Why does fiction matter? This simple question enthralls, presenting a trap of innocent appearance and treacherous depths. The answer should be plain. Works of fiction obviously matter a great deal, and, with the effort of a little attention, the reasons why they matter should become manifest. No reason satisfies, however. Stating that fiction matters as an artistic achievement avoids answering what counts as art; stating that it matters as a revelation of humanity avoids answering what is being revealed. The problem with all such heroic sounding proclamations is generalization (if I may risk one myself). Whether in music, painting, performing, or writing, no definition for what qualifies as “artistic achievement” is undisputed. If some artists are called “before their time” in retrospect, then, faced with futures stretching dim and distant, who is to say Danielle Steele’s time will not come? Perhaps it strains credulity to believe a trashy romance novelist will ever be lauded for prophetic artistic achievement, but more radical cultural shifts have occurred before.

The “revelation of humanity” criterion would seem to hold more promise as a valid standard for judging the importance of fiction. Fiction that matters would be fiction that evokes, clarifies, or redefines the human condition for a reader. This criterion proves empty, however, without the assumption of a universal “human condition” or a normative reader. After all, a story cannot read itself. It is the reader who interprets and finds meaning in the text, and the accumulated experiences of any individual affect his or her interpretation and appreciation of any story. I cannot appreciate the experience of someone living in Uganda; I barely understand the perspective of my white, Californian, female roommate. With all the differences which exist between our beliefs, prejudices, and values, I doubt that what matters to me matters in the same way to my roommate—doubting aside, I simply do not know.

In light of such considerations, I find it difficult to judge whether any work of fiction matters. The problems inherent in trying to answer “why does fiction matter?” may indicate that the pertinent question
should be “does fiction matter?” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* matters very much to a lot of people; it does not matter enough for me to have finished the first chapter. What I am saying should not be taken to mean that fiction has no importance, but only that I cannot claim my evaluation of literary importance to be true for others besides myself. “The Garden of Forking Paths” by Jorge Luis Borges matters to me. It challenges my intellect with a puzzle which, once solved, heightens my awareness of the complex dynamics involved in the reading of fiction. In considering why “The Garden” affects me thus, I could ignore my personal values which lend the story its impact. Silence on the issue (one of little concern to others anyway) would allow me to wear a mantle of objectivity in my interpretation, and only the reader’s occasional dissent would jar that image. Having gone to some trouble to point out certain limits of interpretation, however, I will make explicit the values that shape how I read Borges’ story. I read “The Garden” as a triple-layered maze of time, freedom, and readership. This is a personal report.

“The Garden” does not begin well for me. Reading the words “World War,” “Captain Liddell Hart,” “offensive,” “British division,” “artillery,” and “German line” in the first two sentences brings up high school memories of the most dreary parts in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The third sentence, however, seizes my attention: “The following deposition, dictated by, read over, and then signed by Dr. Yu Tsun, former teacher of English at the Tsingtao Hochschule, casts unsuspected light upon this event” (Borges 16). The name “Tsingtao” strikes me with an unexpected and delightful familiarity; I recognize it as a Chinese island famous for its sweet light beer. That Borges uses a Chinese person as his narrator makes me feel personally invested in his portrayal. In Borges’s “Garden,” Yu Tsun seeks out the renowned Sinologist Stephen Albert, who talks to him about a story entitled “The Garden of Forking Paths,” which happens to be written by Yu Tsun’s ancestor, Ts’ui Pên. Of this second “Garden,” Yu Tsun writes, “With proper veneration I listened to these old tales, although perhaps with less admiration for them in themselves than for the fact that they had been thought out by one of my own blood, and that a man of a distant empire had given them back to me” (24). I begin reading Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths” with the proper respect due to its place in the modern literary canon, but perhaps with less admiration for the story itself than for the fact that it involves “one of my own blood,” and that a man from Argentina, of all places, is telling it to me.
Once I enter the maze of Borges’ story, however, I am caught. When I read that “all things happen, happen to one, precisely now . . . there are countless men in the air, on land and at sea, and all that really happens happens to me” (17), I hear my mental reading voice merging with that of the narrator. I am possessed by the strangest feeling that the “me” on which the sentence ends actually refers to myself; it almost seems that the words on the page represent Yu Tsun’s mental voice reading my thoughts. My identification with this character lingers throughout the story—even while knowing that Yu Tsun is, after all, Borges’s creation. When reading works of fiction, I imagine the author’s presence behind the text but cannot get past the barrier of words. The author is there (somewhere), I am here, and between us is the text. I do not know Borges, and Borges certainly does not know me; but it cannot be denied that we interact, for he wrote the text that I am reading. At odd moments in “The Garden,” however, the literal distance between author and reader vanishes, and I find myself suddenly behind the text. These moments occur when I hear Yu Tsun speaking in my voice. The problem Yu Tsun faces of how to broadcast his voice across nations becomes for me the problem writers face of how to preserve their voice through centuries. Fear of being forgotten spurs me to desire some lasting achievement. That Yu Tsun’s story is being retold by a British editor, that its first two pages are lost, even that I am appropriating his voice, give me little hope, however, for the survival of my own voice after death. On the other hand, Borges still stands behind the story, omnipresent but seemingly voiceless. What story is he telling?

He leaves it for the reader to figure out. As Stephen Albert asks, “In a guessing game to which the answer is chess, which word is the only one prohibited?” (24). The answer, of course, is “chess.” I imagine that Borges would have hated a spoil-sport, so, in the spirit of sportsmanship, I will gamely try to follow his rules. “The Garden of Forking Paths” begins with Yu Tsun, a German secret agent in England during World War I, trying to escape capture by English Captain Richard Madden and send the name of a target city to Berlin headquarters at the same time. Yu Tsun finds Stephen Albert in the telephone directory, “the one person capable of passing on the information” (18), and pays him a visit. They sit and—Yu Tsun having calculated that his pursuer, Captain Madden, should not arrive for at least an hour—chat about Ts’ui Pên’s “The Garden of Forking Paths.” I read the twin stories of “The Garden,” one built inside another, as being each a guessing game.
After much discussion, Stephen Albert and Yu Tsun surmise that the answer to Ts’ui Pên’s inscrutable story (“a shapeless mass of contradictory rough drafts . . . the hero dies in the third chapter, while in the fourth he is alive” [22]) is “time,” a word never mentioned in the text. One possible answer to Borges’s outer story is “freedom.” The outer “Garden” hints at countless paths the story could have taken but did not. The definition of “freedom” that my philosophy professor has drummed into my head is: a free person “could have done otherwise,” or, “things could have been otherwise.” There are other definitions, but this one fits my reading of the story. Stephen Albert describes the inner “Garden” as “a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging, and parallel times,” which, as a whole web, “embraces every possibility” (25). Entangled in a web of possibilities, Yu Tsun is free.

He exercises this freedom with a surprising act: killing Stephen Albert. No, this is not The Stranger all over again; Yu Tsun reveals at the end of the story that “Albert” is the name of a secret target city to be attacked by Germany. He succeeds in sending this information to Berlin when English newspapers cover “the riddle of the murder of the learned Sinologist Stephen Albert by the unknown Yu Tsun” (26). Immediately before the crucial moment of his plan, Yu Tsun recognizes that he has the ability to choose different futures by his action in the present:

Once again I sensed the pullulation of which I have already spoken. It seemed to me that the dew-damp garden surrounding the house was infinitely saturated with invisible people. All were Albert and myself, secretive, busy, and multiform in other dimensions of time. (25)

The possibilities, however, are terrifying. Yu Tsun calls his vision a “nightmare.” The nightmarish quality of his experience arises from the loss of a unique self in a maze of alternates. The appearance of Captain Richard Madden, forcing all possibilities to converge into one, comes as almost a relief to Yu Tsun. He describes Madden as “a single man, but this man was as strong as a statue and this man was walking up the path” (25). All paths converge in the present, and, by killing Stephen Albert, Yu Tsun creates his own destiny. By his plan and its execution, Yu Tsun escapes the “destiny of the hunted” (20) and becomes the hunter. He writes his own story.
Yu Tsun’s story is set within the outer “Garden” of Borges. There is, however, another “Garden” around that of Borges—my reading of the story. Borges is too smart not to realize the inevitable role readership plays in the interpretation of any story. He makes this realization explicit by framing Yu Tsun’s story with a British historian’s introduction. The context in which a story is read affects how it is read. The British editor’s reading of Yu Tsun’s claim that Captain Madden “arrested or murdered” Viktor Runeberg as being “a malicious and outlandish statement” (16) comes from his background as a citizen faithful to the integrity of his nation’s leadership. My reading of Borges’ story as a three-part maze of time, freedom, and readership comes from my background as a Chinese, self-consciously intellectual, college student (and, of course, a woman, but that aspect introduces to my identification with the male character Yu Tsun hermeneutic complications which make for another story altogether). The maze in Borges’ story thus refers not only to time and freedom but to future readings of “The Garden of Forking Paths” as well. Stephen Albert says of Ts’ui Pên’s “Garden” that each event in it becomes “the point of departure for other bifurcations” (23). The text is the point of departure for my reading of Borges’s “Garden.” You, my reader, are taking my reading of Borges as another point of departure. Why does this essay matter to you?

Works Cited