BORGES’S FICTIONS: EXISTENTIALISM AND THE MEANING OF STORIES

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Jorge Luis Borges is generally acknowledged to be one of the more difficult postmodern writers. While many of the postmodern writers are challenging from a reader’s perspective, one factor that makes Borges so tricky and distinct from his contemporaries is his fascination with philosophy. Not only is Borges’s work teeming with references to complex philosophical topics and famous philosophers, his writing also seems to engage in its own type of philosophical thinking. Though the presence of philosophy in Borges’s writing has been recognized for enriching his power as a literary writer, it has been underappreciated for what is has to offer the western philosophical tradition. The following project is an attempt to demonstrate how reading the fictions of Borges from an existentialist perspective illuminates the philosophical value of his writing. Though there are many different existentialist perspectives, the one that became most central in my analysis of Borges’s work was that of Jean-Paul Sartre. The existentialist ideas that Sartre expresses in the “What is Literature” essays about the essentiality of the role of the artist in communicating freedom to humanity were most significant in my method for reading Borges’s writings for their philosophical value. The Borges stories chosen for this analysis are by no means the only ones that could have been part of this project; however, I chose to focus on a few of the most famous and complex stories. I chose the well-known stories because I thought that these seemed to be worthy representations of Borges’s unique writing style and tone, and I chose to focus on a few rather than many so as to deal with the few more fully.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to Edward Maloney, Frank Ambrosio, and Stephen Delacroix. Thank you all for seeing potential in my ideas, pushing me to pursue them, and supporting me in the struggle. Your guidance, challenge, suggestions, and many words of encouragement allowed me to go further with this topic than I thought possible. Our countless conversations will be with me always.

Many thanks,

Mimi
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INTRODUCTION

When asked about the metaphysical puzzles in his work, Jorge Luis Borges claimed, “I am quite simply a man who uses perplexity for literary purposes.” Yet, while this response makes light of the philosophical engagement of his fictions, the pervasive presence of complex philosophical terms and concepts in his writings belies this playful proposal. Even if Borges intended these philosophical references to be nothing more than a means toward the end of creating his fictions, the intensity and centrality of metaphysical topics in the fictions suggest the possibility that these metaphysical wonderings could serve as ends in themselves.

Because Borges’s short stories invoke philosophical terms and the names of famous philosophers, the topic of philosophy in the work of Borges has received much critical attention; however, there is a gap in the scholarship. While a fair amount had been written about the way that the boundary between philosophy and literature seems challenged in Borges’s works, there have been very few attempts to actually consider Borges as a literary philosopher and, in a positive sense, explore his works for their own philosophical value. In what follows, I explore the philosophical value of Borges’s fictions by reading his work in light of existentialist philosophy, with particular attention to the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre.

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CHAPTER I: BORGES AND EXISTENTIALISM

Modern Art, Existentialism, and Borges’s Historical Moment

An important first step towards considering Borges as a literary philosopher involves understanding the state of Western intellectual and artistic thought during his time. Borges’s career reached its peak in the middle of the twentieth century, which is quite significant from an intellectual perspective because it was a time in which the previously separated disciplines of philosophy and literature experienced a complete collision in the Western world. The cause of this collision, according to William Barrett’s *Irrational Man*, can be understood as part of a larger intersection between the existentialist philosophical current of the nineteenth century and the socio-cultural challenges of the modern world, brought on by the Industrial age and the two world wars.

As these intellectual currents and historical forces collided, modern man found himself grappling with fundamental questions about the nature of existence, as well as questions about an individual man’s life, death, freedom, and history. Consequently, while the questions pertaining to the nature of existence had long been considered the business of academic philosophy, the conditions of the modern world made these questions the business of the public. As Barrett puts it:

The important thing to repeat, was that here was a philosophy that was able to cross the frontier from the academy into the world at large…This should have been a welcome sign to professional philosophers that ordinary mankind still
could hunger and thirst after philosophy if what they were given to bite down on was something that seemed to have connection with their lives. (8)

This public hunger for philosophical thinking and discussions regarding human existence ignited a big response through (and also due to) art. As Barrett claims, “art is the collective dream of a period, a dream in which, if we have eyes to see, we can trace the physiognomy of the time most clearly” (41). Therefore, because the widespread concern of the modern period was philosophical in nature, much of the literature and art produced during the modern period also worked as modes for philosophical consideration. Thus, the fundamental questions about human existence permeated both philosophy and literature of the time, and the disciplines found themselves overlapping and working to answer the same questions.

Borges enters the literary scene just after the first wave of modern writers engage existentialism as a central concern. So, in a sense, philosophical contemplation had already become the business of literature when Borges begins writing. Yet, as William Barrett claims, the recurring themes that emerged through the works of the most prominent and influential modern writers, such as James Joyce and William Faulkner, produced unsatisfying answers to these existential questions.

The unsatisfying answers offered by these modernist writers were based on conclusions that human alienation was an inevitable part of creating an authentic human existence and that man is condemned to despair by realizing his own limitations and lack of freedom. For example, Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist (arguably the foremost of the modern novels) is the full embodiment of this modernist existential perspective, as Stephen Daedalus escapes the “labyrinth” of mundane living by becoming an artist and isolating himself to make his art.
Likewise, Faulkner’s *Sound and the Fury* presents a grim picture of the modern man as a predetermined being, confined in time, who is ultimately condemned to live with an awareness of his freedom without the ability to harness and act on it. Jean Paul Sartre’s essay “Time in Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury*” provides keen insight into the merits and shortcomings of Faulkner’s art in dealing with existential questions. Sartre understands that Faulkner is engaging in questions regarding man’s existence and meaning, yet his answers are just as unsatisfying as Joyce’s move towards alienation. Sartre writes:

Faulkner’s concept of the present is irrational in essence. It is an event, monstrous and incomprehensible, which comes upon us like a thief—comes upon us and disappears. The present drives out another present…In Faulkner, moments erupt and freeze, then fade, recede, and diminish, still motionless. Man spends his life struggling against time; and, acid like, time corrodes man, tears him from himself and keeps him from realizing his humanity. (227)

According to Sartre, Faulkner’s understanding of man’s confinement in time leads to despair. The future is barred, and thus, man is not free to make his own future. Consequently, the Faulknerian man is a creature deprived of potentiality. Thus, while Faulkner’s art deals with existential questions by bringing critical and aesthetic analysis to the human experience, his version of existentialism fails to provide the hope that the modern world so desperately needed in the face of the post-war tragedy.

In Faulkner, and modern art on the whole, man is condemned to an unhappy state of being, which is a consequence of the power of imagination and aesthetic sensibility being limited and frustrated by human finitude. Thus, modern man seems condemned to live in perpetual
angst, as the efforts to escape from this condition only will drive him to further realization of it. Just as a trapped animal will become agitated if it attempts escape, man faces a fate of frustration once he realizes his condition; yet, ironically, realizing this condition is also the only possible way for man to escape it. If realized, man can strive to deal with this state of being through art; however, the cost of dealing with this condition is often isolation because the demands of society and life create a momentum that will trap men into certain roles in life.

In a sense, modern art led to different versions of nihilism because it forced humanity to accept limitation, or alienation, or that our only option for finding meaning in existence involves the “will to power”—as explained by Nietzsche\(^b\). The answers to these specific existential questions were unappealing enough on their own, but from a historical perspective, the challenges that the western world would face in the time between the modern period and WWII, once again, reopened the questions about human existence and meaning and demanded a better answer.

Because Borges emerged as an artist and writer at this particular moment in philosophical and literary history, in which existential questions forced the disciplines of philosophy and literature back into dialogue with one another, his art becomes part of a larger conversation, already in motion, between philosophy and literature. Thus, while the explicit references to philosophical history in Borges’s fictions might entice us to consider his work in relation to the historical philosophical ideas, I would argue that reading Borges as an existentialist leads to the best illumination of the philosophical value of his work. This illumination will be my aim in the

\(^b\) “The will to power” is an idea explained in Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols* and other writings. It can be understood as the idea that the drive to gain power is the real motivating force behind human existence.
following project. However, before moving on to this project, a clarification of the term “existentialism” is vital for grounding the rest of my analysis.

What is Existentialism?

The term “existentialism” cannot be rigidly defined, yet it is commonly used in academic circles to refer to a specific movement in philosophy and art that has a unique and particular concern with human existence. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, existentialism is a term that belongs mainly to intellectual history, which essentially means that academic institutions have retrospectively identified a line of thinkers whose works have a certain family resemblance that qualifies them as existentialist. This family resemblance provides grounds for labeling the body of works (and thinkers) as a group, yet the family resemblance criterion also evades the trouble of giving “existentialism” a strict definition—which is important because there are about as many versions of existentialism as there are thinkers categorized in the movement.

If we are to work with “existentialism” as a functional designator in intellectual history, we can best attribute the introduction of the term into the academic lexicon to French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, and we can use the term to distinguish a cultural period around the 1940s-50s. This period produced a proliferation of works in Western art, literature, and philosophy that share in a concern with a certain cluster of philosophical problems, all having to do with the way we evaluate and understand the human condition and experience of reality.

What distinguishes the existentialist movement from other philosophical movements (which all
share in the interest in the human condition and experience of reality) is a particular interest in how the human condition is complicated by self-consciousness, intelligibility, and freedom.

The line of inquiry traceable throughout existentialist thought also holds that thus far in Western intellectual history, scientific, philosophical, and religious disciplines have failed to adequately explain the human experience. In his 1946 lecture, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Jean-Paul Sartre explains the necessary shift, according to existentialist thought, in how humans should approach an understanding of existence. He described the shift as a movement in understanding that “existence comes before essence – or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective” (20). This statement is perplexing on its own, but the basic point behind it is actually simple, and is probably easiest to understand in the context of intellectual history.

The first significant work done to consider “existence before essence” is credited to the two most important precursors of the existentialist movement, Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. The passionate and unique philosophies of these two early existentialists are reactions against Hegelian rationalism, which is the apotheosis of a philosophical tradition that places “essence before existence.” Thus, Sartre’s description of the existentialist movement of the 20th century identifies it as a reaction against other forms of Western philosophical and scientific rationalism, all of which place “essence before existence.”

Borges’s Fiction and Existentialism

Like these existentialist works, Borges’s writing takes a keen interest in the stabilizing structures that humans create for themselves to avoid the unbearable burden that comes with the responsibility of making life meaningful, as a result of our intelligibility and free will. As humans attempt to deal with this burden, they create different stabilizing structures (like,
religion, philosophy, science, and anthropology) to bring meaning to reality, but the problem is that these structures might not present an accurate picture of reality, and definitely might lead to misguided ethics.

Borges’s fictional work exposes the futility of many of these attempts by revealing the instabilities of the disciplines human beings use to codify reality. This futility is explored in stories such as “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis-Tertius,” where a totally comprehensive encyclopedia has no correspondence to the real world and “The Theologians,” where sound religious doctrines and heresies are indistinguishable, yet lead to persecution and death, and, ironically, the greatest kinds of evil. “Exactitude in Science,” though just a half-page essay, manages to question the entire scientific field about its purpose by musing on its future trajectory, via the image of a map with such precise correspondence to the land it diagrams that it is equal in size and becomes useless. Throughout all of these stories, there is a pressing question about how the specified disciplines actually benefit mankind.

While some stories seem existentialist in their stance against rationalism, others hint at existentialist thought by reflecting on the individual experience of reality and consciousness, like “The Circular Ruins,” in which the main character turns out to be a creation of another man’s dream. In other instances, Borges’s stories follow characters of overtly existential action, such as Dr. Yu Tsun in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” who confronts an ethical dilemma by sacrificing his own life for what he believes to be the greater good of mankind. Most of these stories unfold with some kind of ironic twist, which seems like an outworking of the ironic state of reality acknowledged throughout existentialist thinking.
With so many thematic connections to existentialism, it is almost curious that there has not been more written on Borges as an existentialist. While the work to this end has been sparse, there has been one significant attempt to read Borges as an existentialist writer and philosopher by Ion T. Agheana in *The Prose of Borges: Existentialism and the Dynamics of Surprise*. Though Agheana makes a compelling case, his attempt falls short of its project for many reasons. Most fundamentally, Agheana focuses too narrowly on one aspect of Borges’s work as it provides grounds for existential classification. Agheana focuses solely on the characters in Borges’s stories as agents of existential action. Through a discussion of these characters, Agheana makes a byway discussion of Borges as an existentialist. Agheana errs both in his understanding of existentialism, as he settles on a convenient, yet incomplete definition, and in his reading of Borges, as he focuses too narrowly on one literary device, which robs the work of the rich and complex web of issues that it raises and intends to raise, through every aspect of writing.

Though Agheana’s attempt falls short, it still lends support to the idea that reading Borges as an existentialist is, indeed, a worthy ambition and of value to the critical world. W.H. Bossart’s book *Philosophy in Borges: Self, Time, Metaphysics* offers further support to this idea, in two important ways. First of all, Bossart, a professor of philosophy, does an eloquent job of working to untangle some of the philosophical problems in Borges that are of interest from an existentialist perspective (like time and the self), which affirms the possibility of Borges being taken seriously as a philosopher by other philosophers. Secondly, Bossart actually discusses Agheana’s attempt to read Borges as an existentialist, and agrees that it is inadequate.

Though Bossart’s conclusion aligns with the above analysis, his reason for declaring Agheana’s work to be inadequate is different, and, arguably, incomplete in itself. He says:
The existential reading has been advocated by Ion T. Agheana, who argues that the ‘Borgesian protagonist, far from being a spectral presence, devoid of identity, is a will in action, a personality which affirms itself. He is driven. Personal identity is the only tangible evidence of existence. Existence is shaped by experience’ (Agheana, 6); “As for the central event of Borges’ fiction being the individual will in action, Agheana simply overlooks the overwhelming emphasis which Borges places on destiny. (163)

Furthermore, Bossart argues that Agheana’s interpretation is problematic because, he explains, Agheana’s reading does not really square with Borges’s antipathy to existentialism. Bossart references Borges’s comment on the philosophies of Heidegger and Jaspers as evidence of this antipathy, as Borges claims that while these philosophers “may play at desperation and anguish, but at bottom they flatter vanity; in that sense, they are immoral.” (162)

Thus, Bossart’s reasons for rejecting Agheana are that Agheana ignores destiny in Borges and that Borges was opposed to existentialism. However, Bossart’s own discussion of Agheana also falls short due to his lack of attention to the complex narrative devices at work in the fictions that complicate any understanding of “destiny” (in short, an inadequate reading of Borges). Also, he does not spend enough energy discussing the term and philosophies of “existentialism” to be justified in such a quick dismissal based on a comment by Borges directed at two existentialists regarding a couple of aspects of existentialism: “desperation and anguish.” Bossart’s work is quite commendable overall, but his lack of attention to the particular topic of Borges as an existentialist reveals a place for new work and consideration to be done in this direction. His
shortcomings in dealing with Borges as an existentialist combined with Agheana’s provide a jumping off point for the following project.

While Agheana and Bossart consider the possibility of existentialism in Borges in regard to certain existential themes (freedom, anguish, despair, and the self), the interest here is in considering Borges as an existential artist with a focus on aesthetics and artistic responsibility. To undergo this consideration, Borges’s writings will be read in light of Sartre’s ideas, as Sartre was prolific in his discussion about the unique role of the artist (and particularly the writer) from an existentialist perspective.

In his later essays on “What is Literature?” Sartre asserts that art carries the special power of communicating among freedoms without alienation or objectification. This is the “gift-appeal” of art, and it is given through the relationship between an artist and the world. Because of this, the artist plays an essential role in demonstrating and communicating the radical freedom that is fundamental to the human condition.

According to Sartre, artists are always engaged in the act of revealing aesthetic order in the world, and, consequently, their artwork is significant as an expression of the freedom that is fundamental to all human beings. Thus, the artist has the role of showing the freedom (and responsibility) that human beings have to be essential in revelation of the world. At the same time that the artist is essential in demonstrating the radical freedom we have as human beings, his work should also help the audience become more engaged in actively understanding their own personal essentiality in relation to the world.

Borges is an interesting artist to consider from this existentialist perspective because on the one hand, we could call him an ideal existential artist. His work is deeply interested in the
impossibility of metaphysics, yet at the same time, his work strives to exhaust imaginative and artistic possibility. In this way, Borges demonstrates radical artistic freedom, and, in a sense, Borges’ fictions work to prove that there is really no difference between metaphysical inquiry and his artistic practice. Yet, the fictions also offer redemption for the metaphysical inquiry, by demonstrating that even if this inquiry cannot lead to truth, it can enable us to realize a type of freedom that is essential to our being human.

At the same time, Borges is complicated to consider as an existentialist artist because, while existentialist artistic practice has a primary concern with revealing an aesthetic ordering in the world, Borges’s works seems to be fundamentally skeptical that art has the power to do this—or more specifically—the power to do this responsibly. For art to do this responsibly, it would seemingly have to escape the problematic act of reference because the act of reference is already assuming a preexisting relationship between the order of the world and that to which one refers. As an author, one must borrow stories, images, analogies and ideas in order to construct a new story. So how, then, can one be revealing an aesthetic order in the world that corresponds to reality and not just someone else’s ideas?

Despite the potential complexities in the notion that Borges, as an artist, attempts to reveal ordering in the world, just the fact that he is creating art through stories is enough to make this claim because, as Sartre explains, any act of storytelling is an attempt to create a meaningful order to the events happening in the world. According to Sartre, storytelling is the chief means by which human beings, and artists alike, attempt to understand the order in the world, as well as their own existence. The act of storytelling, then, is essential in the pursuit of meaning in the human experience, and one that appears in significant ways throughout existentialist thought.
This connection between story making and finding meaning is even fleshed out by Sartre, himself, in *le Nausea*. Sartre observes that the most insignificant events become exciting once we engage in storytelling. All we have to do is start relating the event or events, and an adventure begins. In one famous passage, he says:

> While you live, nothing happens. The scenery, people come in and go out, that’s all. There are no beginnings. Days add on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable and monotonous addition…But when you tell about a life, everything changes; only it’s a change that nobody notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories. As if there could be true stories; events take place in one direction, and we tell about them in the opposite direction…I wanted the moments of my life to follow each other and order themselves like those of a life remembered. I might as well try to catch time by the tail. (40)

Essentially, there is a kind of arbitrariness to all stories we tell. Where we choose to begin, which details we include, and how we characterize other people and ourselves all depend on choices that we make from among countless other possibilities.

Thus, it seems that there is not a real correspondence between our stories and reality. However, the act of storytelling is necessary for us to find meaning in our lives and the world. Even more ironically, storytelling (or story creating, internally) has the potential to be the chief means by which we come to an authentic existence; however, it could also be a chief means of deception or self-deception. For this reason, the “storytellers” have an added responsibility to tell stories that will not lead to deception.
Borges’s own interest in storytelling is at the center of the following exploration of his work from an existentialist perspective because his nontraditional, labyrinthine style seems to explore and challenge the storytelling practice (which is essential to our understanding of a meaningful existence) from every angle. In stories like “The Garden of Forking Paths,” “The Library of Babel,” and “Pierre Menard,” narrative voices, the rationalization of morality, plot devices, and character are all complicated and brought into critical view. Yet, Borges not only works to bring reflective reading to the devices and modes of storytelling—thus revealing artistic freedom, and thereby human freedom—he also explores the negative side of this responsibility, demonstrating the dangers of storytelling as a result of its power.

Not only do his stories work as direct meditations on the storytelling process, they also inspire a new level of reflection on art as an existentialist activity by challenging the pre-given roles of the artist, the text (as it functions within the world), and the reader. Borges challenges these pre-given roles by demonstrating and expanding possibilities—artistic possibilities by revealing choice in unlikely place, interpretive possibilities by making the reader understand choices as a reader, and possibilities in how we understand text in the world.

Borges not only understands artistic responsibility as being inextricably linked to the way that the artist must uncover possibilities within works of art, and allow the reader to see these, but he is also acutely aware of the dangers of irresponsible storytelling. Problems with storytelling present themselves throughout Borges’s works; however three of the most recurring and central problems have to with authorship (who actually makes the story), imagination (the enabler of aesthetic ordering for a story), and language (the most basic structural element of the
story). Not only are these three aspects of storytelling problematic, but the relationship between them is especially problematic.

Ultimately, when these forces collide, they have the power to produce falsified worlds and can lead human beings to live out of “bad faith,” if we choose to explain ourselves through these falsified worlds. Borges seems to hold the view that the world exists in language; thus, storytelling can produce distorted (and sometimes harmful) pictures of the world and how it operates. The problem of falsified worlds points out a problem with the free power of the human imagination. For, imagination is both the enabler of free and true story making and false story making.

I would now like to demonstrate how some of Borges’s most famous and complicated short stories act as works of existentialist thought. In the following analysis of these Borges short stories, I will be interested in considering how the stories work to expand artistic and reader possibilities, and, thus, illuminate freedom. These possibilities and freedoms involve the ways in which author, reader, and text interact towards the end of communication among freedoms. In order to do this, I will be looking at how the fictions work towards the existentialist goal of revealing the world through art and also work to specifically consider the way that the artistic act of revealing the world can be problematic. The fact that Borges’s short stories can do both of these things at the same time is one of the many reasons that his aesthetic is so rich and so complex.
In working with and against reader expectations by employing, breaking, and reshaping common literary devices, Borges is able to take the common reading experience and complicate and enrich it. In doing this, Borges demonstrates his artistic responsibility by breaking free from preset literary rules as an artist. His work not only exemplifies the responsibility artists have in revealing possibilities in the aesthetic ordering of the world, but it also forces the reader to understand her agency in revelation of the world through the text. The tensions and instabilities he creates lead to a more authentic action from the reader, as possibilities unfold in divergent directions within the world of the story. This freedom discovered from the reader’s perspective within the world of the story also translates to her role in making sense of the world she inhabits.

*The Garden of Forking Paths:*

“The Garden of Forking Paths” is perhaps the exemplar story to consider for Borges’s existentialist-aesthetic power because of the way it demonstrates how artistic freedom should work towards the end of expanding reader possibilities. As the reader struggles with the complications and possibilities presented in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” she must realize the essentiality of her role in making meaning out of the confusion of the story. Thus, “The Garden of Forking Paths” works to fulfill both aspects of Sartre’s description of the communication among freedoms between artist and audience. The story simultaneously works to reveal the freedom of the artist in communicating a unique picture of reality, which, in this instance, is full
of instabilities and tensions, and, at the same time, the story pushes the reader to realize her own essentiality in making meaning out of the complicated picture presented through the story.

One of the most important aspects of the work that Borges does in the “Garden of Forking Paths” towards the end of communicating his artistic freedom to the reader is that the work breaks and challenges reader expectations. We are jolted awake as readers by the reversals and challenges that “The Garden of Forking Paths” brings to our expectations of the reading experience. As soon as we think we know what type of reading experience we are about to have, and thus settle in to the comfortable act of reading with expectation being met, our expectations are broken and readjusted, only to be broken again. As this challenging and breaking of expectation occurs, we are made aware of the radical freedom an artist has in revealing aesthetic order in the world through art.

The type of reversal and challenge of reader expectations is evident from the very beginning of the story, given its title, dedication, and first line. We are accustomed to reading title first: “The Garden of Forking Paths,” which sounds like the name of a parable, as forking roads are a literary trope signifying moments in time in which a decision must be made, and the outcomes of the choice are equally unknown. Thus, as a reader, we are already setting our expectations for the type of tale that we are about to read based on the title.

Usually, a parable is a story that borrows images from real life to teach about spiritual or moral ideas. Because we (as reader) see the title of the story “The Garden of Forking Paths”, as well as the dedication to “Victoria Ocampo’ (a well know Argentiana literary critic), our experience as reader begins like a typical reading experience me might have when reading a short work of fiction.
After reading the title and dedication, however, the first line of the story actually breaks expectation because it opens like a work of nonfiction, with reference to a specific page in another book. This reference is made to a work that sounds like non-fiction, based on the title, “The History of the World War,” and the specificity of detail involved in the description of the incident in reference (specifics about the number of artillery, dates, military divisions) supports that this work is a work of history, rather than fiction.

The reversing and toying with reader expectations caused just by the artistic choices made in the first paragraph of the story serve as excellent examples of Borges’s handiwork, which I would like to consider here. Borges writes:

On page 242 of The History of the World War, Liddell Hart tells us that an Allied offensive against the Serre-Montauban line (to be mounted by thirteen British divisions backed by one thousand four hundred artillery pieces) had been planned for July 24, 1916, but had to be put off until the morning of the twenty-ninth. Torrential rains (notes Capt. Liddell Hart) were the cause of the delay—a delay that entailed no great consequences, as it turns out. The statement which follows—dictated, reread, and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun, former professor of English in the Hochshule at Tsingtao—throws unexpected light on the case. The first two pages of the statement are missing. (119)

Though this introductory paragraph sounds like a legitimate reference on a first read, it also has some suspicious content that provides little clues that the work might not be a real work, and that the reference is just a literary artifice that is part of the fictional story “The Garden of Forking Paths.”
As the introductory paragraph comes to a close, the reader expectations change again because after we have been told that the “Torrential rains” that were the cause of the delay had no great consequences, the narrator of this paragraph tells us that a “following statement—dictated, reread, and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun…throws unexpected light on the case.” The fact that this is a personal statement by someone prepares the reader for a story.

We believe that we are about to hear an authentic, narrative voice speaking from a first person perspective about a war experience. However, even before we go on to read the statement, other questions about authenticity and authorship present themselves based on the conditions we are given about the statement by Yu Tsun.

We are told that the statement has been “dictated, reread, and signed,” which implies editing and changing of ideas, which, then, seems to undercut the purity of a firsthand account (at least in the way that we typically think of it). We are also told that Yu Tsun is a former professor of English in Hochshule in Tsingtao, which raises questions about translation, as it seems that Yu Tsun is editing translations of ideas that may have originally occurred in a different language.

Most interesting and troubling is probably that the first two pages of the statement are missing. Though we (as readers) read this specific reference to a page, and a specific story in history to be an entry point in the story, this entry point actually leads us to the beginning of another story. We are told that the statement by Dr. Yu Tsun “follows” this introductory paragraph and that this statement is supposed to throw “unexpected light on the case” (119). Because we are reading with the expectation that the statement by Dr. Tsun will clarify the ambiguous introduction to the story, the next line “The first two pages are missing” is both
surprising and unsettling from the reader’s perspective because it introduces a feeling of frustration that the “clarifying” statement is incomplete. By virtue of the fact that pages are missing from this account, we must question what information is given in those pages that might change the overall interpretation and behavior of the statement.

As we become familiar with the reading experience created by the artistic choices (and refusals to make clear choices) by Borges in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” the experience extends beyond our reading of this one story and causes us to consider the role of artistic choice in other works of art. In an ironic way, by refusing to commit to certain choices as an artist, Borges reveals how many choices are actually made in works of art that we may not even be aware of. Thus, his choice to reveal the many possibilities for artistic choice becomes a way in which he communicates the radical freedom that Sartre and other existentialists understand to be essential in understanding our humanity.

As Borges communicates this radical freedom through his role as artist, this communication also calls for a response from the reader that requires a realization of her own freedom in bringing forth meaning in the complex and seemingly disparate parts of the story. As we wrestle with this cluster of interpretive problems and our broken expectations, we actually come to realize that the work is opening possibilities for how we might read it. As the work resists all efforts to define itself, it requires something extra from the reader to understand and make sense of it.

The essentiality of the role of the reader in understanding the significance of “The Garden of Forking Paths” is made most evident through the narrative layers that comprise the story—and stories within stories. The layers draw attention to the narrative elements of the story, but they
also work against each other to create tensions within the work of art that require heightened reader reflection and consideration.

As the story opens, our narrator records a story that is framed by an excerpt from another literary work (supposedly historical) in which Liddell Hart is describing a specific instance in the World War. Our narrator uses this as a framing device for another account given by Yu Tsun in which he records an encounter with a man named Stephen Albert. Stephen Albert then goes on to tell a story about Tsun’s ancestor, who was creating a story about a labyrinth. Ironically, the multiple layers of narration in this story create a labyrinth that the reader is forced into if she tries to figure out where to start interpreting.

Thus, from the beginning of the story, the narrative voices are intertwined in a confusing, but seemingly significant way. The story opens with one narrative voice making a reference to a specific page of another text, which, by its title, sounds like a work of non-fiction. This book is “The History of the World War,” and the reference is to page 242 (which signifies that the events under discussion are a very small part of “The History of the World War”). It is noteworthy that this page seems so arbitrary, for if it were either the first or the last page, or even if it were referenced as the opening of a chapter or section of the book, it would seem more significant. However, the specificity of the reference also makes the narrative voice carry more authority.

The narrator of the introduction claims that the account given by Liddell Hart is illuminated by the statement (supposedly following the introductory paragraph) told by another man, Dr. Yu Tsu, and this is the story we are about to read. The narrator of the introduction also tells us that the first two pages of the statement are missing, and again, our attention is drawn to the specificity of the numbers, as we know that two pages are missing, but we have no clues
about what was on these two pages. Already, we have one narrator who is communicating the information in the introduction, and then Liddell Hart’s voice is captured in this opening paragraph only to add in that “Torrential rains were the cause of the delay—a delay which entailed no great consequences, as it turns out.” This multiplicity of voices in the introductory paragraph exposes a complex web of narrative perspectives, which framing devices for stories within stories.

The complicated narrative devices employed by the artist force us as readers to make choices and realize our essential role in making meaning of the story. For this reason, Borges creates the possibility for the communication of freedoms between artist and audience, which is essential for his significance as an existentialist artist. “The Garden of Forking Paths,” however, does not just present Borges as an existentialist artist, but it also works to show that he has something to offer existentialist philosophy.

For as much as the story allows for realization of the particular roles of the artist and reader and the communication among their freedoms, it also works to reveal a particular ordering in reality. In fact, the relationship between the reader and the text in “The Garden of Forking Paths” works as a mirror for our reality, in which there are competing claims and truths (established by individuals and societal norms) that we must choose between in order to make sense of the events we witness and are made aware of in our lifetimes.

As the complications and ambiguities in the text work as a mirror of complications and ambiguities in reality, the entire story (from the insides and out) becomes about choice, freedom, and possibility. As we are able to consider our relationship to the text and reality in light of each other, we become essential in understanding the meaning of our own existences.
In the story, the mirror for ambiguities and complications that we face in our own reality is most clearly reflected in the character of Yu Tsun. Though he is just a character, by virtue of the fact that he is controlling the story we receive, his character becomes a metaphor for the controlling voices (narratives) that are presented to us as we live in the world. Thus, as we understand Yu Tsun as a metaphor for narrative voices in our realities, our own relationship as readers of his narrative becomes the significant focus for understanding how our understanding of the act of reading “The Garden of Forking Paths” extends beyond the text and into the real world.

As we read the statement from Yu Tsun, his moral ambiguity becomes a central problem for us as his reading audience. Yu Tsun’s narrative is full of a strange mixture of honesty and deceit, which we become increasingly aware of as the story goes on; thus we have to make the choice between believing what he says at face value versus reading between his words for meaning. Though the credibility of Yu Tsun’s story is questionable, he writes with a passion and desperation that compel us to be drawn into his narrative story, as his musings on life, death, family, and honor make him seem fully humanized.

He describes the day of his death (which he expects to be the day he is writing) to be oddly normal. The weather, the birds, the bustle of the city all seem to be unchanged and disconnected from his personal experience:

I went upstairs to my room; absurdly I locked the door and then threw myself, on my back, onto my narrow iron bed. Outside the window were the usual rooftops and the overcast six o’clock sun. I found it incredible that this day, lacking all omens and premonitions, should be the day of my implacable death. Despite my
deceased father, despite my having been a child in a symmetrical garden in Hai Feng—was I, now, about to die? Then I reflected that all things happen to oneself, and happen precisely now. (120)

As a character, he seems to be deeply considering existential questions that we all must consider—and the consideration of which makes us feel more connected to the rest of humanity. He gives us details about his ancestors, and he describes a desire to redeem the status of his race in the mind of the Germans by showing them that a yellow-skinned man could be the hero of their race.

Thus, Yu Tsun writes as if he is musing on the existential questions that are common to all human beings, as we consider the fact that find ourselves placed in this story, in this time, in this body, on this stage for action. The resulting questions: “Why me? Why these conditions? Why now?” have no clear answers. We do not know, and we have no control over it. Furthermore, while we perceive ourselves to have certain freedoms, if we did not design these conditions and we did not create ourselves, then how can we really be free? I can think freely, and I can act freely (just limited by other persons and circumstances), but what determines the way that I understand this freedom?

Because these questions are so much at the heart of Yu Tsun’s thoughts, on the one hand, we feel a connection with him because they are questions that apply to all of us. As a result of this, we feel a certain support for him as the “main” character in our story. However, we also know that he is expecting death as a result of some kind of military operation that he has been a part of. We suspect that this involves spying, based on the first paragraph of his story in which he tells us that one of his correspondents was discovered and killed, but because we do not have all
of the information, we cannot be sure of his exact involvement and the moral content of his
actions. We sympathize with and distrust Yu Tsun all at the same time, and this back and forth
feeling about him keeps us engaged as readers, but does not allow us the common comfort of
trusting the narrator that we often have in fiction.

Not only are we kept guessing about how we should think and feel about Yu Tsun as a
character and our relationship with him as readers of his narrative, we are also misled at various
points in the story by the forking story lines. The various story lines obscure causality within the
story, but also mirror the confused act of understanding causality between events in our own
lives as we try to make meaning out of occurrences that involve ourselves.

In the story, the events that unfold to bring Yu Tsun to his death are connected in a
supremely ambiguous way because there are so many significant events that are part of his
narrated story, which may or may not be causally connected to the world outside of him. Yu
Tsun’s murder of Stephen Albert is apparently the intersection of all forking storylines within
our story (because Yu Tsun puts it there), yet this intersection opens more questions about
causality and connectedness between events than it answers.

Yu Tsun explains to us that the murder of Stephen Albert is significant because it is
committed in order to make another story come clear to another audience. In this case, Yu Tsun
wants to communicate to the Germans the name of the city in which the British artillery supply is
stored. While the reason for the murder is practical, on one level, the meeting between Yu Tsun
and Stephen Albert uncovers all sorts of ironies and questions about destiny, as their pasts
intertwine in uncanny ways. It is unclear from Yu Tsun’s perspective which of the details of their
connection is significant for our understanding of the present story, and many of subplots lead to
dead ends in terms of bringing clear meaning to the story he is reliving through his narrative. However, they work in presenting possibilities for making meaning and connection of the grand story.

Interestingly, these possibilities in the story add aesthetic power that extend outside of the text to our reading experience of the text and our experience of reading meaning in our world. Storylines that end in dead ends are exactly what make this story behave like a labyrinth, and, all too appropriately, imbedded at the very heart of this short story is the question of a novel behaving like a labyrinth. Thus, the reading experience and Yu Tsun’s experience of trying to understand his own story come to mirror each other. This mirroring effect creates an uncanny sense in the reader because the multiples levels on which stories seem to be working alongside each other and intersecting translates to the text and the world, and also links them.

No passage is as significant as an example of Borges’s writing bringing us into a space of the uncanny, in which we are aware of multiple levels of significance of meaning and mirroring of text, story, and stories within stories, as the comment made by Stephen Albert in regard to Ts’ui Pen’s novel. He describes his own journey to understanding the novel to be the labyrinth Ts’ui Pen aimed to create like a detective story. Thus, there is on one level a detective story within a detective story. As Stephen Albert explains his gradual process of realization, he makes explicit his moment of epiphany that came from imaginatively musing on Ts’ui Pen’s dedication of the novel:

I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths.” Albert says:

Almost instantly, I saw it—the garden of forking paths was the chaotic novel; the phrase ‘several futures (not all)” suggested to me the image of a forking in time,
rather than space. A full rereading of the book confirmed my theory. In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts’ui Pen, the character chooses—simultaneously—all of them. He creates, thereby, ‘several futures’ several times, which themselves proliferate and fork. That is the explanation for the novel’s contradictions. (122)

Another important thought embedded in this reflection is the thought about the choice making that is involved in “all fictions.” Here the discussion of “all fictions “ seems to elevate this reflection beyond the conversation that Albert is having about Ts’ui Pen’s novel and allow it to apply to fictions outside of the novel. If read this way, then the discussions about the fictions make the novel a type of analogy for the creative process that an artist must go through to choose a storyline. At every point in the story, the writer is meeting with diverse alternatives, and he must choose some and eliminate others.

Albert talks about the characters in the novel as the agents of choice, giving the example following this passage about a character named Fang. In the novel, Fang has choices to make that will result in different outcomes when another character knocks on his door. He has the choice to kill the character, or the character could kill him, or they could both live, or both be killed, etc. Obviously the unfolding of these events would make many more possible permutations of the cause and effect events leading to any of the outcomes.

However, while Albert is intent on talking about the choices with regard to the characters in the novel, the author of the novel is also implicated because he is involved in setting up the possible outcomes. It is the goal of Ts’ui pen’s novel to exhaust possible outcomes by exploring
all of them; however this is exactly what makes the novel chaotic. Thus, the chaos of the novel represents the radical freedom that an artist has, but must negotiate in order to make art. The freedom comes from the fact that so many possible outcomes can be chosen in any given story.

Of course the significance of this radical freedom of the artist (Ts’ui Pen), the characters (like Fang), and the reader, who is the one actively involved in being caught in the labyrinth, is all further complicated and made ironic by the connection that the reflections from Albert on the novel have with the larger story that Albert and Yu Sun are in, and which we are reading. What Albert points out about possible outcomes and paths crossing in Ts’ui Pen’s novel becomes utterly ironic because it applies to the situation at hand between the two men. Albert (almost prophetically) says, “In Ts’ui Pen’s novel, all the outcomes occur; each is a starting point for further bifurcations. Once in a while, the paths of that labyrinth converge; for example, you come to this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another my friend” (125). Though Stephen Albert gave this example to make the point about the novel, it is ironically connected to the situation that he is living in at the moment.

Once we learn the unfolding result of the story, we know that Stephen Albert is shot by Yu Tsun for the purpose of getting his name published along with news of the murder. Although Yu Tsun has ulterior motives for killing Stephen Albert, the action must be taken, in his mind, for the greater purpose of sending a message to the Germans. Furthermore, Captain Madden (according to Ys Tsun), was in the garden as he committed the murder, and it could have been the case that Madden interrupted and captured Yu Tsun before he had the chance to complete his action. However, in the story that we are getting through the narrative of Yu Tsun, this is not the case.
In the story that we get, the murder is done, Yu Tsun is captured, and the city of Albert is bombed because the Germans picked up on the clue he made by killing a man with the name of the city where the artillery camp was. Of course, when we read the story backwards, the moment we read about earlier in which the “phone book” comes in to the story, we realize that the act of looking up the name was not due to the fact the Yu Tsun was looking for a name of a person he already knew. Rather, it was a coincidental act that resulted in the death of the man he chose. This type of coincidence is exactly the kind of event that the story within the story about the novel makes us consider in terms of fate and destiny. Here, freedom and determinism are two sides of the same coin.

It is exactly Yu Tsun’s freedom (radical freedom) that leads him to make the series of choices that he does in the story. He thinks and works like an artist because he is basing his choices on factors that are not immediately pressing on him or are obviously given as alternatives. Rather than merely responding to his environment, Yu Tsun is thinking about possibilities beyond the immediately obvious and physical, and this is what gives him the idea to kill a man with the name Stephen Albert. Though this choice was seemingly made by chance, it is the story that becomes the central story in the narrative that we are reading. Thus, while the story began as chance, as we get deeper into it, the coincidences we discover become increasingly uncanny.

Not only is the content of the conversation with Stephen Albert significant in its thematic dealings with possible futures, chance, destiny and time, but there is enormously significant coincidental importance of the fact that Stephen Albert knows about Yu Tsun’s ancestor and the book that he made. Also significant, which can easily be overlooked, is the fact that the story we
are reading is still told from the narrative voice of Yu Tsun. This casts into doubt the factual validity of everything in the story because it is coming through an unreliable narrator, who has also edited his own ideas, according to our introduction. This, of course means that the ideas have been further edited by the person who wrote the introduction, and so it is impossible to know how much of what seems coincidental or ironic or left to chance within the story actually is as it seems. Thus, we must entertain the idea that what we are reading is the creation of an artist, just like the labyrinth of the novel within the story.

This type of reflecting on our own reading experience and the author who made the work that we are reading is exactly why the story “The Garden of Forking Paths” behaves unlike other fiction. Though the story itself opens many questions, some of the most important questions have to do with who is telling the story, how the story is constructed, and possibilities that are tried and chosen from an artistic perspective.

We are constantly reconsidering how the fiction behaves, and what kind of fictional work we are dealing with, and this is the type of story that we read back and forth, rather than straight through. We continue flipping pages back and forth to try to make the coherent meaning out of what we are reading, and depending on how we choose to read the story, there are certain parts that we may choose to pay attention to in one reading that we must then surrender or forget in another reading because they do not fit and make things more complicated.

“The Garden of Forking Paths” introduces a whole host of issues: narrative structures that complicate our interpretation, metaphysical puzzles that frustrate understanding, and moral dilemmas. Yet, the experience of reading it requires intellectual and emotional engagement with the writing that proves its artistic success. This success is not just due to the fact that the story
pulls us in and compels us to consider the world in a certain way; rather, the success comes because the story reveals to us our own role in the world, via our own freedom and responsibility. Because the effort to meditate on and draw reader attention to the production and behavior of ‘text as text’ is essential in Borges’s existential position, “The Garden of Forking Paths” serves as an excellent example of how the experience of reading a text intersects with and informs our understanding of the world—and our choice making involved in understanding our lives as stories that require interpretation for meaning.

The Library of Babel

In “The Garden of Forking Paths,” the communication among freedoms between author and reader is best accomplished as the work that we do to read this text draws our attention to the way that we read other texts in the world. Through this, the work shows us new possibilities for the act of reading. While this story behaves like a work of existentialist art in helping us understand our essential role in bringing forth meaning from the texts, “The Library of Babel” is perhaps the best example of Borges writing as an existentialist philosopher to reveal the impossibility of metaphysics, while opening new possibilities for metaphysical thinking.

“The Library of Babel” is another story that focuses on the act of storytelling, or more precisely, the use of stories in making meaning of existence in the world. Yet, it has added philosophical weight, as it reads like a philosophical allegory in which the pursuit of metaphysics is impossible. In this context, the act of story making becomes all the more significant for human beings because it (and not philosophy) is shown to be the method for making meaning of existence. The following reading of the story will attempt to show how this story, read like a
philosophical myth, works to ironically expose the futility of philosophical work while engaging in a new kind of philosophical work through the creation of story.

The “Library of Babel” centers on the image of an infinite library (though some doubt that it is infinite) full of an infinite number of books. The library is a series of hexagonal rooms, with four walls full of books and the other walls connecting to the next hexagonal chamber. The books on the shelves are full of a jumble of letters, and thus contain all possible combinations of characters. The puzzling aspect of this supposed “universe” is its organizing principle. Though it seems that there is organization to the Library based on the symmetrical and orderly layout, the content of the books contained in it contradict its order through their chaos.

Since the story opens with this image, it is clear from the beginning that the story that the “universe” contained in the library is an imagined one. Thus, our attention as readers is drawn away from any attempt to read the story in a literal way. Since we know that the story is fantasy, we must use our imaginations just to follow the speaker’s description. Yet, while the story is fantasy, it has an uncanny resonance for us as readers. The library’s catalogue of knowledge, based on the use of language and characters, seems to reflect the efforts from science, philosophy, and religion in our own world to apprehend and classify the information contained within our own universe. Thus, while we read the story as fiction, its seeming correspondence to our own universe causes us to seriously consider the real potential of any philosophical conclusions it may present. However, the story actually teases us in this regard as it complicates, rather than clarifies, the possibility for conclusions.

The narrative voice in this myth works as the chief mode for philosophical thought as it delivers the description of the library and then further describes the effort from humanity to find
the book that contains the code that will explain the jumble and chaos catalogued in the library. Since the narrator initially speaks in a comprehensive way about the library and the code and the books, it seems that they voice is one of experience and wisdom. However, the voice is also ultimately cynical that this book exists.

Interestingly, the narrator speaks as an aged man who used to wander in pursuit of such a book (which in the philosophical analogy would seems to be wandering in pursuit of absolutes), and throughout his whole life, he has not been able to find it. Now, he is resolved to the fact that this book may not exist. Consequently, since the narrative voice was the means by which we gained hope about philosophical conclusions, his quickly discovered cynicism closes this possibility.

The narrator’s opening paragraph about his lifelong pursuit expresses feelings of anguish and futility as he reflects on the little progress he has made, most poignantly exemplified by the fact that he will die, essentially, in the same place he was born. He writes:

Like all the men of the Library, in my younger days I traveled; I have journeyed in quest of a book, perhaps the catalog of catalogs. Now that my eyes can hardly make out what I myself have written, I am preparing to die, a few leagues from the hexagon where I was born. When I am dead, compassionate hands will throw me over the railing; my tomb will be the unfathomable air, my body will sink for ages, and will decay and dissolve in the wind engendered by my fall, which shall be infinite. I declare that the Library is infinite. (112).

While the man has been on a quest for the “catalog of catalogs,” he has traveled a whole lifetime only to end up in the same place where he started. The futility of his effort seems to suggest that
man is both curious by nature, but also limited in his capacity to understand what his curiosity drives him to pursue. This surrendering to futility suggests a type of existential angst that comes with the realization that our seemingly unlimited imaginations are completely limited by our finitude. Thus, if we are interested in understanding metaphysics, then we are doomed to live with a type of melancholy, as we are barred from understanding metaphysics due to our limitations.

Though the philosophical myth begins with this meditation on the futility of the pursuit, and thus seems to set itself up as an expression of existential angst, as the meditation unfolds, there are more and more rotations of consideration that make reading the central act of consideration. One of the most significant moments of this meditation comes after a description of the chaotic order of the characters in the books in which the narrator says:

Those phrases, at first apparently incoherent, are undoubtedly susceptible to cryptographic or allegorical “reading”; that reading, that justification of the words’ order and existence, is itself verbal and, ex hypothesi, already contained somewhere in the Library. There is no combination of characters one can make—dhcmrlchtldj, 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. To speak is to commit tautologies. (114)

Here, “reading” itself makes a translation from chaos to meaning, which almost appears to be an existential solution to the problem of the impossibility of metaphysics. If the reader is able to
extract meaning and “justify to words’ order,” then this seems to suggest that the only meaning that can be brought to the library is the meaning the individual inhabitant (the reader of this universe) gives it.

Though this translation from chaos to order that is enacted by the perceiver of the library strongly evokes an existentialist perspective, this point is seemingly undercut by the next lines of the meditation. Here, the narrator explains that even if he brings meaning to the text that he finds in the library, his thoughts are already contained elsewhere in the library. Once he is thinking in language, then his thoughts must exist in the library because the library contains all possible letter combinations. This seems to rob him (or anyone) of the authorship of his own ideas, and, thus, rather than stemming from his freedom to create meaning, he is only acting as one particular manifestation of the repetition of the library. Thus, his effort seems more a function of chance or randomness and circumstance than any kind of act of free will.

There even seems to be a moment of authorial angst in which the narrator almost jumps off the page to question the reader, saying: “You who read me—are you sure you understand my language?” (114) There is a rhetorical maneuver going on here in which the narrator expresses question about whether or not his reader is understanding him, which reveals a certain existential angst. And yet, the effort to communicate this angst by wording the question just so, with that particular tone, already becomes ironic because the drive to communicate overrides the sense that the attempt at communication will be futile.

Thus, through this act of communication, the narrator is revealing himself to act according to the opposite of what he seems to believe about the point of communication. He says, “To speak is to commit tautologies,” but clearly he does not behave according to this. In
fact, his communication shows the outworking of the existential hope that needs no justification because it drives us to strive for meaning, understanding, and communication with other human beings and other works of human creation. However, this seeming contradiction works to create a tension that works to communicate one of the most sophisticated and complex points in existentialist philosophy, namely that in order to live an authentic existence, we must live in tension and irony, as we are essentially ironic beings—composed of boundless imagination and a sense of the eternal, and yet trapped in a limited and finite body.

So if my life and my world correspond to the narrator’s experience in the “Library,” then the undercutting of the originality of my ideas might diminish the freedom that I have as a reader to make sense of the chaos I find in my text. Yet, I am still compelled, in essence, to work within the confines and limits to find a meaning and order to the world I know. The angst that I experience as I become aware of my inability to know that my ideas are original expressions of my perceptions and experiences as a unique individual interacting with the world is iterative. It operates in a cyclical nature, as I find order, then my new order is complicated and made chaotic by my perceived limitation. Yet, as soon as I begin the pursuit of meaning in the chaos, even in the simple form of communication about the chaos through the act of writing, I am already enacting my freedom as an individual and creative agent in the world. This cycle of perceived limitation countered by an indomitable creative thrust to exercise my freedom captures the tension and irony that give me authentic existence as a human being.

If we consider the narrator’s closing comments in the story in light of this ironic cycle that defines our authentic relationship to reality, then they bring this point to bear even more significantly by allowing it to resound in the thematic closure. The narrator says:
And yet those who picture the world as unlimited forget that the number of possible books is not. I will be bold enough to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: The Library is unlimited but periodic. If an eternal traveler should journey in any direction, he would find after untold centuries that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder—which, repeated, becomes order: the Order. My solitude is cheered by that elegant hope. (118)

Not only does this cycle reveal how I must embrace the irony in my own existence, as I am part of an ironic universe, establishing this as a thematic ending to the story, this theme also connects to the significance of the roles of author and reader in the communication of freedoms.

In this ending, the narrator is acting both as artist and “reader” and is demonstrating the triumph of freedom in both cases. As a “reader” of the Library, he is articulating his own understanding of the order of the library, which involved a circularity in which the same disorder becomes repeated. For the narrator, this order is a way of understanding the disorder. Thus, through the exercise of interpretation and analogy, his solitude is “cheered.” At the same time, as author of the myth we are reading, he chooses to close with this comment, which creates a nice, and satisfying aesthetic closure to the story.

Within the story, the narrator is coming full circle to an idea that he introduced in the beginning of his meditation when he began talking about his travels and journeys through the Library during his life. Thus, by returning to this image, his story makes a poetic circle, which has double significance because the topic he returns to is the very idea of circularity. In the library (and the universe), the circularity exists between ideas, between texts, and between space.
Even the hexagonal shapes of the library’s chambers are like modified circles, and the entrance and exit are perfectly symmetrical, and this symmetry is ongoing.

Thus, the theme of circularity brings the story to a close, and it does so in an aesthetically satisfying way. Because the problem of angst (and the angst that is expressed in the story, especially) has to do with a feeling of inability to escape, this angst can be relieved through an aesthetic escape. However, unlike Stephen Deadalus’s escape from the labyrinth in Portrait of the Artist, which requires him to pursue isolation, this aesthetic escape happens like a sleight of hand magic trick. Here the escape happens because the alignment of the elements in the story creates a tunnel of escape, held in place with ironic tension. It is the ironic twist that makes this possible.
CHAPTER III: ARTISTIC IRRESPONSIBILITY AND BAD FAITH

The imagination (of the author and the reader) is the primary means by which meaningful stories for ordering the events in life are created. Thus, on the one hand, the exercise of the imagination is essential in our ability to live a meaningful existence. However, while the imagination holds the key to our living a meaningful existence (in allowing us to explore hypothetical possibilities for understanding our lives and choices, and thus allowing us to understand our essential freedom), the imagination can also be the chief means of self-deception and can inhibit us from understanding our freedom, thus leading us to inauthentic existence. Consequently, when an artist or a society chooses to reveal certain storylines in the world, the effort can be responsible (if it reveals possibility) or tyrannical (if it limits possibility).

Many of Borges’s stories explore and reveal acts of the imagination that become tyrannical and lead towards some kind of inauthentic existence. One particular fascination of the fictions is the power of the collective imagination, or “public” belief systems. The collective imagination, unchecked, can produce worlds that are deceptions—like those created by the metaphysicians in “Tlon” and the Counsel responsible in the “Lottery in Babylon.”

While an individual imagination can conceive of systems of order, which may or may not properly understand the individual’s freedom in relation to reality, the collective imagination causes an actuality of a conceived of order. Because it exists in the collective imagination, there is a unity and order to it that exists outside of individual consciousness. Thus, it becomes empowered to impact the freedom of others under its influence. However, this does not make the system true. And when individuals base action on a created system this leads to “bad faith” (in
Sartre’s understanding). The Nazi ideology (to use a historically relevant example) and action is just one example, but it fully serves to expose the horrors and dangers of this.

As a storyteller himself, Borges allows us to see the ways in which our attempts to control reality through stabilizing structures is an outworking of “bad faith.” Though the chief controllers of reality might be easily understood as scientists, philosophers, and theologians, as they have historically provided the dominant paradigms for explaining human existence and reality, Borges is interested in exposing these intellectuals and any others who attempt to persuade people to believe in their systems of understanding the world, including artists. For this reason, in many of the stories, authorship—and the possibility of new created work-- is brought into question, whether it has to do with an intellectual idea, an anonymous piece of writing, a fictive encyclopedia, or the story presenting these ideas.

A direct implication of Borges’s questioning of authorship is that we, as readers, become responsible for choosing which stories we believe. Thus, as much as an intellectual human being can be acting in bad faith if believes that he has created an accurate picture of reality, the reader of this picture can be acting in bad faith if he believes the author as a mere act of faith. I hope to demonstrate how Borges’s fictions understand, reveal, and deal with these problems in the following analyses of some of his short stories.

The Theologians

“The Theologians” seems to be almost a direct meditation on an individual acting out of ‘bad faith.” As the central character, Aurelian, strives to make his existence defined by his famous theological authorship, we watch the destructive nature of this belief acting upon the world. The main problem stems from the fact that Aurelian needs his ideas to be original in
order to understand the significance of his own existence, yet through a surprising turn of events, his ideas are exposed to be reiterations of ideas that are already in existence.

Much like the angst the narrator experiences in “The Library of Babel” when he comes to terms with the fact that the Library already contains all of his possible ideas, Aurelian is tortured by the fact that his theological revelation turns out to be nothing more than a repetition of an idea already realized. Borges describes Aurelian’s struggle by noting, “He could not find the necessary words; the admonitions were too affected and metaphorical to be transcribed” (206). Just then, however, Aurelian comes up with a thought that seems like a revelation, but is actually a repetition of a thought from his archrival theologian, John of Pannonia. Aurelian’s disgust at the realization of the unoriginality of his thought drives him to shame, and ultimately leads him to condemn John of Pannonia to death.

Although John of Pannonia ends up burning at the stake (which should be a victory for Aurelian), Aurelian is the one truly defeated. His defeat, thus, demonstrates that religious thoughts are intertextual rather than original in nature. Thus, heresies are by nature intertextual, in the Kristevan sense, as they attempt to reinterpret doctrine based on the ideas and mistakes already attached to that doctrine. Then, any refutation of heresy is also based on a reinterpretation of the ideas contained in the heresy, and guided by ideas that the heresy reinterprets.

As the story closes, another ironic punch comes in the last line “The end of the story can only be told in metaphors, since it takes place in the kingdom of heaven, where time does not

\[\text{\footnotesize The term, as coined by Julie Kristeva, decades after Borges’s writing, was writing, was originally considered specifically with regard to texts, though it applies equally to “ideas.” The concept of “intertextual” is that all are recapitulations or collages of ideas that have already been articulated elsewhere.}\]
exist” (207). While, this line is clearly ironic on one level (as this further renders the entire debate moot), it also creates instability because it is not entirely clear how this is intended to be taken. Obviously, the comment ascribes to some kind of special transcendent knowledge, but how does the narrator have this? Is this not another example of intertextuality, in which he has gotten his idea (which brings his story to a close) from some other conception of the eternal and divine?

We leave this story wondering whether or not Borges is actually making a comment about religion? Is he reaffirming the idea of the mysterious transcendent? Ultimately, does the intertextuality of religious ideas prove or disprove that there is truth in religion? The story does not provide us with answers to these questions, but instead leaves us to consider them for ourselves. We, the reader, must make the choice of interpretation, and since we have this choice, we are not left with the unbearable weight of the hanging questions the story leaves open. We have the power to interpret, and in understanding this power, we have retained our ultimate freedom to find meaning in our existences, through our choice to believe or disregard the stories that come our way.

In “The Theologians,” we come away with a clear message that there is a great danger in assuming authorship of any idea, and especially religious ideas. The metaphysical nature of religious ideology draws especially on the human imagination for articulation; however, there is an even greater danger for this reason because “I” am necessarily involved in the creation of the stories that are supposed to have transcendent truth. Though my ideas may feel like the stem from divine revelation, it is worth considering the origin of my ideas as already existing in other
ideas in the world. If I am not aware of this possibility, then I am in danger of creating stories that I believe to be true, which may just be reinterpretations of false stories.

So the story works as existentialist philosophy in that we (the readers) are affirmed in our ultimate freedom in choice making, which is essential to us as human beings, but we are also cautioned against claiming truth or that extends beyond our locus of knowledge. Thus, the story pushes us to embrace our own responsibility (caused by our freedom) in making ourselves essential in the world, while at the same time pushing us to realize that we are limited in our ability to know truth beyond our own responsibility.

**Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote**

The story “Pierre Menard” is perhaps most effective in revealing why it is essential for us to embrace our existential responsibility in choosing to believe different narratives presented to us through the world. As “readers” of the world, if we do not exercise discernment about which stories we choose to believe in our reality, then we face the danger of living in “bad faith” and living out an inauthentic existence. The danger in choosing to believe the wrong stories is further heightened by the natural interpenetration between fiction and our worlds that occurs as we strive to make meaning of our lives through story making.

The story of “Pierre Menard” explores the effects of the interpenetration between fiction and our world and how this can confuse us and others and lead to deception and inauthentic existence. By creating ironic moments in which our narrator (who we are dependent on for the story) is unreliable and we are able to see through his attempts to impose an order on the world where it does not exist, Borges, as an existentialist philosopher, teaches us as readers to be aware of individuals in authorial positions acting out bad faith. As we become aware of our narrator’s
unreliability, this realization lets us know that we must read between the lines of what is said in order to uncover a more authentic meaning in the story we are reading.

“Pierre Menard,” starts out in a rather ironic position because it purports to be the work of a literary critic, and this critic is beginning his article by criticizing the compilation of Menard’s works by another literary critic, who (according to our narrator) has made “unpardonable omissions and additions” (88). The reason our narrator has for dismissing this work is that the newspaper that printed the “deceitful catalogue” is biased and overtly Protestant in its leanings.

The narrator uses the second paragraph as an attempt to legitimize his authority and justify his description of the “real” catalogue and dismiss the one made by Mm. Henri Bachelier. The narrator attributes his authority to the approbation of two “high testimonials” from the baroness de Bacourt and the countess de Bagnoregio. The fact that these two women have titles of nobility seems to draw attention to the fact that literary criticism (and the arts at large) are impure and are controlled by patrons. Thus, the fact that the narrator of our story is appealing to these titles for his authority to comment on the work and life of the poet bring him into critical light for us as readers because, even if we do not see the problem with his source of authority, the text draws attention to the ridiculousness of his reference by the extra information about the countess de Bagnoregio. He says:

Likewise, the countess de Bagnoregio, one of the rarest and most cultured spirits of the principality of Monaco (now of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, following her recent marriage to the international philanthropist Simon Kautzsch—a man, it grieves me to say, vilified and slandered by the victims of his disinterested
operations), has sacrificed “to truth and to death” (as she herself phrased it) the
noble reserve that is the mark of her distinction, and in an open letter, published in
the magazine Luxe, bestows upon me her blessing. (88)

The fact that the countess is described as one of the most “cultured spirits of the principality of
Monaco” and is now of “Pittsburg, Pennsylvania” is an odd switch for our narrator to include
because Monaco and Pittsburg create quite an ironic juxtaposition mentally. Not only do the
places create a mental juxtaposition, but the reason the countess’s residence changed was
because of a marriage to an “international philanthropist” who, we are told, has been vilified and
slandered by victims of his “disinterested operations.” The fact that the man is a philanthropist
implies that he should be driven by the motivation of love for humanity; yet, his operations are
“disinterested,” which implies a lack of emotion, and have victimized people. The description,
thus, is perfectly ironic.

Also ironic is the fact that our narrator cites an “open letter” in Luxe magazine. The title
of the magazine, “Luxe” epitomizes sumptuous frivolity, so the fact that this letter appeared in
this context makes a certain implication about the spheres of influence the countess has, as well
as the value she places on her relationship with the poet and with our narrator. For the countess,
it seems that relationships with people in the literary field serve her as accessories to maintaining
her image as the cultured, wealthy woman that she is.

After meandering into this explanation (which becomes ridiculous) about the patronesses,
our narrator goes on to say, “those commendations are sufficient, I think,” but we as readers see
an ironic disconnect between the fact that he is trying to justify his authority by making
associations with wealthy patrons. His obsequious description of these women reveal more about
him as a narrator than the women as patrons, and the fact that he thinks this description will bring more validity to his commentary actually has the opposite effect.

Because so much attention is placed on the world of literary production and criticism and patronage at the beginning of the story, we are led to think in metatextual ways about how we read fiction, criticism, and the story we are reading at the moment. This reflection allows for the type of mirroring reflectivity that is so common in the work of Borges, and which makes us understand the mechanisms behind the creation of art.

After our questionable narrator gives us the list of Pierre Menard’s works, he explains this list as justification for the rest of his essay, because he makes a distinction between the “visible works” of Menard and an unfinished lifework, which he describes as the most “significant work of our time.” The fact that he was able to give the list of visible works, in chronological order, becomes the justification for his thorough and intimate knowledge of Menard’s work, which is a further justification for him to comment on this other work.

Once the narrator has proven himself through his thorough and articulate list of Menard’s works, he begins his own work, which all of his justifications are intended to bolster. While the foundation for his validation is shaky based on the ways that he undermines his own authority, his introductory comment to his own work draws even more explicit attention to this. He begins his commentary with a statement that draws even more attention to his self-consciousness as a critic by making a caveat that is intended to communicate to his audience that he is aware of the “absurdity” of his own project.

To make this caveat, he says, “This work, perhaps the most significant writing of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of Part I of Don Quixote and a fragment of
Chapter XXII. I know that such a claim is on the face of it absurd; justifying that “absurdity” shall be the primary object of this note” (88). Though this line seems to convey recognition of the potential failure of his project, it is also a rhetorical hook that is intended to form an alliance with the audience and cause us to lend him our listening ears. In a sense, this rhetorical move asks us to withhold our own criticism, as we read his, so that he has the chance to make his case.

As we become involved in his story and discussion, we almost forget about the narrative presence. At other times in the story, the narrative presence becomes significant again, as our narrator admits to imaginations about the work of Menard, which are interpretive and biased, but shape the way his praise of Menard becomes expressed. At one point, he says, “Shall I confess that I often imagine that he did complete it, and that I read the Quixote—the entire Quixote—as if Menard had conceived it? A few nights ago, as I was leafing through Chapter XXVI (never attempted by Menard), I recognized our friend’s style, could almost hear his voice” (92). The narrator is thus admitting how much of his own imagination and effort are involved in bringing forth the reading he is advancing of Menard’s work.

Our awareness of the role of the critic in bringing forth understanding of Menard’s work has significant implications for our own reading experience, as this brings into focus the freedom of the reader in finding meaning in life and text alike. Like so much of Borges’s fiction, the acts of reading and interpretation at work in “Pierre Menard” mirror our act of reading, and thus allow us to reflect on our own act as we reflect on the story before us. Thus, the work we do in reading “Pierre Menard” becomes the existentialist work that we must do in life to find the meaning in existence. This mirroring effect between the ideas about reading contained within the story and the experience that we have reading this story, and, furthermore, how this
experience translates to the existentialist practice of reading life, is made most clear in the following passage from our narrator in discussing the work of Menard. Here, the meaning of the text reaches beyond the story and resonates with us as readers of the work of Borges:

Menard has (perhaps unwittingly) enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique—the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution. That technique, requiring infinite patience and concentration, encourages us to read the *Odyssey* as though it came after the *Aeneid*, to read Mme. Henri Bachelier’s *Le jardin du Centaure* as though it were written by Mme. Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the calmest book with adventure. (95)

This passage is almost uncanny from a reader’s perspective because it seems so relevant to the reading experience of Borges’s fiction. Borges, like Menard as described here, employs techniques that require infinite patience from the reader, and thus, also enrich the art of reading. Not only does this art of reading apply to the act of reading literature, but it also translates to a reading of the world outside of the text, as Borges’s fiction reveals the world (and instabilities in the world) through text.

*Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*

While “The Theologians” and “Pierre Menard” serve as a powerful examples of imagination (storytelling in particular) working against its proper end in the life of an individual and his immediate world, one of the most harrowing examples of the danger involved in storytelling is exemplified by the collective imagination in the story of “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” Most often, or at least most often in the work of Borges, the consideration of these
collective imaginations are related to attempts people make to control understanding (comprehensive understanding) of the universe. These understandings, thus, become part of the “anonymous public voice” that controls my actions and limits my freedom and leads me to an inauthentic existence.

If I am aware of this voice, then I can rebel against it and make a determination to take responsibility. My realization of this freedom is inextricably linked to a responsibility. I have to be aware of as many voices as possible and choose which to believe. Here, again, I have to choose which stories to believe, and my responsibility in this choice is essential in my given role as a “reader” of this world. From this existentialist perspective, then, “Tlon, Uqbar” seems like an attempt to help us become aware of the power of the public voices we believe by exposing an instance in which this “public voice” altered reality (and thereby human freedom).

In “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius”, which reads like another philosophical myth, the world is actually altered by the work of metaphysicians and collaborators who have created a false universe. The end of the story paints this picture most starkly:

Contact with Tlon, the habit of Tlon, has disintegrated this world. Spellbound by Tlon’s rigor, humanity has forgotten and continues to forget, that it is the rigor of chess masters, not of angels. Already Tlon’s (conjectural) “primitive” language has filtered into our schools; already the teaching of Tlon’s harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has obliterated the history that governed my own childhood; already a fictitious past has supplanted in men’s memories that other past, of which we now know nothing certain—not even that it is false. (72)

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Heidegger’s term from Being and Time, Part 7.
Thus, the “moral” of this story seems to be that we must be aware of collective forces in the world (that result from collective imagination) that actually limit our understanding of possibilities, and thereby our own freedom.

“Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” is like “The Garden of Forking Paths” in that this story reads like detective fiction and also draws important attention to the narrative voice. However, unlike “The Garden of Forking Paths,” this story is told from the first person narrative, and the speaker gives us information and details of the story as they become known to him. Though the story occurred five years ago, supposedly, the narrative voice that brings us through the story is speaking as if in the present. Thus, the switch in tense between the first two paragraphs, which allows us as readers to know that the story is being told retrospectively, causes a certain amount of tension in what we take to be the “truth” of the story, as we know that the narrator who speaks to us could be distorting things.

The beginning of the story gives us quite an ironic entry point, as our narrator associates the central event of the story “the discovery of Uqbar” as having its origin in his life on the night of a dinner with a friend. As he tells it, the conversation that was occurring at dinner was a conversation about a narrator of a novel who would intentionally distort things and engage in contradictions. The narrator conveys this event as almost insignificant for the story. Rather, it seems to function only to validate the memory of the night, and the conversation seems inconsequential. The tone here is quite casual, yet if we bring a critical perspective to the thoughts, they are quite suggestive of the potential for a trick on us as readers. In other words, they seem to foreshadow something about the reading experience, but we have to be discerning readers to pick up on this. The narration reads as follows:
Bioy Casares had come to dinner at my house that evening, and we had lost all track of time in a vast debate over the way one might go about composing a first-person novel whose narrator would omit or distort things and engage in all sorts of contradictions, so that a few of the books readers—a very few—might divine the horrifying or banal truth. (68)

Because of the position of this passage relative to the rest of the story, the mere suggestion of a narrator distorting things introduces the essential problem that the short story deals with, both thematically, and as a self-aware text and how it relates to the world.

Not only are the authors of Tlon working with this intent, which our narrator wants to reveal to us, but we must also question the intents and motivations of our narrator. Should we believe what he is telling us? On the one hand, the story starts out like it could be true. The specificity of terms and names of real artists and thinkers that are incorporated bring a perceived validity to what we are reading. However, as we read on, the story becomes increasingly apparently false.

Our own experience as readers is mirrored in the text as the narrator goes through a similar process of realization regarding the encyclopedia entry on Tlon. However, within the story the switch between understanding the text as true or false switches multiple times. Early on in the story, the narrator describes his first moment of epiphany (though the third person narrative suggests some doubt in his mind about this):

> At first it was thought that Tlon was a mere chaos, an irresponsible act of imaginative license; today we know that it is a cosmos, and that the innermost laws that govern it have been formulated, however provisionally so. Let is suffice
to remind the reader that the apparent contradictions of Volume Eleven are the
foundation stone of the proof that the other volumes do in fact exist: the order that
has been observed is just that lucid, just that fitting. (72)

However, the question about Tlon’s existence is eventually settled when, in the postscript the
narrator discusses the impact of this “false” world on the “real” world. The final revelation of
this fact after the cycle of belief and doubt mimics our reading experience of the story, but also
the type of mental activity we engage in when considering metaphysical theories about the
world.

The fact that, in this case, Tlon is a creation of collective imagination, thus, seems to
serve as a warning about the “public” knowledge that we assume to be true because it has a
logical consistency. Thus, from an existentialist perspective, this Borges story teaches that the
power of collective “storytelling” is both great and dangerous, and it seems that the best way that
we can deal with it as individuals is to be aware of this danger and become more critical readers
of our “world.”

In order to do this, there seems to be a suggestion that we must be okay with uncertainty.
We must learn to question the “grand-narratives” that the public gives us, even if they are
comfortable and convenient. Otherwise, we are subject to falling into belief in a system that is
false and is only a result of human creation. This is the exact reason that Tlon became part of the
public realm of knowledge. The narrator expresses a type of melancholic resignation about this
fact in the postscript:

Jean-Francios Lyotard discusses of the collapse of grand-narratives in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on
Knowledge.
Ten years ago, any symmetry, any system with an appearance of order—
dialectical materialism, anti-semitism, Nazism—could spellbind and hypnotize
mankind. How could the world not fall under the sway of Tlon, how could it not
yield to the vast and minutely detailed evidence of an ordered planet? It would be
futile to reply that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but orderly in accordance
with divine laws (read: “inhuman laws”) that we can never quite manage to
penetrate. Tlon may well be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth forged by men, a
labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men. (81)

This passage not only expresses pessimism about the world and collective knowledge of human
beings, but moreover suggests doubt about the philosophical pursuit all together. Here, like in
“The Library of Babel, metaphysics seems to be impossible.

Also like “The Library of Babel, while on the one hand this particular story seems
pessimistic about our ability to understand order in the world, a closer reading of the text reveals
hope despite the explicit skepticism. At first, the narrator makes (the above) expression of futility
in searching for meaning and order in the universe. Furthermore the story also ends with the
narrator committing himself to a perpetual act of futility. Yet, a close reading of this ending
reveals that the cynicism about the purpose of this act is undercut by the specific references the
narrator makes:

A hundred years from now…the world will be Tlon. That makes very little
difference to me; through my quiet days in this hotel in Adrogue, I go on revising
(though I never intend to publish) an indecisive translation in the style of
Quevedo of Sir Thomas Browne’s Urne Buriall. (81)
Because Quevedo was known for his simplicity of language and unpretentiousness, the reference here seems to imply that the narrator is interested in translating the chaotic encyclopedia into simplest terms, which requires finding a new and simpler order in the work. Thus, this narrator’s plan for the act of translation seems to undercut his “belief” in the futility of this act. Even if the act of translation is futile from a metaphysics perspective, the narrator sees this “futility” as license to pursue the activity for his own pleasure, and the pursuit of this pleasure becomes a new way of understanding how to make his human existence meaningful.

Once the act of translation is removed from consideration as an act of utility, it becomes an act of artistic production. For the narrator, the ongoing revision becomes the work of his life, and there is a purpose and pleasure in this endeavor. This is not the same as ‘art for art’s sake’, however, because the importance is placed on the act of production rather than the product. It is the cycle of reading and revision of this encyclopedia that is important. Though there may be nostalgia about the fact that this encyclopedia does not have correspondence to the real world (underscoring the impossibility of metaphysics), there is meaning in the act that has been discovered.

The concern about the futility of intellectual activity is a theme explored elsewhere in Borges, and explicitly in one of the stories already considered: Pierre Menard. This concern is expressed near the end of the story when our narrator reflects on the project of Menard as an intellectual exercise. He writes, “There is no intellectual exercise which is not ultimately pointless. A philosophical doctrine is, at first, a plausible description of the universe; the years go by and it is a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or proper noun—in the history of philosophy. In literature, that “falling by the wayside,” that loss of “relevance” is even better known…Fame is a
form—perhaps the worst form—of incomprehension” (94). Though, this intellectual activity may not advance the uncovering of truth, it seems that Borges still sees value in it, as explained by Anthony Cascaridi.

Cascaridi argues, “Borges shares Nietzsche’s suspicion that ‘philosophy’ may have its origins not in wonder but in anxiety, in the desire to quiet the fear that comes from this abandonment of reality’s metaphysical grounds” (121). Thus, Cascaridi asserts that because Borges thinks that there is no way to pacify this anxiety, he thinks of philosophical discourse as a “series of puzzles to be enjoyed,” like the metaphysicians in Tlön who seek to amaze and astound rather than seek truth (121).

After exposing philosophy as a cycle of repetitions that fail to gain further access to truth and demonstrating through his work that literature has been exhausted and also is doomed to repeat borrowed symbols, Cascaridi explains that Borges seems to have an optimistic outlook on the future of art. As Cascaridi explains:

Neither the baroque philosophical speculations of a text like “Tlön, Uqbar” nor the labyrinthine structure of Ts’ui Pen’s novel in “The Garden of Forking Paths” precludes the possibility of an aesthetic reflection on the predicament in which everything seems to be either a mere repetition or failed mimesis. Thus, Borges is able to communicate a new aesthetic theory by demonstrating the failure of the old one. (123)

I would add to this conclusion that it is through the recognition of the active role of imagination in understanding our reality explains the hope expressed in Borges’s work despite the surrendering of metaphysics and the possibility of creating original art. Borges seems to reject
these as being necessary for discovering authentic human existence by showing that they do not
determine freedom. Rather, freedom is found through the aesthetic act of choosing between
stories we choose to believe in ordering the world.
CONCLUSION

In all these cases, Borges effectively demonstrates how radical human freedom is limited by illusions, but can be regained and harnessed through art—and in particular, stories. The illusions that distort and hinder our understanding of our freedom come about through ourselves and deception about who we are, the certainty we try to obtain for ourselves about our worlds, and the “anonymous public voices” that control even our subconscious thoughts.

To act in “bad faith” by failing to bring a critical eye to the structures and devices we use to make meaning in our lives, we act out of either ignorance and complacency or hubris. In either case, for Borges, our actions (individually and collectively) result in negative consequences in which parts of reality become denied, changed, or forgotten. We become unhealthily bound to these stabilizing structures and humanity (on the whole) becomes endangered of losing itself.

I think that we have to see the implication here that Borges has an existentialist understanding of what it means to be human in that to be human will entail living in a type of tension and uncertainty, but that this is essential to also live freely. And if we are not living freely, then we are not living a fully human life and we are operating out of bad faith.

While Borges seems to fully understand the importance of understanding and exercising freedom as part of an authentic human existence, he is unlike existentialists who get bogged down in angst about the “freedom” problem. Instead, Borges seems interested in a positive investigation of this freedom. Ultimately, for Borges, an understanding of freedom leads to hope and enjoyment of possibilities rather than despair about my limitation. I get to be a human being conscious of myself as human being and witness to my story. I get to assimilate my own story as
the one born onto this stage. It is ironic, but also enjoyable that I can be aware of myself as self and as a person set on the stage of life at any given point in time.

“Borges y Yo,” one of Borges’ shorter stories, offers a delightful articulation of this exactly. It is so brief; it is tempting to cite the whole text; however, just the opening will show this attitude. It opens as follows:

The other one, Borges is the one things happen to. I wander around Buenos Aires, pausing perhaps unthinkingly, these days, to examine the arch of an entranceway and its metal gate. I hear about Borges in letters, I see his name on a roster of professors and in the biographical gazetteer. I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typeface, the taste of coffee, and Stevenson’s prose. The other one likes the same things, but his vanity transforms them into theatrical props. To say that our relation is hostile would be an exaggeration: I live, I stay alive, so that Borges can make his literature, and this literature is my justification. (324)

This is one of the more poignant passages in which the voice of Borges the artist comes through. The type of reflection he does here acknowledges Borges the man and Borges the artist, and this is the kind of duality and role playing awareness that is so essential in Sartre’s existentialism for human beings to achieve freedom, and thereby full humanity. Clearly, here, Borges the man is distinct from Borges the artist.

Borges is author par excellence when it comes to considering human freedom from the artist’s perspective because he understands that what is absolutely essential in this connection is the necessity of exhausting possibilities to realize freedom. There is a “negativity” of our being

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This concept is fully explained in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. 
fully human because for us to understand our freedom, we must feel the space of nothingness that exists between ourselves and our possibilities of choice.

In drawing attention to the narrative nature of experiencing life as a human being through his fiction, Borges is also exposing that these gaps and tensions exist in life, and we should be aware of them. This is necessary for us to live the most authentic human life that we possibly can live—(a dynamic between our unlimited imagination and finitude). But the chorus of voices that present narratives to us must be exposed, and this is part of Borges’s project.

Returning to the introductory discussion of this paper, which detailed the historical time of Borges’s writing and the need for new examination of old existential questions, Borges responds to this new artistic responsibility admirably. John Barth’s “Literature of Exhaustion,” describes Borges’s work as holding a new aesthetic power despite the perceived end of innovative possibilities in art. My belief is that this power should be credited to Borges’s work because of the way he enlivens us in the realization of our own humanity and what an authentic human existence entails.
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