

“The Garden of Forking Paths”: A Taboo Transgressed

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ABSTRACT

The French philosopher and iconoclast Georges Bataille, believes that all the systematic systems, particularly, the language and narrative system as well as the linguistic human beings are indeed vertical frameworks filled with horizontal blind and excessive moments which transgress the borders of the system's and explode their explosive energies. “The Garden of the Forking Paths” penned by Jorge Luis Borges is also a horizontal text full of excessive moments which attempts to transgress the limits of the vertical language and narrative systems.

Keywords: Labyrinth, horizontal axis, vertical axis, transgression, labyrinth, taboo

INTRODUCTION

Georges Bataille is a French philosopher, theorist and novelist and whosoever who throughout his whole career was searching for destructive experiences in order to experience boundless freedom, freedom from language, discipline, morality, utility, culture, identity and so forth. He was trying to breach the moral, linguistic and social taboos by transgressing them and the present paper aims to explore the short story “The Garden of the Forking Paths” penned by Jorge Louis Borges through the heterogeneous notion of Bataille.

Bataille, as a protector of the violence and the transgression of the rules of the world of things, stands against this "profane" world, which, he claims, has been founded on the fixed ground of Hegel's closed system. He believes that the Hegelian system with extreme looking at the enlightening sun of the reason, represses and assimilated the blind and transgressive points within its framework; the blind points which cannot be defined by the Hegelian logic. For Bataille, Hegel's Phenomenology was a decisive failure, a thought which insists on completeness and absoluteness but was itself incomplete and susceptible to ruin. Hegel's thought, for Bataille, proposed itself as an absolute, as entirely homogeneous, while Bataille proposed himself as a living negation of that thought and as utterly heterogeneous to it.

His notion of "general economy" was raised for the first time in the second volume of his key book *The Accursed Share (La Part maudite)* and also his notion of *depense* and "unproductive expenditure" (Noys 106) were raised as the fundamental pillars of Bataillean "general economy" (Bataille *The Accursed Share 2*: 40). In *The Accursed Share*, he describes and at the same time criticizes capitalism and bourgeois societies whose foundation stands upon production and the principle of accumulation. In this book, Bataille maintains that in the Western bourgeois societies there is nothing which is an end in itself but is for an end. He continues that these capitalistic systems are interwoven with the Hegelian notion of labor which reduces man to thinghood and productivity.

As mentioned, in Hegel's world of thing or practice, man is subjugated to utility and the fulfillment of a purpose; he serves some purpose and he is himself a thing. Bataille believes that in this utilitarian system, chance and moment do not have any position, and instead linear

time- past, present and future- with its anticipation of the results of the performed labor is validated. He believes that when anticipation is given value in a system, moment, chance, and thus any contingency (which are unpredictable) are ignored or simply eradicated or assimilated.

In his essay "Obelisk," Bataille illustrates this point. Here he speaks about the upright statue Obelisk from Egypt, which was situated at *Place de la Concorde* in Paris in 1838, and which conceals the place of French Revolution's violent tool of death, guillotine. Bataille in this essay claims that Hegel's upright system and any other homogenizing structure hides a heterogeneous and violent material base which flows underneath this system as Obelisk conceals the heterogeneous and transgressive guillotine.

As he believes, for Hegel, any horizontal element such as death, whose place is not upon vertical axis, must be appropriated and assimilated within the system. Hegel's philosophy confronted heterogeneous moments of death as death is not a homogeneous and harmonizing event, but a spontaneous and violent moment which disrupts and ruptures any linear and logical system and which Bataille validates as a consumptive and excessive element oozing within the system and crossing its borders.

For Bataille, Hegelian vertical axis is an upward axis of knowledge, intellect, religious morality, work and labor, utility, homogeneity, theory, narrative and linguistic homogeneity, language, reason and every other element which is not obscure and obscene and whose identity is known and illuminated. The "horizontal axis," in contrast, which Bataille appreciates in his *oeuvre*, is the axis of difference and of the other; it is the axis of any element which is not useful and which has an end in itself and of any element which shatters the idealistic dignity of self and society.

Elements such as madness, poetry and any kind of art, dance, music, tears, anger, crime, war, art, eroticism, laughter, death, sacrifice, waste matter, chance and contingency, anguish, excess, heterogeneity, silence, the domain of non-discursive practice, ecstasy and so forth are the non-assimilated elements which are disrupting the order of things.

Georges Bataille in the second volume of his book *The Accursed Share* introduces another type of economy, which later on he expanded to his other theories of sociology. This type of economy which is interwoven with his notion of heterology was named by him as "general economy". This economy upsides down the utilitarian and rational economy since it does not validate labor and accumulation of wealth and rather it values the purposeless consumption and expenditure of resources. In general economy or "solar economy," which is the economy of excess and *depense*, the sovereign principle of any activity is the consumption of wealth as against labor and servitude which produces wealth. This economy appreciates any excessive consumption of wealth and "unproductive expenditure," which means consumption without any production.

In *The Accursed Share*, in order to elaborate this point, Bataille states that the radiation of the sun has the characteristic of excess; it radiates and pours its light over the earth without any return; the sun just gives and receives nothing in return. Bataille's most exemplary social forms of "unproductive expenditure" are the horizontal elements such as luxury, non-linear narrative, war, mourning, waste, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, gambling, the arts, perverse sexual activity (any form of sexual activity with no end of procreation), which, if having no external result, are the various forms of consumption without any return and without any production.

Marcel Mauss in his book *The Gift* claims that in the ancient sacrifices performed by the Aztecs in Potlatch festivals, the (self-)sacrifice defies the utilitarian goals. This sacrifice is for the purpose of profit and utilitarian motivations. Along these claims, Bataille comments that in the sacrificial excesses of ancient Aztecs, the underlying principle is to "liberate the heterogeneous elements and to rupture the homogeneity of the person" (Irwin 8). It is in these festivals of sacrifice, usually the sacrifice of the king or the sacrifice of a slave or animal as the embodiment of gods and as the symbols of authority and power, that all the boundaries and limits are broken and transgressed.

Sacrificial rituals, for Georges Bataille, are interwoven with violence, because every act of transgression is bound with committing violence. The performance of sacrifice means breaking the integrity of the king-god, and thus the self and the society. It means getting rid of all the norms and their confining definitions

Bataille defends a "headless" social and linguistic system in which all the excessive energies can be liberated without confronting any subjugation and suppression by the head or heads of the society as well as of the language; he believes that a headless society and linguistic system and being validates not only the intellectual above part of the social body such as the head and what is affirmed by it but also it validates the below part of this social body such as the sexual parts and the waste product. He illustrates this notion by introducing the *Acéphale* figure

His *Acéphalic* figure is a king or a god who is headless and who holds a sword in his left hand. This state of headlessness of a god or a king has several meanings: he can be the victim (god or king) of a ritual sacrifice which has been beheaded by an executioner and thus his head and authority has been removed; or it can be a man in rupture and ecstasy that due to his liberation of impulsive energies has lost his individual identity and his self-dignity. It can also be a man who has overcome the tyranny of intellect the position of which lies in head; furthermore, it can be a radical expression of the revolt of body against its enslavement by mind.

Language system, according to Georges Bataille, is an Obelisk-like system with its own limits and constraints, and because human being is a linguistic being, the limits and the confinements of language are also the limits of his self. He believes that language and its uniting and fixed rules are the most effective medium for assuring social cohesion. Bataille continues that the basis of language is political power and this power prevents any consistent violent touching of its laws.

Bataille throughout all his writings attempts to contest this power of the laws of language by what he names the heterogeneous moments within its own system. He claims that the law of language supposes its dominance over us and that this dominance can be breached through inner experience of transgression and violence. His ambition of inner experience is to be free not just from the Christian as well as the Hegelian influence but to be free from any system whatsoever.

Georges Bataille informs us that language seems to be an Obelisk-like system with a starting and an ending point, and thus with a logic moving toward a specific goal. However, he states that this Obelisk has a lot of voids and fissures underneath and it is, indeed, the most complete form of an endless labyrinth.

Bataille claims that this linguistic labyrinth does not have any particular entrance and exit. For him, a labyrinth is no longer a maze which has a potential or actual solution; it is a space without any center or head and therefore, without any stability. In order to explicate this point

Bataille maintains that there are hours when Ariadne's thread is broken and this broken thread is lost in the labyrinth.

In the Greek mythology, the labyrinth of King Minos is well-known. When Theseus goes to Minos' kingdom searching for the golden wool, Ariadne, Minos' daughter, who has fallen in love with Theseus, conducts him throughout the labyrinth by means of a thread. In this mythology Ariadne's thread leads them to the exit. However, Bataille makes use of this myth with injecting it some difference and it is that Ariadne's thread is not a strong one which leads someone towards a goal or an exit. Bataille's labyrinth is a decentered maze and therefore without any order and coherence; here the princess' thread is broken recurrently and eternally at moments and it is at these moments that the order of the labyrinth is disrupted. This labyrinth of language has no head to regularize and rationalize it. For Georges Bataille, language like *Acéphale* is headless without any center.

Bataille in his writings points to the violent imposition of language system over the human beings but at the same time he recognizes that this system can be fissured and breached by the violence of transgressive and excessive inner experience. He maintains that language might seem to be a fascist in imposing its power on the linguistic beings, however, like fascism it never achieves the ultimate power and completion that it desires.

The French philosopher claims that language is a powerful test case because it imposes itself on us as a law; however, for him, this imposition is always incomplete because it is a fissured labyrinth with no fixed ground and is full of gaps which can never be filled completely. This slippery labyrinth can be fractured by consumptive and excessive experiencing inner experiences. These inner experiences, as was noted, disrupt the regulating force of language and it also disrupts the subject of that experience.

The death or the beheading of this linguistic center is also the opening of voids and fissures within seemingly linear language and also within linear time. Shattering the supposed linearity and the logic of language system and experiencing it as an unsolvable labyrinth is also fracturing the concept of time as linear; it opens some voids which must be filled in order to have a totality (although he believes that achieving this filling of the voids and this totality is Impossible).

The disorientation of time is guaranteed by the chance of the inner experience which, in turn, is interwoven with violence and this is what the sovereign and transgressive being brings about by committing luxurious and consumptive acts such as eroticism, sacrifice, murder, death, laughter, war, scream and any other shattering experience.

Bataille states that language system tries to suppress the excessive moments which if taken place, can expose the existent voids within it. This fact, as he displays in his essay "Obelisk," is best embodied by the statute of Obelisk. This upright statue indicates the seemingly stability of the linguistic system and any other vertical system.

However, Bataille believes that language-the-Obelisk can never completely succeed in suppressing the contingent and miraculous moments which are interwoven with chance and which disrupt its laws. The reason is that it has been erected on threatening violent voids that it conceals, however, they flow underneath. Bataille in this essay continues that language system is open to the reversal of signs. This interpretation alters the absolute position of language to a space which can be breached and aborted through Bataillean sovereign and transgressive freedom.

Narrative is linear; it has a beginning, a middle point, and an ending. The events within a narrative take place on the basis of the law of cause and effect. This law makes the technique of verisimilitude within the narrative possible. The cause-and-effect law and its imposition of logic and regularity as well as coherence warrant linear time. The characters of a linear narrative are situated in a specific space, their position and their status is already evident and determined and besides this, they have a past, present, and a future which are blossomed in the narrative through the function of this cause-and-effect law.

However, Bataille commits this violent mutating of sign by performing the random play of signifiers. In this play of signifiers which reveals the non-narrative labyrinth of language as well as the underlying luxurious and consumptive energies, there is no authority of signified and there is no head and center which organizes and regularizes this game. Through the free play of signifiers we have, therefore, the free play of antitheses, juxtapositions, and thus the undermining of the structure of the logical narrative.

It is in this free play of signifiers in which the excessive and irruptive forces of language are liberated, and instead of a systematic narrative we will have poetic language which approaches to the extent which, according to Georges Bataille, simulates sacrifice which is the murder of the words.

Bataille and his notions are heterogeneous and counter-system just as “The Garden of Forking Paths” penned by Jorge Louis Borges. Originally published in 1941, it is first of Borges’s stories to appear in English. It is a Bataillean waste matter and an accursed-share text which oozes throughout the linguistic and narrative system in order to transgress the borders and the taboos of language as well as any other apparent social system.

“The Garden” is indeed a Bataillean Obelisk as there flows under this fissured text a guillotine-like war. War and its concomitant violence and transgression of moral and social as well as linguistic taboos. The Bataillean horizontal war which is flowing and present everywhere and every time in the text, breaches the Hegelian and capitalistic vertical system which has dominated the Western culture as well as the linguistic system.

“The Garden of the Forking Paths” is a good example of the Bataillean accursed share, the waste matter which the systems are trying to eradicate and repel it forever; it is a linguistic labyrinth, endless, and a lost maze with no beginning and no ending. This fissured and violated as well as violating text begins in the middle, in *media res*. There is no beginning as it starts with an ellipsis “...” and in it “[t]he first two pages of the document are missing” (Echevarria 212). Therefore, the text begins with a Bataillean blind spot flowing under the Hegelian system and violating the linearity of the narrative.

This is one of the most important fissures in the garment of the text. The reader is free here to begin the story of Dr. Yu Tsun, as he/she likes. The text is beheaded from the first words and it is here that the luxurious energies of the text explode and ooze within the system of the narrative. Here, the reader is placed in the middle of the lost maze, the textual labyrinth, with no guide and no thread to direct him/her throughout this dark and dizzying maze; thus he/she is left forever.

“A physical labyrinth has walls, hedges, or some other form of boundary that impedes or guides the movement of the subject. But in a textual labyrinth, it’s not so clear where the walls are, or when one has reached the center” (Weed 162). Borges himself was a lost labyrinth as he says “I am not sure that I exist, actually. I am all the writers that I have read, all the people that I have met, all the women that I have loved; all the cities that I have visited, all my ancestors” (Karl 64).

We as the human beings are also trapped in the textual labyrinth of our lives since we are deprived of any beginning or ending in our lost and non-central maze. We are born in the middle of the maze and think by mistake that we are being guided by narratives or some directing hand but in fact, there are no linear narratives and we are wandering throughout this textual labyrinth which is full of fissures, and we die with no ending also. “The experience of being lost, of moving without a clear direction is one which we all recognize and which is a powerful metaphor for our experience of our mortal lives.” (Weed 162). Indeed, to move through a labyrinth is to explore an unknown time.

It is not just the reader of “The Garden of the Forking Paths” as well as Dr. Yu Tsun who are the forever lost waste matters of the textual labyrinth, but also Richard Madden is lost in a maze seeking uselessly and endlessly in the textual labyrinth for the Secret, the lost sign. “Like the Cubists who tried to show several perspectives of objects in order to capture three-dimensional essences, ... [“The Garden of Forking Paths” and all its element, especially Madden is] a multi-perspective text which appears to cover all fictional possibilities” (Faris 151).

“The Garden of the Forking Paths” is accompanied by a big fallacy, the fallacy of history as it points at first to “page 22 of Liddell Hart’s History of World War I and an attack against the Serre-Montauban line by thirteen British divisions (supported by 1,400 artillery pieces), planned for the 24th of July, 1916” (Echevarria 211). Liddell Hart is a real historian who has various books on European wars but none of his writings refer to the note penned by the editor of the story. Therefore the seed of doubt and suspicion is already present in the text when an illusion is made to a false statement. The text indicates a big gap, a large fissure and the editor stupefies the history.

This is a Bataillean horizontal fallacy and this false claim indicates that there is no center in the text upon which the reader can trust. The text features a big lie and it floats upon a fallacious and non-fixed base and there is no systematic foundation upon which the text could exist. However, this big lie, maybe it is not that much important because even if the claim by the editor weren’t fallacious and it matched to the real historical claims, again one can’t trust the claims as history itself is a fallacious fiction, a big lie full of metaphors and rhetorical figures. History itself is a Bataillean accursed share, a waste matter, full of luxurious and excessive texts, none of which can be trusted. History is floating labyrinths within labyrinth, wandering upon the Bataillean horizontal axis and whose garment is full of blind spots and *juissance*, never filled with any fixed meaning.

In “The Garden of Forking Paths”, Dr. Yu Tsun is a waste matter in the text as well as among the Germans as he is a Chinese, a foreign body, who spies for the Nazis (who are themselves violating waste matters transgressing the moral and linguistic taboos) just to prove that a Chinese and yellow man is able to rescue the German army. Tsun is a spy, an element who oozes within the systems and narratives in order to find some secrets and illusory signifieds and transmit them to his generals. “Yu Tsun is not only a narrator; he is also concurrently an English professor, a prisoner, a friend (albeit newly acquired) to Albert, a spy for Germans, an assassin” (Faris 152). He is a horizontal labyrinth within labyrinth with no ending and beginning who transgresses the borders of the language and being.

Richard Madden is also a waste matter; he is an Irishman, a pure foreign body within the British system who never is assimilated by the English ones as a citizen and who is considered as an extra being. Maybe, he has the same Yu Tsun’s motivations to serve the English army. “An Irishman at the service of England, a man accused of laxity and perhaps of treason, how could he fail to seize and be thankful for such a miraculous opportunity”

(Echevarria 212). Both Tsun and Madden are horizontal elements within the German and English vertical and utilitarian systems. The systems for which the sole purpose of war is to extend territorial and capitalist goals.

Joy Bolter notes in his essay "The Garden of Forking Paths" that the garden "suggests a luxuriant growth of textual possibilities" (Sasson-Henry 74) in which "[f]antasy and reality seem to blur and the reader is left to her own devices to figure out the author's subliminal metaphysical postulates, such as the possibility of simultaneous times" (74). Albert says that Pen unlike Newton and Schopenhauer, didn't regard time as absolute but he believed in "an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, over spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times." In the text narrated by Tsun also the time is dissolved and bifurcates over and over as in a lost maze there is no linear time but a "web of time-the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other" (Echevarria 219) and embraces each possibility.

The similarity of "The Garden" to Kafka's novel *Trial* and to an endless chess-game full of repletion and the circulation of texts is astounding. "Chess is of course, a game of endlessly forking paths, of constantly branching combination of moves that makes up the 'possible lines of play'" (Irwin 83). The fissured text of "the Garden" is indeed a "Chessboard-maze of the garden" (83) and Albert wants to decipher this chess-board, although he himself is a floating text among the surplus texts existing in the garden. "He himself admits that 'I have gone over hundreds of manuscripts, I have corrected errors introduced by careless copyists, I have worked out the plant from this chaos, I have restored, or believe I have restored, the original.'" (Echevarria 219). Therefore he who lost in his illusion, wishes to decipher the secrets, must be murdered and beheaded just as Bataille's *Acephale* is beheaded and deprived of any illusory signified forever.

Albert is an *Acephalic* figure, beheaded and deprived of any non-existent signified within the narrative system. As he is murdered by Tsun, he is deprived of seeking for any such signified and decoding the letter and gets a free signifier floating in the maze. There is no signified and no decoding for the labyrinth of illusory Pen "in which all men would become lost" (Irwin 91); the labyrinth which Pen himself says that "I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking path (Echevarria 217)". The text penned by Pen is indeed a "shapeless mass of contradictory rough drafts" (216) and an invisible labyrinth of time with no thread to pull out the text from this maze.

The clue that was to allow Albert to decipher Tsu Pen's novel and thus it was to become identified with him was a fragment of a letter and the letter is itself an assemblage of signifiers and texts with no fixed meaning, a "book whose last page was identical with the first, a book which had the possibility of continuing indefinitely" (217).

Bataille claims that one way to shatter or at least to endanger the linearity of the utilitarian time and narrative is repetition. Mircea Eliade, the Romanian historian, asserts that repetition is "an implicit abolition of profane time" (Eliade 35); he believes that repetition confers a "cyclic direction upon time" (89), because in this case "[e]verything begins over again and its commencement every instant. The past is but a prefiguration of the future, no event is irreversible and no transformation is final" (89).

The labyrinth attributed to Ts'u Pen and the text of "the Garden of Forking Paths" is a lost maze full of repetitions and circulations like *Thousand and One Nights*, when "Scheherazade through a magical oversight of the copyist, started to tell the story of the *Thousand and One Nights*, with the risk of again arriving at the night upon which she will relate it, and thus to infinity" (Echevarria 217).

It is this circulatory recurrence which puts the text of “The Garden” in an endless play of signifiers. Repetition is a waste matter not restricted within the system and to be eradicated as the transgressor of the taboo and the body of narrative. The repetition belongs to the Bataillean accursed domain which is obsessed with the lower part of the body and not the Hegelian systems. Repetition is the blind spots oozing within the system and they are the Bataillean “consumptive moments” which mean nothing and are Potlatchan moments of a text which participate in the custom of gift-giving without demanding taking any capitalistic meaning.

Yu Tsun’s murder of Albert necessary results in his own death. Tsun has murdered Albert and thus has transgressed death as a taboo and it is not the ending of the narrative as Tsun is a spy and the whole text as well as the ending that he attributes to it, is not trustable and could be a big lie. In his labyrinth narration like the narration that is attributes to Ts’ui Pen, all possible outcomes [could] occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings. The text is a waste matter full of repetitions, ellipses and silences.

These blind-spot elements, as Bataille claims, are heterogeneous spaces as they rupture the homogeneous system of language and narrative, and thus linear time, and that they sacrifice and mutilate violently this homogeneity forever. For Bataille, they are some voids and gaps which make language slippery; they create discontinuity within language and remove its coherence and thus its linearity. He also believes that ellipses disillusion the hallucinatory ideal of some final and ultimate unity. They cause the deferral of the center of every narrative. Here, the beheaded and dissolved time also takes part in the gift-giving custom of Potlatch without participating in the Hegelian and capitalistic system of give-and-take. Time dissolves and participates in the giving and consumptive moment of Potlatch. It is an ellipsis and a blind spot with no fixed linearity.

For Bataille, silence is a blind spot within the vertical narrative; this spot is blind forever and is deprived of any illuminating concept. Silence is an underlying violent and guillotine-like flux under the vertical frame of narrative. It is a tomb with no corpse within and thus with no definition; it is there forever, mute and dumb. No one can decipher silence because silence is everlastingly silent.

“The Garden of Forking Paths” begins with an important ellipsis and silence (...) and that dark realm is full of insolvable puzzles and ambiguities. The text has been beheaded from the first and it is the Acéphale. The text is full of elliptical fissures and *juissance*: “countless men in the air, on the face of the earth and the sea, and that really is happening is happening to me ... The almost intolerable recollection of Madden’s horselike face banished these wanderings” (212) and somewhere else he says “If only my mouth, before a bullet shattered is, could cry out that secret name so it could be heard in Germany... my human voice was very weak” (213). The text is full of these vague and Bataillean consumptive moments.

“The Garden of Forking Paths” is a Bataillean *acephalic* text-figure who has been sacrificed for nothing and it floats deprived of any death. In this labyrinth within labyrinth the taboo of linearity of narrative and the dignity of language and being has been transgressed in a Potlatchean and carnival-like dance which overturns any capitalistic and Hegelian boundary.

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