



Borges, Deleuze, and the Labyrinth of Multiplicity

Ratul Nandi

Department of English, Siliguri College, West Bengal, India

Email: ratul@siliguricollege.in

Received: 27 Mar 2022; Received in revised form: 22 April 2022; Accepted: 27 April 2022; Available online: 30 April 2022

©2022 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract—Jorge Luis Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" is a deceptively simple story that gradually becomes a meditation on time, possibility, choice, and reality. At its centre is the image of a labyrinth, but Borges's labyrinth is not merely a maze from which a traveller must find an exit. It is a labyrinth of time itself, in which different possibilities branch, coexist, intersect, and diverge. Gilles Deleuze's concepts of difference, repetition, multiplicity, virtuality, and becoming provide a productive vocabulary for understanding Borges's radical treatment of time and narrative. Yet Borges should not be reduced to an illustration of Deleuze. Rather, the two can be brought into a productive encounter in which each illuminates the other. This paper argues that "The Garden of Forking Paths" imagines reality not as a single chronological line but as a multiplicity of divergent possibilities. In this world, choice does not simply eliminate alternatives; it actualizes one line while other possibilities remain part of a larger virtual structure. Borges's labyrinth consequently offers a literary figure for Deleuze's attempt to think difference without reducing it to identity and repetition without reducing it to sameness. The story finally challenges the human desire for a single, coherent account of reality and invites us to imagine existence as an open-ended process of becoming.

Keywords—Borges, Deleuze, multiplicity, difference, repetition, virtuality, becoming, time, labyrinth, choice

Jorge Luis Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" begins like a spy story and gradually opens into a problem in the philosophy of time. Yu Tsun, a Chinese professor working as a German spy during the First World War, knows that Captain Richard Madden is pursuing him. He must communicate important military information before he is captured. He reaches the house of Stephen Albert, a scholar who has studied the work of Yu Tsun's ancestor Ts'ui Pên. Their meeting ends in murder, but the murder is also an act of communication: by killing Albert, Yu Tsun ensures that the name "Albert" will appear in the news and identify the target of the British artillery installation.

The plot, however, is only the surface of the story. The decisive revelation comes through Albert's explanation of Ts'ui Pên's strange project. Ts'ui Pên attempted to construct a labyrinth while also writing a novel. The apparent

contradictions and multiple endings of the novel were not failures of composition. They expressed a different conception of time. Instead of one event following another along a single line, different possibilities branch into different temporal sequences. The garden is therefore not simply a place; it is a model of time.

This transformation of the labyrinth provides a productive point of contact with Gilles Deleuze. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze questions the dominance of identity, unity, linearity, and fixed forms. He seeks to think difference in itself rather than as a deviation from an established identity, and he distinguishes repetition from simple reproduction. Repetition can produce difference and novelty (Deleuze, 1994). These concerns make Deleuze an important interlocutor for Borges, although Borges should not be treated merely as a literary example of Deleuzian

philosophy. Borges makes philosophical problems experiential through narrative, while Deleuze provides concepts through which the strange structure of Borges's fiction can be articulated.

The most important feature of Ts'ui Pên's labyrinth is that it breaks the opposition between one and many. A conventional account of reality assumes that there is one world and that within it many events take place. Borges reverses the emphasis. The world itself becomes multiple. Different possibilities are not merely imagined alternatives added to a single reality; they constitute divergent lines within a larger temporal structure.

This is close to Deleuze's understanding of multiplicity. Multiplicity does not simply mean a large number of separate objects. It names a dynamic field of relations, differences, intensities, and processes. Its elements acquire significance through their relations to one another. Borges's labyrinth works in a similar manner. The different paths are meaningful because each exists in relation to other paths. One possibility becomes intelligible because another possibility could have occurred.

The story therefore changes the meaning of possibility. In ordinary experience, we distinguish sharply between what is real and what is merely possible. If a person chooses one career, for example, the career rejected is generally treated as an unrealized possibility. Borges asks us to imagine something stranger: what if the road not taken continues to exist as another branch? The alternative is not necessarily nothing. It belongs to another line of the labyrinth.

Deleuze's distinction between the virtual and the actual helps to clarify this idea. The virtual is not simply the unreal or imaginary. It is real without being actualized in one particular form. The actual is an expression of a larger field of virtual differences (Deleuze, 1994). Read in this light, Borges's alternative paths can be understood as more than hypothetical futures. They form part of a structure from which different actualizations emerge.

This also changes our understanding of time. We usually imagine time as a line: past, present, and future. Borges exposes the limits of this model. In "The Garden of Forking Paths," the future is not singular. There are futures, and those futures diverge. Deleuze's account of time in *Difference and Repetition* similarly refuses to treat time as a simple succession of isolated presents. His three syntheses of time make the present, past, and future philosophically distinct modes rather than merely three points on a clock (Deleuze, 1994).

Borges turns this difficulty into narrative form. The future is open because it branches, yet the story also seems strangely deterministic because all the branches belong to the same labyrinth. This tension is never fully resolved. From the perspective of a character, one decision must be made and one path becomes actual. From the perspective of the labyrinth as a whole, other paths remain structurally present.

The question of choice becomes particularly important here. Human choice is often understood as an act of negation. To choose A is to reject B. Every decision appears to close possibilities. Borges offers another model. Choosing one path does not necessarily annihilate the other paths; it actualizes one branch while leaving the larger multiplicity intact.

This is closely related to Deleuze's critique of a purely negative conception of difference. If difference is defined only by saying that one thing is not another, difference remains dependent upon identity. Deleuze instead seeks to understand difference as productive. Borges's divergent paths embody this productive dimension. The difference between two choices is not merely that one was selected and the other rejected. Each choice can produce a different world of consequences.

This has an important implication for regret. Human beings frequently imagine the lives they might have lived if they had made different choices. Usually, these alternative lives remain imaginary. Borges transforms this psychological experience into an ontological possibility. The other life may belong to another branch of reality.

The story nevertheless does not turn choice into something meaningless. Yu Tsun's decision to kill Albert remains an actual act of violence. Albert dies, the military information is transmitted, and the war continues. The existence of alternative branches does not erase the consequences of the actualized branch. Multiplicity does not mean that everything is equally insignificant. It can instead make actualization more serious because each actualized event has consequences.

The concept of repetition further deepens the relation between Borges and Deleuze. Borges repeatedly returns to labyrinths, mirrors, doubles, books within books, circular time, authorship, and unstable identities. Yet repetition in Borges rarely means simple sameness. Each return changes the problem.

"Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" provides a clear example. Menard attempts to reproduce passages from Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, but the same words acquire

different meanings when placed in another historical context. The words repeat; the meaning changes. Repetition becomes a source of difference. Borges thus anticipates, in literary form, the Deleuzian insistence that repetition need not reproduce an identical object (Deleuze, 1994).

The same principle operates in “The Garden of Forking Paths.” An event may recur across different temporal branches, but it does not necessarily have the same meaning in each branch. The context changes, and with it the consequences. What appears to be repetition is therefore transformation. Borges’s labyrinth can thus be understood as a machine of productive repetition. Events echo across different paths, but every echo introduces variation. The labyrinth does not merely multiply the same world; it produces different versions of a world.

The instability of identity follows from this structure. Yu Tsun initially appears to be a clearly defined individual: a spy with a particular mission. Yet his identity is constituted by a complicated network of relations. He is a Chinese descendant of Ts’ui Pên, a professor, a German agent, a fugitive, a murderer, and the person through whom Albert’s interpretation of the labyrinth becomes significant.

His identity is therefore not independent of his relations. He becomes intelligible through ancestry, politics, war, scholarship, language, and violence. This is compatible with Deleuze’s attempt to shift philosophical attention from fixed identities toward processes of differentiation and becoming. Borges’s characters repeatedly demonstrate this instability. The scholar becomes a victim; the victim becomes the means through which a military message is transmitted; the ancestor becomes a writer; the writer becomes an architect of time; the novel becomes a labyrinth.

This movement can be described through Deleuze’s concept of becoming. Becoming is not simply change from one fixed state into another. It is a process in which identities are continuously produced and transformed. Borges’s labyrinth is therefore a figure of becoming. It grows through divergence. Each path opens further possibilities, and its significance depends upon continued branching.

The connection between Borges’s labyrinth and Deleuze and Guattari’s later concept of the rhizome is tempting, although the two should not be treated as identical. The rhizome challenges hierarchical and linear models of organization by allowing multiple connections and points of entry. Borges’s labyrinth similarly disrupts the idea of a single privileged route. Its complexity is organized through relations rather than through one centre. Multiplicity is not

the absence of order; it is a different form of order (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Literature in Borges is consequently not merely a representation of philosophical ideas. It becomes a mode of thinking. Borges does not give the reader a philosophical definition of multiplicity; he makes the reader experience it. The reader discovers that an event can have more than one possible relation to the events surrounding it. In this sense, Borges and Deleuze can be read reciprocally. Borges makes multiplicity imaginable; Deleuze makes its philosophical implications more explicit.

The historical setting of the story further complicates this philosophical picture. Yu Tsun’s choices occur within the First World War. His individual agency is inseparable from political and military forces. He does not act in an empty philosophical space. He acts as a spy, as a descendant, and as an individual caught in a violent historical situation. A possibility becomes actual within concrete circumstances.

The subject is consequently neither completely free nor completely determined. Yu Tsun does not stand outside the labyrinth and choose from an unlimited range of options. His choices are shaped by war, time, geography, ancestry, knowledge, and pursuit. Yet he still acts. Agency emerges from within the labyrinth rather than from outside it.

The larger implication of Borges’s story is a challenge to the human desire for a single coherent narrative. We normally reconstruct our lives as stories with causes and consequences. We want to believe that there is one version of what happened and one explanation of who we are. Borges makes that desire unstable. Every life contains unrealized alternatives. Every historical event could have unfolded differently. Every decision carries other possibilities within it.

The labyrinth therefore becomes an image of existence itself. It does not tell us that everything is possible in some vague sense. It tells us something more precise: the actual is produced from a field of possibilities, and what becomes actual does not exhaust the multiplicity from which it emerged.

CONCLUSION

“The Garden of Forking Paths” remains powerful because Borges does not simply tell us that time may be multiple; he makes narrative itself experience multiplicity. The apparently straightforward spy story becomes a labyrinth in which time, identity, choice, and reality cease to possess

stable boundaries. Ts'ui Pên's project transforms the idea of the labyrinth from a spatial maze into a temporal ontology.

Read alongside Deleuze, this structure can be understood through multiplicity, difference, repetition, virtuality, and becoming. Multiplicity explains why Borges's world cannot be reduced to one sequence. Virtuality helps us understand why unrealized alternatives need not be dismissed as simply unreal. Difference allows us to see why divergent paths are productive rather than merely oppositional. Repetition explains how Borges can return to the same motifs while continually producing new meanings. Becoming reveals why identities in the story remain unstable and relational.

The most significant consequence concerns choice. In ordinary thinking, choice is often an act of negation: one possibility is selected and the others are lost. Borges offers a more complex model in which choice actualizes one path without necessarily annihilating the others. The alternative remains part of the larger labyrinth. This does not remove responsibility, because actualization has real consequences. Rather, it places responsibility within multiplicity.

Yu Tsun therefore cannot be understood simply as either a free individual or a helpless product of circumstances. He acts within a network of historical, political, personal, and temporal forces. His agency emerges from within the labyrinth.

Borges's great philosophical achievement is thus to make the labyrinth more than an image of confusion. It becomes an image of reality as an open multiplicity. The world is not necessarily one road on which we move from past to future. It may be a network of paths in which every actual event carries the traces of other possibilities.

Deleuze helps us give this insight a philosophical vocabulary, but Borges gives it a literary life. Their encounter suggests that literature does not merely describe worlds; it can alter our sense of what a world is. The labyrinth does not finally ask us to discover the one correct path. It asks us to recognize that the path itself is being produced through movement, choice, difference, and becoming.

The deepest lesson of the story is not that everything could have happened differently. It is that every actual reality contains more than the single line through which we experience it. We inhabit one path, but the labyrinth is larger than the path. What we call reality may be the particular actualization through which we happen to live, while other possibilities remain active within the larger field.

Borges leaves us without a final centre. Deleuze helps us understand why that absence is not a failure. If reality is multiplicity, there may be no single point at which all paths finally converge. There are only paths, divergences, encounters, repetitions, differences, and new possibilities. The labyrinth is not a problem waiting to be solved. It is a way of imagining existence itself.

REFERENCES

- [1] Borges, J. L. (1964). *Labyrinths: Selected stories and other writings*. New Directions.
- [2] Boundas, C. V. (Ed.). (1993). *The Deleuze reader*. Columbia University Press.
- [3] Colebrook, C. (2002). *Gilles Deleuze*. Routledge.
- [4] Deleuze, G. (1988). *Bergsonism* (H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam, Trans.). Zone Books.
- [5] Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and repetition* (P. Patton, Trans.). Columbia University Press.
- [6] Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.