware, wished to condemn them to the fire; but his executor—a Taoist or Buddhist monk—insisted on their publication."

"We descendants of Ts'ui Pên," I replied, "continue to curse that monk. Their publication was a senseless act. The book is a shapeless heap of contradictory drafts. I examined it once: in the third chapter the hero dies, in the fourth he is alive. As for the other undertaking of Ts'ui Pên, his labyrinth. . . ."

"Here is the labyrinth," he said, indicating a tall lacquered desk.

"A marble maze!" I exclaimed. "A minimum maze."

"A maze of symbols," he corrected. "An invisible labyrinth of time. To me, a barbarian Englishman, has been entrusted the revelation of this diaphanous mystery. After more than a hundred years, the details are irretrievable; but it is not hard to guess what happened. Ts'ui Pên must have said once: *I will withdraw to write a book.*

And another time: *I will withdraw to construct a labyrinth.* Everyone expected two works; to no one did it occur that the book and the maze were one and the same thing. The Pavilion of the Limpid Solitude stood in the center of a garden that was perhaps intricate; that circumstance could have suggested to the heirs a physical maze. Ts'ui Pên died; no one in the vast territories that were his came upon the labyrinth. The confusion of the novel suggested to me that it was the maze. Two circumstances gave me the correct solution to the problem. One: the curious legend that Ts'ui Pên had planned to create a labyrinth which would be strictly infinite. The other: a fragment of a letter I discovered."

ALBERT rose. He turned his back on me for a moment and opened a drawer of the black and gold desk. He faced me and in his hands he held a sheet of paper that had once been crimson, but was now pink and fragile and cross-sectioned. The fame of Ts'ui Pên as an expert penman had been justly won. I read, uncomprehendingly and with fervor, these words written with a minute brush by my own blood: *I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths.* Wordlessly, I returned the sheet. Albert continued:

"Before unearthing this letter, I had questioned myself about the ways in which a book can be infinite. I could think of nothing other than a cyclic volume, a circular one. A book whose last page was identical to the first, with the possibility of continuing indefinitely. I remembered too that night which is at the middle of the Thousand and One Nights when Scheherezade (through a magical oversight of the copyist) begins to relate word for word the story of the Thousand and One Nights, establishing the risk of coming once again to the night when she must repeat it, and thus on to infinity. I imagined as well a Platonic work, a hereditary project trans-

mitted from father to son, in which each new individual adds a chapter or corrects with pious care the pages of his elders.

"These conjectures diverted me; but none seemed to correspond, not even remotely, to the contradictory chapters of Ts'ui Pên. In the midst of this perplexity, I received from Oxford the manuscript you have examined. I lingered, naturally, on the sentence: *I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths.* Almost instantly, I understood: 'the garden of forking paths' was the chaotic novel; the phrase, 'the various futures (not to all)' suggested to me the forking of time, not of space. A broad rereading of the work confirmed the theory. In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork. Here, then, is the explanation of the novel's contradictions.

"Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger calls at his door; Fang resolves to kill him. Naturally, there are several possible outcomes: Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they both can escape, they both can die, and so forth. 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. If you will resign yourself to my incurable pronunciation, we shall read a few pages."

HIS FACE, within the vivid circle of the lamplight, was unquestionably that of an old man, but with something unbreakable about it, even immortal. He read with slow precision two versions of the same epic chapter. In the first, an army marches to a battle across a lonely mountain; the horror of the rocks and shadows makes the

men undervalue their lives and they gain an easy victory. In the second, the same army traverses a palace where a great festival is taking place; the resplendent battle seems to them a continuation of the celebration and they win the victory. I listened with proper veneration to these ancient narratives, perhaps less admirable in themselves than the fact that they had been created by my blood and were being restored to me by a man of a remote empire, in the course of a desperate adventure, on a Western isle. I remember the last words, repeated in each version like a secret commandment: *Thus fought the heroes, tranquil their admirable hearts, violent their swords, resigned to kill and to die.*

From that moment on, I felt about me and within my dark body an invisible, intangible swarming. Not the swarming of the divergent, parallel and finally coalescent armies, but a more inaccessible, more intimate agitation that they in some manner prefigured. Stephen Albert continued:

"I don't believe that your illustrious ancestor played idly with these variations. I don't consider it credible that he would sacrifice thirteen years to the infinite execution of a rhetorical experiment. In your country, the novel is a subsidiary form of literature; in Ts'ui Pên's time it was a despicable form. Ts'ui Pên was a brilliant novelist. The testimony of his contemporaries proclaims—and his life fully confirms—his metaphysical and mystical interests. Philosophic controversy usurps a good part of the novel. I know that of all problems, none disturbed him so greatly nor worked upon him so much as the abysmal problem of time. Now then, the latter is the only problem that does not figure in the pages of the *Garden*. He doesn't even use the word that signifies *time*. How do you explain this voluntary omission?"

I proposed several solutions; all unsatisfactory. We discussed them; finally, Stephen Albert said to me:

"In a riddle whose answer is chess, what is the only prohibited word?"

I thought a moment and replied, "The word *chess*."

"Precisely," said Albert. "*The Garden of Forking Paths* is an enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time; this recondite cause prohibits its mention. To omit a word always, to resort to inept metaphors and obvious paraphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic way of stressing it. It is the tortuous method preferred, in each of the meanderings of his indefatigable novel, by the oblique Ts'ui Pên. I have compared hundreds of manuscripts, I have corrected the errors that the negligence of the copyists has introduced, I have guessed the plan of this chaos, I have re-established, I believe, the primordial organization, I have translated the entire work: it is clear to me that not once does he employ the word 'time.' The explanation is obvious: *The Garden of Forking Paths* is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as Ts'ui Pên conceived it.

"In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces *all* possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us. In the present one, which a favorable fate has granted me, you have arrived at my house; in another, while crossing the garden, you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost."

"In every one," I pronounced, not without a tremble to my voice, "I am grateful to you and revere you for your re-creation of the garden of Ts'ui Pên."

"Not in all," he murmured with a smile. "Time forks perpetually toward innumer-

able futures. In one of them I am your enemy.”

ONCE AGAIN I felt the swarming sensation of which I spoke. It seemed to me that the humid garden that surrounded the house was infinitely saturated with invisible persons. Those persons were Albert and I, secret, busy and multiform in other dimensions of time. I raised my eyes and the tenuous nightmare dissolved. In the yellow and black garden there was only one man; but this man was approaching along the path and he was Captain Richard Madden.

“The future already exists,” I replied, “but I am your friend. Could I see the letter again?”

Albert rose. Standing tall, he opened the drawer of the tall desk; for a moment his back was to me. I had readied the revolver.

I fired with extreme caution; Albert fell uncomplainingly, immediately. I swear his death was instantaneous; a lightning stroke.

The rest is unreal, insignificant. Madden broke in, arrested me. I have been condemned to the gallows. I have won out abominably; I have communicated to Berlin the secret name of the city they must attack. They bombed it yesterday; I read it in the same papers that offered to England the mystery of the learned Sinologist Stephen Albert who was murdered by a stranger, one Yu Tsun. The Chief had deciphered this mystery. He knew my problem was to indicate (through the uproar of the war) the city called Albert, and that I found no other means to do so than to kill a man of that name.

He does not know (no one can know) my infinite repentance and weariness.