The Garden of Forking Paths*

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For Victoria Ocampo

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On page 22 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 July, 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, reread 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. 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 laxity and perhaps of treason, how could he fail to seize and be thankful for 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 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 of 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 hatred and terror (it means nothing to me now to speak of terror, now that I have mocked Richard Madden, now that my throat yearns for the noose) 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 park on the

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1. An hypothesis both hateful and odd. The Prussian spy Hans Rabener, 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 wound which brought about Runeberg’s death. (Editor’s note.)

2. Basil Henry Liddell Hart served in the British Army during World War I, fighting on the Western Front. He rose to the rank of Captain, and later in life became a military historian. Serre and Montauban are two towns in northeast France, north of the Somme River. The Battle of the Somme, fought within and across labyrinthine networks of trenches from July 1–Nov. 18, 1916, was one of the bloodiest and most futile episodes in modern warfare, resulting in a net shift of the western front by about 6 miles at a cost of 1.5 million lives. The map below describes the British assault on German troops planned for July 1, 1916, one of the most intense days of fighting. The solid curves denote the initial front lines for the British (red) and German (blue) troops. Note that the River Ancre flows through the town of Albert, and eventually into the Somme, which in turn flows through the city of Amiens, coincidentally the site of one of the first church labyrinths. The reference to the month of July in line 4 is almost certainly an intentional departure from reality. Liddel Hart actually writes, “The bombardment began on June 24; the attack was intended for June 29, but was later postponed until July 1, owing to a momentary break in the weather. This postponement, made at French request, involved not only the spreading out of ammunition over a longer period, and a consequent loss of intensity, but a greater strain on the assaulting troops, who after being keyed up for the effort, had to remain another forty-eight hours in cramped trenches under the exhausting noise of their own gunfire and the enemies retaliation—conditions made worse by torrential rain which flooded the trenches.” [8]
The telephone was invented in the United States by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876. By 1914, two years prior to the beginning of this story, there were approximately 15 million telephones operating in the world, 64% of these were in the United States. In London at this time, 258,895 telephones were shared by 7.3 million inhabitants. In the rural county of Staffordshire (where the action takes place) there was about one telephone per fifty inhabitants. Telephones of this era did not have a dial or buttons, but a crank that one would turn in order to connect with a telephone party. [7]

During Easter Week, April 24–30, 1916, Patrick Pearse and James Connolly led an unsuccessful rebellion in Dublin that protested English sovereignty over Ireland, and declared Irish independence. The Easter Rising of 1916 turned quickly violent as the British army fought with field artillery and machine guns. After hundreds of innocent civilians, rebels, and British troops had been killed, Pearse ordered an unconditional surrender to halt the violence. Over 3000 were eventually arrested. In May of that year Pearse, Connolly, and other rebels were executed for treason. Incidentally, a German ship loaded with arms for the Irish rebels was sunk by the British navy off the coast of Ireland on April 21, 1916 (Colby, 1917 [5, p. 290]). British rule over Ireland remained intact until the Irish War of Independence (1919–21) led to the independent Republic of Ireland in 1921. The largely protestant state of Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom. See the National Library of Ireland’s online exhibit about the 1916 Rising at http://www.nli.ie/1916/

Staffordshire is a county in the western English midlands, highlighted in the map on the following page.

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 abjection of being a spy. Besides, I know of a man from England—a modest man—who could save his armies. Besides, I know of a man from England—a modest man—who for me is no less great than Goethe. I talked with him for scarcely an hour, but during that hour he was Goethe . . . I did it because I sensed that the Chief somehow feared people of my race—for the innumer-able ancestors who merge within me. I wanted to prove to him that a yellow man could save his armies. Besides, I had to flee from Captain Madden. His hands and his voice could call at 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 farmers, 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 (no less fallaciously) 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 them 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 proceeded as my eyes of a man already dead registered the elapsing of that day, which was perhaps the last, and the diffusion of the night. The train ran gently along, amid 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 enlightened 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 elemental 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 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 labyrinths. I have some understanding of labyrinths: not for nothing 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 populous 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, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve 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, an 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 afternoon was intimate, infinite. The road descended and forked among the now confused meadows. A high-pitched, almost syllabic music.

The most populated city in Staffordshire is Stoke-on-Trent. On April 1, 1910, the six towns Stoke-on-Trent, Hanley, Burslem, Tunstall, Longton, and Fenton (referred to in line 61) were incorporated into the borough of Stoke-on-Trent. The town of Ashgrove (mentioned in line 81) appears to be fictitious. (There is a village called Ashley in western Staffordshire, and another called Ashwood near the southern tip of Staffordshire, far removed from Fenton.)

*This would have been a pocket watch, as wrist watches were not widely worn by men until after the war. The development of the American watch industry was stimulated by the development of the transcontinental railroad. Track is expensive, so nearly all railroad lines, in the nineteenth century as well as today, use a single pair of rails that is shared by trains moving in both directions. In order to avoid collisions, one train must wait in a siding, until the higher priority train passes. Both the telegraph and pocket watch were important tools for coordinating these operations. The watch here also a symbol for linear time, which plays an important role later in the story. Presumably this is a double-ended pencil, with red lead at one end, and blue lead at the other, usually ideally suited for editing documents or grading papers. A crown was a coin with one-fourth the value of a British pound, also equal in value to five shillings. One shilling was also equal to 12 pence. In 1916 one pound was equivalent to US $4.87 [5], which would be equivalent about 100 US dollars today. Thus, Dr. Tsun’s coins would have had the equivalent spending power of about 35 US dollars today.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) was a monumental German author and philosopher whose novels, plays and poems heralded the Romantic Era. His most famous works are the two part play Faust and the novel, The Sorrows of Young Werther. Ironically, Tsun here praises the culture (or Kulture) of “a barbarous country.”

Tacitus (56–117 CE) was a Roman historian and senator. The Annals describes the lives of the four Roman emperors that followed Caesar Augustus, namely Tiberius (42 BCE–37 CE), Caligula (12–41 CE), Claudius (10 BCE–54 CE) and Nero (37–68 CE). Unfortunately, Tacitus died before his work was completed, and only a portion of the chapters that he finished survive to the present day.

This sentence provides both a temporal and seasonal clue. At this northern latitude the sun would set sometime between 9:00 and 9:30 PM during the month of July.
Yunnan is the southernmost landlocked province of China, bordering with Myanmar (formerly Burma), Laos, and Vietnam. The capital city of Yunnan province is Kunming.

The Hung Lu Meng or Dream of the Red Chamber (also known as The Story of the Stone) is a 120 chapter Chinese novel written by Cao Xueqin in the late 18th century. It is believed that the author died after writing only 80 chapters, and that the remaining chapters were written by others. It is a very complex work of literature, with over 400 significant characters. English translations of this work are available on the internet and in print.

Linguists might classify the phrase “labyrinth of labyrinths” as an example of the genitive of gradation, as in the biblical “King of Kings,” from Daniel 2:37 (originally in Hebrew, “Melech ha-M’lachim”). I Timothy 4:14, and Revelations 17:14 and 19:16 (Curme, [6, p. 88]). Here the repetition of words conveys a sense of preeminence or superiority. A similar rhetorical device occurs earlier in line 30. But “centuries of centuries” might be more readily interpreted as a time span of hundreds of hundreds of years, constituting what is known as the partitive genitive, as in the “land of milk and honey.” Both usages are marvelously recursive, like “wheels within wheels,” and like the Thousand of One Nights, alluded to on line 230, which is a tale of a tale of a tale . . .

A nonexistent literary work invented by the author.

The bronze phoenix is likely symbolic of cyclical time. The following is quoted from Bulfinch’s Mythology [4, p. 386]:

Ovid tells the story of the Phoenix as follows: “Most beings spring from other individuals; but there is a certain kind which reproduces itself. The Assyrians call it the Phoenix. It does not live on fruit or flowers, but on frankincense and odoriferous gums. When it has lived five hundred years, it builds itself a nest in the branches of an oak, or on the top of a palm tree. In this it collects cinnamon, and spikenard, and myrrh, and of these materials builds a pile on which it deposits itself, and dying, breathes out its last breath amidst odors. From the body of the parent bird, a young Phoenix issues forth, destined to live as long a life as its predecessor. When this has grown up and gained sufficient strength, it lifts its nest from the tree (its own cradle and its parent’s sepulchre), and carries it to the city of Heliopolis in Egypt, and deposits it in the temple of the Sun.”

Pink and white Chinese porcelain.

Tientsin is located in northeastern China, close to Beijing. Following the Boxer rebellion in 1900, Beijing was invaded by a diverse alliance of western nations: Austria-Hungary, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States. As part of the Boxer Protocol, signed in 1901, the city of Tientsin was one of several ceded to the invading nations. Tientsin was divided into districts, one for each nation, and became a uniquely international city. Today it is called Tianjin.

According to Murray [9] our modern game of chess, and all of its diverse variations found around the world, can be traced, using 8th century literary references, to a game called chaturanga which was played in India during the 8th century, and likely earlier. From India the game spread eastward into Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan; to the north to Tibet, Central Asia, and Russia; and to west via Persia and Arabia. The game evolved differently along the different migratory routes and deposits it in the temple of the Sun.”

An astounding fate, that of Ts’ui Pên,” Stephen Albert said. “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 all this in order to compose a book and a maze. He denounced 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 senseless. The book is an indeterminate
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 Ts’ui Pên’s labyrinth,” he said, indicating a tall lacquered
desk.

“An ivory labyrinth!” I exclaimed. “A minimum labyrinth.”

“A labyrinth of symbols,” he corrected. “An invisible labyrinth of
time. To me, a barbarous Englishman, has been entrusted the reve-
lution of this diaphanous mystery. After more than a hundred years,
the details are irretrievable; but it is not hard to conjecture what hap-
pened. Ts’ui Pên must have said once: I am withdrawing to write a
book. And another time: I am withdrawing to construct a labyrinth.
Every one imagined 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 labyrinth.
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 of the prob-
lem. 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; he opened
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 tenuous and cross-sectioned. The fame of Ts’ui Pên as a
calligrapher had been justly won. I read, uncomprehendingly and with
fervor, these words written with a minute brush by a man of my 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 with the first, a book which had the possibility of continuing
indefinitely. I remembered too that night which is at the middle of the
Thousand and One Nights\(^a\) when Scheherazade (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, hereditary work, transmitted 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 in time, not in 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
paths. The Chinese version, called xiangqi, was presumably the version
of the game that would have been played by Ts’ui Pên. Xiangqi uses a
modified board, that is divided by a central “river.” Since the pieces are
always placed on the vertices, the board has 9 files (or columns), and
10 ranks (or rows). Like western chess, each player begins the game
with sixteen pieces. However they are distributed differently than in
western chess. Some of the major pieces have a different name for red
and black; however pieces on the same row in the table below share the
same move and ability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Red</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Guard</td>
<td>Councilor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>Elephant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Horse</td>
<td>Horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chariot</td>
<td>Chariot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cannon</td>
<td>Cannon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Foot-soldier</td>
<td>Foot-soldier</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The initial board position is shown below.
“The Thousand and One Nights,” also known as the Arabian Nights, is a compilation of numerous Arabian and Persian folk stories and legends. These include the “Tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “The Tale of Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp,” and “The Seven Voyages of Sinbad.” What delights above all in the “Tale of Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp,” and “The Seven Thousand and One Nights,” now infinite and circular, their two heads and she presents him with a son. The immobile king would forever listen to the trun-
cation of Scheherazade, who distracts him with wondrous tales until a thousand and one nights have revolved over their two heads and she presents him with a son. The need to complete a thousand and one segments drove the work’s copyists to all sorts of digressions. None of them is as disturbing as that of night 602, a bit of magic among the nights. On that strange night, the king hears his own story from the queen’s lips. He hears the beginning of the story, which includes all the others, and also—monstrously—himself. Does the reader have a clear sense of the vast possibility held out by this interpolation, its peculiar danger? Were the queen to persist, the immobile king would forever listen to the truncated story of the thousand and one nights, now infi-

In 1936 Borges also wrote a review entitled “Translators of The Thousand and One Nights,” [3].

In 1936 Borges also wrote a review entitled “Translators of The Thousand and One Nights,” [3].
mous 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 periphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic way of stressing it. That 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 I have re-established—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[^1] 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 innumerable futures. In one of them I am your enemy.”

Once again I felt the swarming sensation of which I have spoken. 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 as strong as a statue . . . 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 the 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 communícated to Berlin the secret name of the city they must attack. They bombed it yesterday; I read it in the same papers[^2] that offered to England the mystery of the learned Sinologist Stephen Albert who was murdered by a stranger;[^3] 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 had found no other means to do so than to kill a man of that name. He does not know (no one can know) my innumerable contrition and weariness.

[^1]: Isaac Newton (1643–1727) was an English mathematician, astronomer, and natural philosopher who developed the method of calculus, as well as formal theories of motion, optics, and gravitation.

[^2]: Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was a German philosopher, whose seminal work *The World as Will and Representation* argues that the universe is shaped by a universal will.

[^3]: Borges was fascinated by the concept of *time*, as is evidenced in his other works including the essays “A History of Eternity” (1934), “Circular Time” (1941), and “A New Refutation of Time” (1947). (All three appear in Borges [3]). In “A History of Eternity” he quotes a passage from an earlier work, *The Language of the Argentines* (1928), which describes an experience he had one evening during a random walk through the streets of Barracas: the serenity of the night, the translucent little wall, the small-town scent of honeysuckle, the fundamental oneness, time is a delusion which the indifference and inseparability of a moment from its apparent yesterday and from its apparent today suffices to disintegrate.

The notion of time described in the “Garden of Forking Path” where each reality branches into alternate versions of simultaneous reality presages the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, introduced by the physicist Hugh Everett in 1957, 16 years after the publication of this story. Under Everett’s theory, with each elementary measurement of a quantum mechanical system, our universe forks into a number of branches, with one branch for every possible measured outcome. This theory forms the basis for the new paradigm of quantum computing.

[^4]: This is potentially a paradox, in that the Chief could not have known that Albert was the target location until after news of the murder of Stephen Albert had been published.

[^5]: Note Alpert’s fate parallels those of Ts’ui Pên (line 128) and the fictitious Fang (line 252). Likewise, Dr. Tsun himself would be killed by a hangman, presumably another stranger.
Study Questions

The following questions are provided to help you make sense of the story. If you are bewildered by this story (some readers are), please post your questions and concerns on piazza.com as an anonymous (ungraded) question or comment. Don’t just say, I don’t get it. But ask instead specific questions that will help you understand the story. You can ask as many questions as you need to. Everyone in the class should try to answer any unresolved clarifying question.

1. Why are the first two pages of the manuscript missing? Were they never written, lost, intentionally destroyed? How does the absence of these pages affect our understanding and appreciation of the rest of the story?

2. How do the author’s references to puzzles and games, like mazes, riddles, and chess, relate to the more serious matters in this story, such as war, free will, life, death, and the nature of the universe?

3. An explicit reference is made to the Thousand and One Nights, a recursively narrated work of literature. In what ways is Borges’s story “The Garden of Forking Paths” recursive? What other recurring patterns are evident.

4. What purpose is gained by giving each major character in the story a different nationality?

5. The story refers to both historical and fictional persons (Captain Liddel Hart, Hans Rabener (alias Viktor Runeberg), Goethe, Newton, Schopenhauer, Captain Richard Madden, Ts’ui Pên), places (the county of Staffordshire, the towns of Ashgrove, Fenton, and Albert, the cities of Berlin and Tsingtao, the river Ancre, the province of Yunnan), literary works (the Annals of Tacitus, the Thousand and One Nights, the Hung Lu Meng, the Lost Encyclopedia, Ts’ui Pên’s Garden of Forking Paths, not to mention the confession letter of Dr. Yu Tsun) and events (the Battle of the Somme, the bombing of Albert, the assassination of Dr. Stephen Albert). Which of these elements are real and which are fictitious? How does the blending of real and fictional persons, places, literary works, and events advance the theme of The Garden of Forking Paths?

6. In lines 297–307 we learn that the word “time” is paradoxically omitted intentionally from Ts’ui Pên’s Garden of Forking Paths. Is anything of equivalent importance missing from Borges’s Garden of Forking Paths, and if so, why?

7. What new questions does the text of the story prompt you to ask?
Bibliography


