

## BETWEEN BORGES AND BARTHES: A TEXT AND BOOK CONUNDRUM

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### ABSTRACT

*In his story The Book of Sand, Borges defines the book as 'infinite' with no beginning and no end. In almost the same way when Barthes discusses his notion of text, in contrast to work, he defines text as 'infinite deferment of the signified.' Critically speaking Jorge Luis Borges' short story The Book Of Sand and the kind of novel offered in the story The Garden of Forking Paths draw a clear resemblance and constantly comment on the Barthesian distinction between a 'Work' and a 'Text'. This paper concerns itself with discussing Borges' notion of 'Book' and proceeds to develop a contrast with the Roland Barthes conception of Work and Text.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Work, Text, Borges, Barthes, Derrida, Blanchot, Author, Signified*

*A book no longer belongs to a genre; every book pertains to literature alone.*

Maurice Blanchot<sup>1</sup>

*Literature is not exhaustible, for the sufficient and simple reason that a single book is not. A book is not an isolated entity: it is a narration, an axis of innumerable narrations. One literature differs from another, either before or after it, not so much because of the text as for the manner in which it is read.*

Jorge Luis Borges<sup>2</sup>

*Literature is the question minus the answer.*

Roland Barthes<sup>3</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

The occasion of 'death' of 'author' opens royal roads towards text/reader/reading, and literature now free from the sinking weight of author's anchor can float free towards a new definition. While answering the question "Where is Literature going?" Maurice Blanchot writes that "literature is going towards itself, towards its essence which is disappearance." (Blanchot 136) Explicating the theme of disappearance or literature's going towards itself, Blanchot removes the first impediment that hurdles this movement: the figure of the author. He writes, "... what is thereby

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<sup>1</sup>Maurice Blanchot, "The Disappearance of Literature." *The Blanchot Reader*. Ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995) 141.

<sup>2</sup>Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, Ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964) 203.

<sup>3</sup>Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972) 202.

glorified is not art, but the creative artist, the powerful individual, and whenever the artist is preferred to the work, this preference, this glorification of genius signifies a degradation of art, a retreat from its own power, the pursuit of compensatory dreams.” (Blanchot 134)

Blanchot’s prophetic view in 1953 will not be popularized until 1967 with the publication of Roland Barthes’ essay “*The Death of the Author*” and Michel Foucault’s 1969 lecture “*What is an Author?*” The important theme in these essays is not the ‘being of the author’ or the ‘author function’ rather the basic question that Blanchot asks, “Where is Literature going?” Literature, free of the author – the transcendental signified, can move freely now in providing a definition or non-definition of itself. Barthes later work, “*From Work to Text*” is an important work in this direction and one which problematizes the notions of ‘work’ and ‘text’ to the point of obscurity. This is where the Jorge Luis Borges’ work emerges as an important trajectory that not only explains these notions but also makes them palpable. Writing as each other’s contemporaries, Borges in Argentina and Barthes in France, separated by countries, languages, and genres still provide a commentary on the basic literary themes as well as the nature of text or literature.

In the essay, “*From Work to Text*”, Barthes makes a distinction between a Work and a Text. According to Barthes, “the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language,” (Barthes 157). This means that a work is something which can be displayed while a text is something which can be demonstrated. In a way, he suggests that a work has a material existence – realst out there – and that the text is a process, “a movement of discourse”. “The Text cannot stop (for example on a library shelf)” and is experienced in an activity of Production. Barthes proposes that “the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library, for example)” (156-157) and Text is a “methodological field” (157). Barthes’ notion of a text “poses problems of classification” because it involves an “experience of unfits” (157) and is emblematic of his deep concern with the process of writing. Barthes is totally against the notion of *Doxa*. For Barthes, a text is something which suspends the conventional evaluation and thereby subverts the canonical classifications. In Borges’ writing and in particular his story *The Garden of Forking Paths* we find this element in its full light. *The Garden of Forking Paths* is the story of Ts’ui Pen’s grandchildren Doctor Yu Tsun, who is working as a spy for German Empire during World War I. When his cover is blown, he escapes to Dr. Stephen Albert’s house. Stephen Albert introduces Ts’ui Pen, who dedicated thirteen years of his life to composing a book and a labyrinth. The book was nothing but a collection of chaotic manuscripts while the labyrinth was never found. Later it is revealed that the book and the labyrinth are “one and the same” (Borges 124). The garden of forking path is the labyrinth and the labyrinth is the book, the chaotic novel. The novel is infinite as the character does not choose only one possibility among others, rather he chooses all of them, leading to ‘several futures’ and innumerable possibilities. Ts’ui Pen writes ‘the inexhaustible novel’ and infinite one with infinite possibilities and his novel is compares to the image of the universe. Albert explains the illogical novel as:

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 features,’ several times, which themselves proliferate and fork. That is the explanation for the novel’s contradictions. (127)

The story which Ts’ui Pen has written and which has been denounced by his people as fragmentary is the prime example of his novel being a text – a text that defies the classical method of narrating a story in a linear model. It is a story

where every possibility is turned into another possibility – a story where a character does not just take a choice among others (which enables a conventional linear plot) rather, chooses and performs each and every possible choice that is available to him/her turning the plot into a labyrinth of sorts. As the narrative proceeds, it becomes impossible to separate the labyrinth from the book. It is exemplified in the letter that Ts'ui Pen has written: *I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths* (125) In another story *The Library of Babel*, Borges compares a cyclic book to God. Borges' notion of a cyclic book as being God further illustrates the conception of a book as the text, which is infinite.

*The Book of Sand* is a simple story of a Bible-seller, who reaches the door of the unnamed narrator and after the small engagement, offers the narrator to buy the mysterious book known as The Book of Sand. The book is so named because the book has no beginning and no end. No matter how hard a reader tries to single out the first or the last page of the book, some pages always slip away, some pages always remain. In addition to this, the inscriptions inside the book vary each time the book is opened. Borges reveals almost nothing about what is contained in the book because he is totally aware of the fact that if he starts to write what is contained in the book, he will make the book subject of discourse. This act of demonstrating what the book is but not revealing what it contains encompasses the idea of the infinite that the text should contain. One cannot write the infinity but, one can surely opine about it. The plot moves on both the object of the plot, the eponymous book, remains a mystery. Borges offers no solution to the reader's mystery and leaves the reader contemplating about the nature of the book. He turns the book into what Barthes calls a 'writerly text' in which a reader continuously re-writes the text through the act of reading and re-reading.

The Bible-seller in *The Book of Sand* asks the narrator to look at the book closely because the inscriptions that appear in the book appear once and will never be repeated. He says, "Look at it well. You will never see it again" (Borges 481). This at once alerts us to the Barthesian idea of a text with the "infinite deferment of the signified" (Barthes 158). The constant play of the signifier is taken as the quality of the text against that of a work which "closes on a signified" (Barthes 158). This quality of the text to defy closure and its continuous process of deferment is actually the sign of a text in a continuous flux. In the same way, the inscriptions and the images that the narrator sees in *The Book of Sand* too are in a process of continuous flux which the Bible-seller himself acknowledges: He told me his book was called the Book of Sand because neither sand nor this book has a beginning nor an end (Borges 481). It thus defies the rules of a conventional work. "The aim of literature... is to put "meaning" into the world but not "a meaning"<sup>4</sup>. In the same way, *The Book of Sand* symbolizes a book that cannot be read as a book which has a fixed meaning, a definite signified, but, a book which constantly plays upon the reader's notion of attributing some kind of identity, closure or signified to it.

For Barthes, a "text is [always] plural" (Barthes 159) and plurality for him does not mean that it contains several meanings rather the quality of being irreducible to one. Plurality forms an important part of a text which is produced by the constant weaving of the signifiers. Barthes puts the notion of plurality against the notion of monistic philosophy and with its conception of conceiving plural as evil. The text on the contrary, achieves its status only when it becomes impossible to reduce it to a single position. Thus, for Barthes, the plurality of a text is what sets it apart from a work which has an individual (a signified). *The Book of Sand* emerges as a prime example of being plural – physically as well as symbolically. When the narrator tries to open the first page of the book he fails to do so and the same happens when he tries to open the end. "It was impossible: several pages always lay between the cover and my hand. It was as though they grew from the

very book” (Borges 481). Furthermore, all the symbols present/absent in the book are plural and multiple because they multiply and are just seen once. The page numbers too are in a non-linear form and appear arbitrarily within the book. Thus, *The Book of Sand* posits itself as a book which cannot be holistically grabbed. It is a book which plays upon the notion of plurality. Barthes relates work to an ‘organism’ while the text emerges as a ‘network’. This idea is fully illustrated in *The Book of sand* where the pages form an endless network of sorts – a book which is an infinite network not only on the pages, but also of the symbols which the book may contain similar to *The Garden of Forking Paths* which is a network of narratives where very narrative holds the possibility of producing more endless narratives.

In the essay, Barthes writes, “The Text is very much a score of [the] new kind: it asks of the reader a practical collaboration” (Barthes 163). For him, it is the act of reading/re-reading the text which paves ways to “open it out, set it going” (Barthes 163). In the story, *The Garden of Forking Paths* Dr. Stephen Albert emerges as a typical Barthesian reader, who is the only person who re-reads and thus re-writes the novel written by Ts’ui Pen. He is the only person who reads it in such a fashion so as to unravel the riddle that the book and the labyrinth are one and the same thing. Albert becomes the perfect reader for whom “reading is the activity of imposing meaning of the *video*, the vacuum or emptiness” (Wiseman 87). Yu Tsun on the other hand, is the typical reader born at the historical juncture which Barthes claims emerge with the coming of democracy “which reversed the word of command” (Barthes 162). With the advent of democracy, Barthes argues, the reader becomes someone who only consumes the text rather than “playing with the text” (Barthes 162). Yu Tsun thus has not been able to decipher the text as Albert does. According to him, the book is nothing but “a contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts” (Borges 124).

The Barthes distinction between the traditional text or what he calls the ‘text of pleasure’ and the modern text or the ‘text of bliss’ further illustrate what kind of books are the Book of Sand as well as the book described in *The Garden of Forking Paths*. Barthes describes those texts, the reading of which does not put the reader in danger, that is, the reader is provided with conventional cultural tropes those which do not disturb the reader’s comfortable position. Such texts are the texts of pleasure. He writes, “Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with its, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading.” (Barthes, *Pleasure* 14) On the other hand, we have texts that rescind the convention and shake the clichéd topography. The reading of such a text unsettles the reader as it is the “Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.” (Barthes, *Pleasure* 14) The reader of the text of bliss finds himself/herself in the same position as that of the narrator of *The Book of Sand*. He is in a state of ‘loss’ and ‘discomfort’, and while he loses his sleep over the book, he even thinks of burning the “monstrous” (Borges 483) book. This unsettling of the narrator clearly aligns the Book of Sand as the text of bliss. Barthes goes on to develop the idea of reading as pleasure – the moment of *jouissance* – a “pleasure without separation” (Barthes 164). In the process of reading/re-writing a text, the reader, and the text emerge as one. The distinction between the reader’s subject position and the text blurs. Just as in the moment of ecstasy one loses the distinction between oneself and the world separate from each other, in the same way, *jouissance* blurs the distinction between the reader and what is being read. In *The Book of sand* when the narrator decides to burn the “infinite book” (Borges 483) he at once concludes that it may engulf the whole universe by proclaiming, “that the burning of an infinite book might be similarly infinite, and suffocate the planet in smoke” (Borges 483) For the narrator, the infinite book this is the infinite world and vice versa.

Harm to one can affect the other. He thus has achieved the perfect Barthesian *jouissance* where the distinction between the world and the text blurs, a notion well put in the story *The Library of the Babel*. It is pertinent here to dwell on the Derridean notion that “There is no outside-text” (Derrida 158), the idea that we cannot get away from the network of linguistic signifiers. In these Borgesian stories as well, the infinite/impossible book and the world are drawn in a parallel. For the narrator, it is impossible now to look at the world as a separate infinite entity and the book as something else. Him in a way hold infinity within his reach – which is impossible.

The ‘book’ that emerges in Borges’ writing and in particular these stories is a notion where the distinction between reader/possessor/prisoner and the world are played upon. This Borgesian ‘book’ is infinite and plural in the same way as Barthesian – a space fraught with unending signifiers as the grains of sand.

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