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# The Literature Returning to 'Tao': A Thinking from Reading 'El Jardín de Senderos que se Bifurcan'

**Yi Zhang**

Department of Computer Science and Technology

Hunan International Economics University

## Abstract

'*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*', the quintessential work of Argentine scribe Jorge Luis Borges, stands as a paragon of 20th-century Latin American Spanish literature. This narrative resonates profoundly with my scholarly sensibilities due to its striking alignment with the 'Yuan'ao' literary concept, a cornerstone of Chinese aesthetics, thereby enabling an interpretation of the short story through the lens of Chinese aesthetic principles. As a dedicated literary scholar, I have discerned a subtle yet profound layer of thought within '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*', a layer that Borges endeavors to articulate. This stratum of thought is unveiled through meticulous textual juxtaposition and critical analysis. The articulation of these thoughts, in essence, masks a more profound ambition - the quest for 'Tao'. In the tapestry of traditional Chinese aesthetics, 'Tao' is revered as an eternal essence and the zenith of ontological inquiry, serving as the ultimate archetype that all creative endeavors, including literary works, aspire to emulate. My scholarly endeavor is anchored in the textual fabric of '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*', enriched by a constellation of enlightening texts and a spectrum of concepts from Chinese aesthetic treatises. In the process of deconstructing and reconstructing its interpretation, I delve into the underlying concepts embedded within these discourses, aiming to unveil the ultimate pursuit of 'Tao'. I offer a novel perspective that seeks to ignite future dialogues on the cross-cultural dimensions of literary studies.

**Key Words:** '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*', Jorge Luis Borges, Spanish literature, Chinese aesthetics, 'Tao', Text comparison and analysis, Cross-cultural nature of literature

## Introduction

I recently re-read the short story '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' (The Garden of Forking Paths) by Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges, which is also one of the representative works of Spanish literature in 20th century Latin America. This short story follows a Chinese man named Yu Zhu, who worked as a spy for Germany in Britain during World War I. It tells of his struggle as he is pursued, culminating in the murder of sinologist Albert in order to provide important information to his German superiors, after which he is subsequently arrested.

However, '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' should be seen more as a philosophical novel, even if it appears to be a detective novel on the surface. In fact, the entire novel is filled with the author's various reflections on the world and the resulting obscure language, which has long surpassed the boundaries of detective fiction. These obscure languages remind me of an ancient literary concept popular in traditional China, namely 'Yuan'ao' (遠奧) - the literal meaning of this word refers to the 'Yuan' (遠, distant) and 'Ao' (奧, difficult to understand) features expressed in language. This term first appeared in a classic Chinese literary criticism called '*Wen xin diao long*' (文心雕龍, Carving a Dragon at the Core of Literature), which is interpreted as the literary temperament of 'drawing essence from typical examples of other articles to describe things that are difficult to understand' (Liu).

This association is actually a feasible starting point for research. The concept of world literature often emphasizes cross-cultural universality, which makes the theoretical analysis of traditional Chinese aesthetics accurately applicable to the exploration of '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*', a Spanish language literature belonging to 20th century Latin America, a feasible approach. Therefore, several questions need to be raised here to explore this work, including what features belong to 'Yuan'ao' in '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurca*' and how they express Borges' ultimate goal in creating this novel, which is to attempt to return literature to the pursuit of 'Tao' (道). Here, 'Tao' is the ultimate existence, highest ontology, and eternal law in traditional Chinese philosophy, similar to the 'Brahman' advocated by traditional Indian philosophy and religion.

It is worth adding that the above discussions not only involve '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*', but also some other texts worldwide, including some literary works related to the textual features of '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' and ancient Chinese aesthetic texts - they will be used to understand '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*'. This also means that the significance of this article is no longer just a new understanding of '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*', but a bold attempt at cross-cultural analysis of literature.

### **Describe the State, Atmosphere, and Meaning**

I strongly agree with the view that literature is a rare exploration of a limited world, including all of Borges's literary works, written as an 'encyclopedia of world knowledge' - including cosmic spirits, metaphysical myths, and some historical or literary allusions. These literary works often give readers a vague and beautiful impression - they originate from certain ideological or emotional elements. This feeling endows the work itself with an unfathomable quality, which I call an imitation of the infinite mysterious essence of the world. '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' is no exception, even though it is a short story with a short length, it does not hinder the completeness of its narrative. It only uses some metaphorical and symbolic rhetoric to achieve a state of literary description:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower. (Blake)

However, these images representing certain concepts make it difficult for people to understand their meanings - these meanings themselves have uncertainty. In the world constructed by Borges, everything is chaotic and unrealistic, and the language used to describe this world clearly has characteristics of ambiguity, ambiguity, and complexity - which is also because the described world also possesses these characteristics. For example, in the maze of this story, we can see the dreamlike projection

of consciousness, the magic brought by association, the expression of unique destiny, the seamless fusion of multiple elements, the ghosts of Gnosticism and paganism, the mysterious atmosphere, clever creation, and astonishing illusions... These clever and unique designs create the beauty of art in form, It also creates an inner tense atmosphere - throughout the entire article, this atmosphere full of various design meanings appears in a profound and prominent manner. These elements in the maze form a structure, which is an extended structure that removes time. Borges emphasizes the technique of repetition in his description of the maze in this novel, creating a prism similar to the proliferation effect through satirical replication.

It is worth noting that this Calvino style fiction creates a mixed atmosphere of truth and falsehood, while also revealing a form of equal truth content, and time is just an eternal cycle. The maze described in the novel shares many similarities with the infinite and internally closed stream of consciousness depicted by Virginia Woolf's *'To the Lighthouse'* and Michel Butor's *'L'Emploi du temps'* (*The time - table*), and can be said to be a fundamental symbol derived from Kandinsky's abstraction. The things and forms symbolized by these basic symbols are all derived from pure life experiences and are related to philosophical thinking about time, which also makes them possess a dual nature of supernatural and everyday - this inevitably reminds people of Franz Kafka's spatial structure in *'Das Schloss'* (*The Castle*) and *'Der Process'* (*The Judgment*). The two are similar in that their meanings are contained in the discourse direction of the text, which is the deep 'narration' of the unique literary language.

### Structure and Language

The previous section's discussion extended to the discussion of structure. The structure of *'El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan'* creates a feeling that is actually similar to Maurice Maeterlinck's play, filled with some pantheological fantasies, various mysteries and ambiguities, as well as various instincts and imaginations. This is not only about 'respecting the aesthetic value of religious or philosophical thought, and even the strange and wonderful things contained within it' ('Otras inquisiciones' 247), but also about establishing a symbolic forest of Swedenborg style. In this symbolic forest surrounded by art, fantasy transcends everything.

And these fantasies are expressed as a collection of symbols, which is also a characteristic of *El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan's* special literary language or textual discourse - traditional writing has been overturned in fact, and the narrative in traditional novels has become an internal, mysterious, flat, fragmented, and illogical narrative. In other words, Borges deconstructed the text and language in the literary tradition represented by classical literature, and replaced it with a new way of expression that is close to Kafka style fantasy. Therefore, the demand for consciousness structure in Borges' creative process has led to the creation of a completely new language - and understanding it, especially the deep meaning, is crucial for understanding the consciousness structure of his creative process.

Regarding language or its interpretation, it can be Kierkegaard style (believing that all rules of language communication lie in the essence of behavior), Hesse style (referring to language contradictions as a sacred hodgepodge), or Wittgenstein style (words are the world itself). The language of all literary works actually belongs to one of them, for example, the language in Peter Handeck's 'Sprechstuecke' (Talk drama) is a typical Wittgenstein style, which attempts to express the world through words. The literary creation concept of 'everything is a vocabulary of a language' ('Luopan') proposed by Borges also belongs to the Wittgenstein style. His description of dreams in *'El Jardín de senderos que se*

*bifurcan*' is similar to that of '*Der Zauberberg*' (*The Mountain*), but his almost unconscious monologue is more like '*Finnegans Wake*' and '*The Death of Virgil*' - a monologue that directly deals with the personalities, interests, and inner worlds of different people. Therefore, the connotations of these things spread to existence, even if they may be fictional. Therefore, the deep meaning contained in the language of Borges' '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' should be understood in relation to the existence itself and its related discourse, and his ideological structure in creating this short story is also a description, analysis, and exploration of existence.

### Characters and themes

Based on his understanding of the first two parts, Borges attempts in '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' to articulate his thinking (about existence and the description, analysis, and exploration of things related to existence) in the creative process of creating texts (i.e. literary works) through language. In this way, the experiential world symbolized by the text imitates the world through language, infinitely close to the true essence of the real world and connected to the real world. And this kind of connection is presented in the theme of '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' throughout the text - which also makes the exploration of the theme of the text an important object of discussion.

However, attributing the entire theme of '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' to the grand proposition of 'philosophy' is clearly too broad. A feasible analysis approach is to seek more detailed themes through the characters and plot in the story. However, due to the various difficult to understand characteristics of the structure and language mentioned earlier, it seems difficult to grasp the characters and plot of this story. In terms of characters, Cui Peng, as a novelist or knowledgeable person, symbolizes his predecessors and their experiences in history. The superior of the opposing enemy country (Britain) and Germany respectively represent death and fate. It is worth adding that the sinologists Albert and 'I' in the story are both narratives of 'me', but the difference between the two lies in whether they have achieved some kind of realization - which also means that these characters are just different aspects of the subject. But the question is, what do they (historical experience, death, and fate) mean by pointing to different aspects of the subject?

It is obvious that the sides of these subjects all point to the historicity of the body and are for the individual. In this way, the answer to this question is very clear: the different aspects of these subjects are actually things that are absent from the entire structure, that is, the concept of time belonging to individuals. I use a text that has intertextuality with '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*', which is another work by Borges, '*Historia de la eternidad*' (*The Eternal History*), to prove that this is an orientation towards the proposition of time - the 'I' text no longer represents the self of the 'author himself and his experience', but the entire person is described as the self. A researcher of Borges and Latin American literature believes that this narrative about the body is essentially a purely humanistic 'hermeneutic expression of reality' (Wilson). And these expressions appear in the form of characters in '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*'.

When characters become different aspects of the subject and become symbols of hermeneutic expression, their themes are also expressed in the symbols. In '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*', its theme is infinite time and the rationality of imagination. But how do I deduce the hidden themes through the different aspects of characters as subjects and the symbols expressed in hermeneutics? Firstly, I am connected to the spatiotemporal background of the entire text - in the 20th century, compared to

the survival dilemma in the so-called absurd world that European existentialists were concerned about, the focus of literary narratives by Latin American writers was not a sense of disillusionment, but rather the melancholy of the Wordsworth style. This is also reflected in *'El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan'* - it has a absurdity similar to Eugène Ionesco's *'Rhinoceros'*. Borges believes that we should 'see a symbol in a day or a year that belongs to the past and humanity' ('Shiyi'), while also reminding us that in the context of 'flowers always protect death' ('Buyinuosiailisi zhi si'), it is impossible for our own soul to pursue eternal life arbitrarily and blindly. In another poem, *'Robajo'*, Borges compares life to chess pieces and creates a sense of oppression in *The Hairy Ape's* style. This emotion has sparked many literary descriptions, such as the contemplation of fantasy and fate in Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud's *'Le Bateau Ivre'* (*The Drunk boat*), the unique ending of voice and anger, symbolizing the impossibility of eternal life. In other words, this absurdity is demonstrated and interpreted by the characters in the text - it showcases the limitations of human existence and cognition in the dimension of time, as well as the resulting sense of powerlessness. It is interpreted as the meaningless essence of being a person in the real world, facing the profound and eternal world in which they exist. Secondly, this theme is also a very common one for Borges' literary works. For example, in *'El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan'*, there are multiple time chains generated by multiple characters and their perspectives. This form of expression also appears in a poem by Borges, *'La Reconetta'* (*The Recoleta*), which is also applied to the finite moments caused by human face of time. However, *'La Recoleta'* presents a different superficial theme, namely the stagnation and uniqueness of history.

### **Art, Aim and 'Tao'**

The previous discussion in this article seemed limited to the scope of traditional literary criticism and did not delve deeper into it. Although these discussions have done a lot of work compared to previous research on *'El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan'*, they are still limited to the analysis of postmodern features of fantasy genres and texts.

The themes mentioned earlier demonstrate the crucial role played by the owl of Minerva in *'El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan'*. We can see the shadows of Francis Herbert Bradley, George Berkeley, David Hume, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche. General literary criticism believes that these philosophical explorations, such as subjective theories of knowledge and experience and the fragility of personal identity, help enrich and level the content of works, especially adding color to poetic and unfamiliar backgrounds. But this understanding seems incorrect - if we follow this idea, these philosophical reflections are no longer the core of *'El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan'*. I believe that even though Borges' literary works often have personality and an uncertain internality in their production and reception, it does not mean that they should be understood as Alain Robbe Grillet's claim that literary works are meaningless. On the contrary, in Borges' works, these themes are the entities that give them meaning. If we can set aside various decorative styles (Baroque, Gondola, and Whitman) in the text, what hides behind various artistic expressions is a strong creative purpose, namely radical avant-garde in Latin American literature.

Not only that, Borges was a devout, even fanatical believer in 'artistic messianism'. Since Gerhard Hauptmann's play *'Die versunken Glocke'* (*The Shatter the Bell*) was published, creators have set their mission as building a utopia of art. In Borges's view, the reason why humans, as transient beings, create art is because it is another way to overcome pain besides death, and death is a terrible and inevitable

choice. Since humans cannot overcome death, they have created a natural building to face it - this building is art. In his own words, this is 'Art is Isaac, the eternal green.' ('shiyi ') Therefore, the entire text of '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' is essentially an art, in which Borges attempts to imitate the eternal pursuit through art. And Borges' goal in telling the entire story precisely aligns with China's ancient aesthetic proposition - attempting to pursue something beyond human experience and eternity, that is, the essence of eternity, also known as 'Tao.' This is also reflected in the language of the entire text that was previously discussed. The 'Yuan'ao' feature of the entire language is an imitation of the 'Tao' feature, which is 'Deep and diverse to understand, it is the gateway to endless wonder' (Lao).

The reason why Borges developed *El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*'s creation in the form of imitating 'Tao' is because it attempts to stimulate the love of 'Tao' as an existence through existing human knowledge (including different artistic techniques, languages, and philosophical thinking) and use it as a driving force for exploration. This is precisely what Plato did in *Συμπόσιον* (*The Symposium*).

## Conclusion

In this atypical original research article, Borges' short story, '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*', is seen as a literary return to 'Tao'. I have conducted extensive analysis, description, and exploration of the elements in this, including but not limited to describing their states, structures, language characters, themes, and broader artistic text analysis, to support this viewpoint. They also reveal the inevitable limitations of being a short-lived person in the face of the time dimension. But Borges pointed out that people can transcend the limitations of time and pursue the eternal essence, that is, 'Tao', through art, which is milder and more beautiful than death. Although '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' only involves individual or specific experiences that belong solely to the body, in fact, it should not be understood as some contemplation of individual existence but should also be interpreted as a metaphor for the entire human survival situation - time and space such as death and fate bring tragedy to the human collective and resistance against it (i.e. art).

Therefore, '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' is no longer just a discussion about life, especially about individual choices, but also a discussion of various dimensions belonging to the collective category, such as society, culture, history, etc. Therefore, the inspiration it can provide to readers is diverse - which is why I used a playful word combination like 'A Thinking' in the title of this original research article. I also understand why this work can be regarded as a representative work of Borges and 20th century Latin American Spanish literature. It not only subverts literary traditions in terms of expression, but its profound ideas can also make readers think about how humans, whether individuals or collectives, should think about their own situation and live on this basis. The answer given by Borges, in the words of a German poet, is:

Full of merit, but poetic,  
Man lives on this earth. (Hölderlin)

The greatness of this work lies not only in its profound explanation of the common dilemma of humanity - the limitations of time and the emptiness it brings, but also in its pointing out that art is a weapon to resist this dilemma and a path to pursue eternity - precisely the original meaning of the Chinese character 'Tao' (Mair 132).

From a broader perspective, '*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*' is unique for subverting the original literary tradition, but it still represents the human heritage of ancient literary traditions, namely

‘Wenyizaidao’ (文以載道, literature is the carrier of ‘Tao’). In this tradition, literary creation itself has become an exploration, imitation, and expression of ‘Tao’ - this is not limited to the so-called ‘Yuan’ao’ literary creation. This kind of exploration can be cross-cultural, so literary creation and research, including the interpretation of *El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, can be interpreted in different cultural backgrounds, as I did in this article. Returning to the literary tradition mentioned earlier, it is evident that truly great art, including literature, starts from the human mind or body, with the pursuit of ‘Tao’ as its own goal, reflecting the sublime beauty inherent in ‘Tao’ itself. Interestingly, Confucius once praised this beauty as follows: ‘If you see it in the morning, then it is worth dying at night.’ (Confucius)

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