

A Labyrinth of Books: Jorge Luis Borges on the implications of infinity

The inclusion of the term ‘Borgesian’ in the jargon of contemporary literary analysis is perhaps the greatest indicator of the brilliance of the author who first developed the genre. Jorge Luis Borges, one of Argentina’s most celebrated writers, was well known for his works revolving around themes of labyrinths, mirrors, reality, identity, the nature of time, and infinity (dictionary.com). A number of these themes figure prominently in two of his stories: “The Library of Babel” and “The Garden of Forking Paths.” In these works, Borges explores the idea of infinity, using each text to examine different facets of the concept. In the former story, he ruminates on the implications of infinite space and knowledge, while the latter tale considers the possibilities of infinite time. On a secondary level, he uses both realities to craft a cynical historical commentary, mocking humanity’s attempts to construct meaning and significance from a series of truly random events.

In “The Library of Babel,” Borges constructs a nightmarish reality, in which the entire universe consists of a single vast network of hexagonal cells containing uncountable billions of books. He states:

The library is ‘total’ – perfect, complete, and whole...its bookshelves contain all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols (a number which, though unimaginably vast, is not infinite) – that is, all that is able to be expressed, in every language.” (Borges 115)

In spite of having noted that the Library is not technically endless, Borges’ creation is infinite as far as man is capable of comprehending, a fact which he illustrates by declaring “The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any hexagon and whose circumference is unattainable” (113). No

matter where a man was born, to him it would appear that he was at the center of all things, because the human lifespan could never be long enough to travel to any semblance of an ‘edge’ of the universe; thus, for all intents and purposes, the Library is indeed infinite. Man appears tiny and insignificant by comparison, a fact that Borges highlights by revealing mankind’s incumbent extinction as a result of suicide, epidemics, and internal warfare. The vastness of the Library is simply too much for humanity to handle, given its own obvious transience in a world that couldn’t care less about its existence. By capitalizing the word ‘Library’ every time it appears, Borges further apotheosizes his world into something beyond the realm of human understanding. Thus, Borges posits the possibility of infinite space as any place whose boundaries extend beyond conceivable reality.

Beyond the superficial discussion of the endlessly vast size of the Library, Borges delves into the idea of infinite knowledge. The true significance of the Library is not the fact that it is enormous beyond comprehension, but rather the fact that the library contains everything that is “able to be expressed, in every language” (115). The words on this page must, somewhere in the library, be copied verbatim, as must the words of Shakespeare and the Bible, grocery lists and advertisements, encyclopedias and children’s stories. However, in addition to a record of all comprehensible knowledge, the library also contains every *other* possible combination of letters. As Borges, states, “for every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency” (114). To complicate matters, not only are the words on this page copied verbatim somewhere, but they also exist in millions of other books with only one different letter, word or phrase. This constitutes the ultimate informational overload, leaving humanity struggling to find meaning in a sea of random text. Borges’ depiction of thousands of people rushing about the library, searching for their personal

vindications, or ascribing meaning to strings of gibberish, is essentially a criticism of man's perpetual attempts to force meaning on a random world. For example, the scholars attempting to analyze the text containing only the letters M V C repeated from start to finish are clearly foolish to do so, and yet they persist in trying to make sense of their world. Ultimately, Borges implies that man's concept of significance is merely a construct, and that even in the face of complete knowledge, it is impossible to ever truly know anything.

In "The Garden of Forking Paths," Borges develops an alternate conceptualization of infinity, focusing not on the possibilities of endless space or knowledge, but rather endless time. This is not endless time in the linear sense, but rather the infinite possibilities that arise as a result of every instant, present moment. He describes his construction thusly:

The Garden of Forking Paths is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as conceived by Ts'ui Pen. Unlike Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform and absolute time; he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains *all* possibilities. In most of those times, we do not exist; in some, you exist, but I do not; in others, I do and you do not; in others still, we both do. (127)

Essentially, every event that happens everywhere in the world has the potential to resolve in any number of possible outcomes, and it is these possibilities that fascinate Borges. At first glance, the endless variations of time in the garden do not seem quite so frightening as the vast, empty spaces of the Library; however, the protagonist of "The Garden of Forking Paths" eventually comes to comprehend the macabre possibility that "the dew-drenched garden that surrounded the house was saturated, infinitely, with invisible persons...secret, busily at work, multiform – in other dimensions of time" (127). This realization decreases the protagonist's sense of personal significance, as he realizes that the course of his own life is not so miraculous, but rather one of countless possible lives that he might have led. This feeling of meaningless coincidence is

further compounded towards the end of the story, when it is revealed that he went to learn about his great-grandfather's garden of forking paths entirely by accident. The unenlightened media discusses the 'enigma' of the murder, but only the protagonist knows that his choice to visit Albert was significant not because of his connection to the subject of Albert's work, but because Albert's name, repeated a thousand times in newspaper headlines, could be used to communicate a message to the German military. Such a coincidence seems impossible, but Borges argues that if this coincidence had not occurred, another equally unlikely coincidence would have, since the protagonist's future could have played out an infinite number of ways. This realization renders the personal events of the protagonist's life meaningless.

The infinite possibilities of time in "The Garden of Forking Paths" are directly parallel to the infinite combinations of letters in "The Library of Babel." It is a typically human trait to feel that the exact combination of events comprising one's life is too impossibly rare to occur by accident. This comforting idea logically leads to the conclusion that one's life must be somehow significant, just as the particular combination of letters necessary to produce *Hamlet* could never have occurred by accident. Borges reveals that in a world of infinite possibilities, no single outcome is any more or less unique than another, just as the combinations of letters to which we ascribe significance are not actually special. He highlights this in "The Library of Babel" in several ways. For instance, he mentions:

Some five hundred years ago, the chief of one of the upper hexagons came across a book as jumbled as all the others, but containing almost two pages of homogeneous lines. He showed his find to a traveling decipherer, who told him that the lines were written in Portuguese; others said it was Yiddish. Within the century experts had determined what the language actually was: a Samoyed-Lithuanian dialect of Guaraní, with inflections from classical Arabic. (114)

Clearly, Borges is poking fun at authority figures attempting to sound important and knowledgeable by ascribing meaning to gobbledygook. The experts take a century to ruminate

on the possible interpretations of words that are, in fact, nonsensical, and their ultimate conclusion is quite ridiculous, as Portuguese, Yiddish, Samoyed, Lithuanian, Guaraní, and Arabic are all languages with such wide-ranging origins that they could never actually have joined together to create a meaningful text. Similarly, Borges states later that books that appear nonsensical in our native languages are not necessarily gibberish in all of the infinite languages encompassed by the library. He states:

There is no combination of characters one can make – *dhcmrictdj*, for example – that the divine Library has not foreseen and that in one or more of its secret tongues does not hide a terrible significance. There is no syllable one can speak that is not filled with tenderness and terror, that is not, in one of those languages, the mighty name of a god... a number *n* of the possible languages employ the same vocabulary... You who read me – are you certain you understand my language? (117-118)

Logically, we may conclude that if this paper were written in Spanish, it would not be meaningless, but merely incomprehensible to English-speakers; Borges takes this further by declaring that in a world of infinite languages, all combinations of words must be equally meaningful, another way of saying that they are all equally meaningless. This revelation shows that it is not even possible to separate nonsense from sense, thus rendering it even more pointless to try to ascribe significance to anything in the library. Furthermore, it reduces the significance of words that we personally have the capacity to understand, because they are no more or less special than the words of any other language. Borges takes every possible combination of written words and renders them all equally unremarkable, just as he does with every moment in human history in “The Garden of Forking Paths.”

In addition to his general criticisms of humanity’s desire for order and meaning, Borges creates an interesting dichotomy of historical criticism and lack thereof in these two stories. “The Garden of Forking Paths” is set in a particular time and place in human history, specifically, Staffordshire, England, during World War I. However, the storyline never particularly seems to

comment on the events of the period, instead focusing on overarching themes of human desire for meaning and order. Borges could have set the narrative at any point in history, anywhere on the planet; war-torn England is a random setting, ultimately meaningless to the plot. This contrasts directly with the setting of “The Library of Babel,” which, while abstract and alien, indirectly references actual people and events in history. For instance, the ‘librarians,’ authorities charged with deriving order and meaning from the books in the library, symbolize religious and philosophical leaders. Borges describes various fanatical sects which search the books for “disgraceful or dishonorable words,” or attempt to “eliminate all worthless books” in a “hygenic, ascetic rage” spurred on by their “holy zeal” (116). His word choice is highly evocative of religious inquisitors, and could be applied to any number of biblioclastic events throughout history, ranging from the Spanish Inquisition to Qin dynasty book-burnings. Borges’ use of such clearly religious imagery is not accidental, but rather a condemnation of the many attacks on knowledge committed throughout history in the name of God. Borges’ choice to contrast the concretely historical but meaningless setting of “The Garden of Forking Paths” with the abstract but highly allegorical events in “The Library of Babel,” whose very title suggests religious significance, serves to further upend traditional assumptions of significance versus frivolity in academic society. The study of history is typically considered meaningful and important, while fantasy is more likely to be dismissed as amusing but pointless; Borges reverses these stereotypes by writing historical criticism into a purely fantastical setting, while writing a historical narrative that says nothing at all about the period in which it is set. This fact alone reminds the reader that meaning, even in the form of the literary genre, is a construct, as subjective as the ineffective attempts of his characters to derive order out of chaos.

Overall, Borges concludes that in worlds of infinite time, space, knowledge, and possibilities, it is impossible to ever derive true meaning from anything, and it is this attempt that ultimately drives men mad. Then men in the Library searching fruitlessly for their vindications meet no more success than the scholars who spend decades attempting to assign meaning to Ts'ui Pen's nonsensical novel. When a single scholar is able to interpret Ts'ui Pen's labyrinth successfully, he is met not by acclaim and awards, but by his own random death. We, like Borges' characters, are ultimately unable to tame the infinite, as it is simply beyond the realm of human understanding. We console ourselves by pretending to have found meaning in our lives, but true significance is unattainable. Perhaps Borges would be distressed by the irony of writing a paper about the meaning of stories in which he declares that no event in the history of the world, nor any text ever written, is in fact meaningful; still, I hope he would be amused.

Works Cited

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