

# Analysis on the Space-Time Vision of “The Garden of Forking Paths” and “The Aleph”—From the Function of the Metaphor of Labyrinth and Mirror

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**Abstract**—In daily life, people tend to recognize and think about intangible and difficult-to-define concepts with reference to known, tangible, and concrete concepts, creating a way to understand different concepts in relation to each other. In Borges' s short story “The Garden of Forking Paths” a labyrinthine manuscript of a novel constantly avoids the concept of time, while at the same time illustrating the infinite possibilities of time. The time and labyrinth in the story can be considered a pair of “structural metaphors.” The manuscript written by Hsi P'êng is a symbol of the labyrinth of time, which is like an ever-entwined network, a collection of contingencies, nonlinearities, and multidimensionality. Another story, “The Aleph” tells the tale of the protagonist who is drowned in depression due to the death of his lover, Bejatric when by chance, he discovers a secret hidden in his lover's cousin's basement, an Aleph, two or three centimeters in diameter, which concentrates all the images and scenes of the universe. The Aleph is the source of his poetic talent, his hope of finding his deceased lover, and a special “space” constructed by Borges through the metaphor of a “mirror”. The objective of this dissertation is to briefly analyze how Borges constructs a “labyrinth”to objectify his vision of time in the story, and how he uses “mirrors” to express his vision of space.

**Index Terms**—Spacetime concept, metaphor, Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths”, “The Aleph”

## I. INTRODUCTION

In his thematic literary magazine *Half a Century* with Borges, Vargas Llosa says, “Borges is exactly the kind of person that Sartre taught us to hate, and to hate as pure as a chemical reagent: the type of artist who lives in his own world, a world created purely by fantasy and knowledge...” [1]. Llosa's perception of Borges undergoes a transformation, starting from a rejection of purely literary writers, then engaging in a dialogue with Borges himself and gaining a deeper understanding of his work, until being convinced that Borges' pure literature “provides a constant source of intellectual pleasure.”

“The Garden of Forking Paths” and “The Aleph” are two of Borges' masterpieces. In terms of their content, they reflect and offer structure to “time”and “space” respectively, reflecting Borges' unique perspective on time and space. The two works together constitute the antithetical unity of “time and space. “However, these two concepts cannot be visually described in literature, and the “labyrinth” and the “mirror” as direct objects of description, are necessary to carry out the

objectification of “time” and “space” The image of the “labyrinth” and the “mirror” as direct objects of description, have to assume the objectification of “time” and “space”, that is, the “metaphor”. In this thesis, we intend to decipher the function of the “metaphor” and analyze its effects to reveal the “spacetime perspective” of the two texts.

## II. THE THEORY OF METAPHOR

The history of metaphor as a concept in literary criticism and metaphor as a concept in rhetoric originated in ancient Greece and took shape through Aristotle, while the study of metaphor in a broader sense only flourished in the second half of the 20th century. The study of metaphor originated in ancient Greek rhetoric, and Aristotle first defined and developed metaphor in a more systematic way in his *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*. His theory of metaphor, generally known as “comparative theory” had a huge influence on metaphorical theory in the following two thousand years. Therefore, Aristotle's theory should be considered the starting point of metaphorical study, both for its systematic nature and its far-reaching influence.

In 1980, George Lykov and Mark Johnson pointed out that metaphor is not just a matter of vocabulary in language, but also an important means of human thought, which directly intervenes in the cognitive process of human beings and is a fundamental state of human existence. They proposed the first conceptual theory of metaphor from a cognitive perspective. In their book *The Metaphors We Live By*, Lykov and Johnson suggest that “metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but is about thought and action, and the nature of metaphor is the nature of thought; the similarity between ontology and metaphor in metaphor is not intrinsic to the nature of things, and similarity is far from being the underlying theory of metaphor; the construction of concepts cannot be done without the participation of metaphor” [2]. Although there is no universally accepted definition of the concept of metaphor, it is easy to summarize some of its characteristics based on the above definition: metaphor is not just a linguistic phenomenon, but primarily a tool for thought, a cognitive activity in which human beings transfer concepts using their experience in one domain to illustrate or understand their experience in another domain.

In everyday life, people tend to recognize and think about intangible and difficult-to-define concepts with reference to familiar, tangible, and concrete concepts, creating a way to understand different concepts in relation to each other. In Borges' story “The Garden of Forking Paths”, a labyrinthine manuscript by Hsi P'êng avoids explicitly mentioning the concept of time but illustrates the infinite possibilities of time.

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The time and labyrinth in the story can be considered a pair of “structural metaphors”. The manuscript written by Hsi P’êng is a symbol of the labyrinth of time, which is like an ever-entwined network, a collection of contingencies, nonlinearities, and multidimensionality.

Another novel, “The Aleph”, tells the story of the protagonist who is depressed by the death of his lover, Beatriz when he accidentally discovers a hidden secret in the basement by his lover’s cousin, an “Aleph”, which is two or three centimeters in diameter that concentrates all the images and scenes of the universe. The Aleph is the source of his poetic talent, his hope of finding his deceased lover, and a special “space” constructed by Borges through the metaphor of the “mirror”. It is also a special “space” constructed by Borges through the metaphor of the “mirror”.

### III. THE METAPHOR OF THE LABYRINTH

#### A. “The Garden of Forking Paths”: Interpretation of Space-Time Perspectives

Firstly, it should be clear that “The Garden of Forking Paths” is a “meta-novel”, meaning that the story itself describes the novel it is part of. In his manuscript, Hsi P’êng spent thirteen years constructing a “maze” in his desire to write a more ambitious and distinguished novel than *Dream of the Red Chamber*, using “time” as an enigma and infinite space as a puzzle to exhaust all possibilities of the story’s plot [3].

Beyond the manuscript of *The Garden* are the testimonies of Yu Tsun after his arrest, which demonstrate that he was on a spying mission to “transmit military information”, while also encountering the “maze of time” expressed in *The Garden*. In this narrative, Borges uses five “cosmic constructions” to visualize “time”: (1) the child reveals that Yu Tsun is searching for Albert; (2) the child tells Yu Tsun to turn left at every intersection; (3) Albert knows Yu Tsun wants to visit Hsi P’êng’s house; (4) Yu Tsun shoots Albert; (5) Yu Tsun reads about Albert’s murder and the bombing of the city of “Albert” in the same newspaper.

The reason we say that the plot outside the manuscript of “The Garden” also follows the pattern of the “temporal maze” is that, although the five episodes above occur in chronological “order” in the story, we can clearly see many indications of non-linear temporal arrangement. In (1) and (3), the child and Albert are clearly informed of Yu Tsun’s intentions because in other spaces Yu Tsun has made numerous possible choices and actions, and thus he repeats his interactions with them. In (4), after realizing that Albert can be an enemy, friend, or irrelevant to himself, Yu Tsun does not hesitate to shoot the friendly acquaintance he has just met. In (5), the two events cannot have been published in the same newspaper, as only with the information that the target of the bombing is the city of Albert could Yu Tsun correctly identify it, but he reads both events in the same newspaper... These two events together demonstrate that in this infinite space, Yu Tsun can encounter himself on multiple occasions, and these fragmentary “cosmic constructions” are the secondary manifestations of infinite space. These fragmentary “cosmic constructions” also allow Borges’ “maze of time” to escape metaphysical concepts and become

tangible. In a three-dimensional world, the act of turning left at every intersection implies a “cycle”, a “reincarnation” [4], but in the “maze of time”, “this demonstrates that, in the “garden” universe, space is infinitely extendable.

#### B. “The Aleph”: Interpretation of Space-Time Perspectives

Aleph comes from the title of Borges’s famous work “The Aleph”. It has multiple layers of interpretation, much like famous spatial imagery. Borges explains that it is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and that it is also a point that can be encompassed, specifically described as a small, bright orb two or three centimeters in diameter, through which one can see the entire world. The cosmic space is all encompassed within it, and the volume does not diminish. “I saw vast oceans, sunrises and sunsets, crowds in America, a silver spiderweb in the center of a black pyramid, a ruined labyrinth (that was London)...”, “I saw a globe between two mirrors in a room in Alkmaar, reflecting each other infinitely. “Descriptions repeated up to the enumeration of countless geographic spaces.

At the end of the story, it’s as if the protagonist, “I”, can no longer express his feelings in writing, he can see the universe clearly from any angle:

“...I saw my face and my entrails, I saw your face, and I felt dizzy and cried, because my eyes had seen that secret and conjectural object, whose name men usurp, but that no man has looked at: the inconceivable universe.” [5]

“The Aleph” takes the biggest geographical leap possible, a science fiction story that could be described as the most outrageous chronicle of a journey, if it were an excursion. In Borges’s writing, there flows a fantastic vision of space, that of the labyrinth. Borges’ space is not solid, it collapses and expands, and if one finds the right place to observe it, there is even the opportunity to recognize the entire expanse of space, and it is then that the observer understands what labyrinthine universe we find ourselves in.

If we compare cosmic space to the old idea of a snake eating its own tail, then the Aleph is the part of the snake’s tail that is contained in the tongue. If we also imagine that this snake is almost transparent, then the inner workings of the head, the larger space, can be seen in the smallest of the snake’s tails. But seeing it does not mean one can escape the labyrinth; rather, it means one is at the farthest point from the exit of the universe. That’s why Borges’ s labyrinth is so unsettling and desperately frustrating.

This game of labyrinths appears repeatedly in Borges’s writings, for example in “The Library of Babel” and “The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths”. In these novels, there are artificial labyrinths, natural labyrinths, legendary labyrinths, etc., to show that ultimately they are nothing more than symbols, that the current world itself is the greatest labyrinth in which we are trapped with no way out. And what “The Aleph” tells us is that, even if you see the entire map of the labyrinth, it is impossible to find its exit.

#### IV. THE METAPHOR OF THE MIRROR

##### A. *"The Garden of Forking Paths": Interpretation of Space-Time Perspectives*

The most basic function of a mirror is to reflect the outer world, and the realization of this function is based on the reproduction of appearances. The function of reproducing mirrors was already discovered by the ancient Greeks, as explicitly mentioned by Plato in his work *The Ideal State*: "Take a mirror and turn it in all directions, and immediately you will create the sun, the stars, the earth, yourself, other animals, utensils, plants, and trees, and all the things we just mentioned". Although this passage is often cited as a classical argument in favor of mimesis, the original intention of the text with the example of the mirror is to underline the mirror's function of reproduction, creating something external exactly like the original, that is, reproducing a series of appearances through the mirror.

The mirror models space infinitely; by illuminating the outer world, it blurs the boundaries of space, creating an identical space. And in the reproduced space, the same people and things as in the original space exist. The garden of forking paths is not a randomly generated maze; it is not a winding and irregular "aristocratic garden", but rather two mirrors placed opposite each other, and at the very moment the position is fixed, countless mirrors reflect each other, and these nested mirrors construct a "reflection-reflected" relationship in the mirror, extending to the "depths" of the mirror, thus realizing the "infinite of space" that can be reached with just two mirrors.

Such a space is undoubtedly a difficult and obscure puzzle for Yu Tsun, a character considered the person of the mirror. Human life has a very different fate in a 'mirror' due to the infinite multiplication of mirrors, but the 'mirror' in which Yu Tsun lives is singular and impoverished, a characteristic that obscures his possibilities of seeing other possibilities. This property obscures his possibilities of seeing other possibilities. The situation changes when Yu Tsun enters the Garden, where the paths fork, and he is drawn out of the mirror by the manuscript of *The Garden*, and as an observer looking into both mirrors, perpetually proliferating the mirror image, as Borges says in his conversation with Coffa: "I believe that the human image and the image in the mirror are equally unreal and equally real. I believe that the human image and the image in the mirror are equally unreal and equally real. Mirrors and copulation are the same thing. Both create the image, not the reality"[6]. We cannot say whether the self in the mirror is the real self or if the "self" outside the mirror is the real "self", but that singular image of the self exists visibly.

##### B. *"The Aleph": Interpretation of Space-Time Perspectives*

What does "Aleph" mean? It is one of the great mysteries in Borges' work that I have read. In "The Aleph" and its epilogue, there are many words about mirrors. The story is about an old infatuation of Beatriz, who passes away, and how every year, on her birthday, he went to visit her father and cousin Carlos at Rue de la Garai. Carlos was a passionate but untalented poet, they became friends and he reluctantly agreed to write the preface to a long poem Carlos was working on. During their conversations, I learned about the

existence of Aleph and met with him in the basement of his house, but it was difficult to reproduce Aleph in words, leaving an "infinite reverence". He couldn't reproduce Aleph in words, but he was left with "infinite reverence" and "infinite sadness".

What is Aleph? The story as a whole contains only about 10,000 words, and Aleph only formally appears halfway through the text, spoken by Carlos. According to the visual description in the story, Aleph is "a small iridescent sphere, almost intolerably bright. At first, I thought it was rotating; then I understood that this movement was an illusion produced by the dizzying spectacle it contained"<sup>4</sup>. Aleph has a diameter of only two or three centimeters, yet it contains everything in the world, everything and everyone. It doesn't shrink or reproduce, "each thing (the moon in the mirror, let's say) was infinite things, because I can see it clearly from any angle in the universe" [4].

This is the characteristic of Aleph: it encompasses everything and reproduces it in its original and true form. And since, according to the previous analysis, having this characteristic of quickly, directly, and accurately representing external things corresponds precisely to the qualities of a mirror, it is provisionally assumed that Aleph represents a mirror.

The idea that Aleph is a mirror can be further verified from the original text. While looking at Aleph, he also "saw innumerable eyes looking at me as if in a mirror, all the mirrors in the world, but none of them reflecting me.". Aleph is capable of reproducing what "I" did, and this sensation is "like in a mirror". At this point in the text, the author strongly suggests that Aleph is the mirror.

In a postscript, Borges also adds the nature and name of Aleph:

"Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet... In Jewish mystical philosophy, this letter refers to the infinite and pure God; it is said to have the shape of a man pointing to heaven and earth, indicating that the world below is a mirror, a map of the world above" [7].

Borges provides his reasons, citing a large number of different mirrors from East and West. The reader can deduce that Aleph is a mirror, but it is clear that Aleph is more than just a mirror; it reproduces everything without losing a moment, and as the text describes its shape as a round ball two or three centimeters in diameter, it is highly likely that Aleph is a smooth-surfaced spherical mirror. That is how Aleph exists. Aleph is an infinite totality. As the story states: "I see Aleph, I see the world in Aleph from all angles, I see Aleph in the world, I see the world in Aleph"[7]. The world reflected by Aleph can be seen from all angles, and Aleph can be seen from all angles in the world reflected by Aleph, and this endless reflection and dynamic multiplication are dizzying, infinitely reverent, and infinitely sad.

According to Lacan's theory of the mirror image, man can only establish a complete "self" by constructing an other in opposition to the "self" [8]. However, Borges is a person unable to achieve his own complementarity by reflecting in the mirror; when he sees the mirror, he can only feel horror. This is because mirrors have the ability to reproduce and multiply reality. By placing two mirrors facing each other, an

endless labyrinthine world of “multiplication” can be created, in which everything encompassed in the universe can multiply infinitely in the form of illusory mirrors[9]. The image that Borges sees of himself in the mirror, seemingly real but actually not, reminds him that perhaps he is nothing more than another image, an illusory image in the mirror of another entity. That is why he feels sad when contemplating Aleph.

## V. CONCLUSION

Jorge Luis Borges dedicated his life to writing, producing a large number of stories and poems rich in profound metaphors, such as the book that symbolizes infinity in “The Book of Sand”, the library that symbolizes the universe in “The Library of Babel”, the labyrinth in the garden that symbolizes parallel space and time in “The Garden of Forking Paths”, and the transparent sphere known as the Aleph, which symbolizes infinite space, in “The Aleph”. The transparent sphere called Aleph in “The Aleph” is a symbol of infinite space. The collection of his countless novels and poems constitutes Borges’s unique vision of time and space, a unique construction of time and space built from a rich variety of metaphors [10]. By reading the metaphors of “mirror” and “labyrinth” in “The Garden of Forking Paths” and “The Aleph”, we can see that Borges’s space is not solid, but like a mirror, it can fold or expand. If we find the right place to observe, we may even have the opportunity to see the entirety of space, and that is when the observer will comprehend the labyrinthine universe we find ourselves in. Borges’s time is not linear, but a labyrinth of separations and entanglements, and it is in this intricate labyrinth where human life is like a mirrored image that multiplies infinitely, where one can have a very different fate.

In this way, it is possible to understand the question of how to exist in Borges’s world. The struggle to repair and maintain one’s own integrity, even if resistance seems futile and playful at times. The flowing human being is deeply

unpredictable, all carnivalesque pursuits and disappointments are only temporary games, and the solitary postmodern individual relies only on themselves. The solitary postmodern individual relies only on themselves. They experience life in complex and ever-changing space and time. The complete self that Borges seeks can only be possessed for a brief period of time in the interstices of the space and time he describes. In the rapidly changing experience of space and time, one cannot force themselves, but simply accept each real and intense experience without exerting a fixed meaning onto a specific space and time. Only the constant search on a path that does not lead to the end is the true meaning of one’s own existence and the only possible attempt to trace one’s own integrity.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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