

An Interpretation of “The Garden of Forking Paths” by Jorge Luis Borges

-- By Can Xue

“I” – The artist who broke into the labyrinth

Albert – Another “I” who had accomplished myself, or the old “I”

Capt. Madden – Death

The Superior – Destiny

Ts’ui Pen – A forerunner of Artists, who represented art history

How “I” entered the centre of the labyrinth

At the beginning of the story, my situation is like this: I am an agent. The stature of a human being is really like an agent—if one wants to drag out an ignoble existence in the dirty world, one has to “sell out” one’s ideal. Both the superior and the enemy (Madden) repress me. I have been forced to be an agent. But there is an amazing ideal in my heart—to experience the ultimate riddle. My chance comes at last. I am pursued by Death—Capt. Madden. Every sign indicates that this time I must die. Suddenly something changes in my deep heart. I, who grew up in a Chinese garden with a style of symmetry, am now no longer afraid of death. Instead, I begin to long for the experience of the gallows. There is another longing inside that longing: I want to proclaim the truth of my riddle to my superior who is a terrible man, and who has been staying in my country and who has always looked down on me. Maybe this is a heroic act— this declaration that will mean my actually returning to him. So I start the journey to the labyrinth on my own free will, and I speak my decision soundly, “ I want to escape!” Of course, I don’t want to escape passively. I want to do it for the great plan, and I want to accomplish it in the time that is left to me, to enter the centre of the maze, to guess my riddle right.

I am a coward, and I thought that there can’t anyone who isn’t afraid of death. But because of my humiliation in the past, the heroism inside the plan, and the urgency of time, I overcome my fear. I take the train, knowing I have escaped death. I decide to find my substitute, and this will be the last maneuver before my real death. I would like to indicate to my superior (destiny) that I would not like to wait to die passively. When I escape Madden, my heart is full of a lowly happiness. I am a mean man. But the important thing is that I have won the game. And even if the victory is transient, it still means overall victory for me—I would resist to the end. In addition, my baseness shows that I am skillful at surviving, and have a bright future. Although the appearance of death is more and more horrible in the river of our long history, and the maneuvers of human beings take more and more atrocious forms, we can play the game of death to the end. Only we should establish the premise that a man must die first in his heart. So my eyes become the eyes of a dead man. I record with my eyes the course of the last day and how the evening is falling.

I am going to enter the center of my labyrinth soon. The child in the dark tells me that I will reach my goal only if I have confidence— to “turn left,” not right (because the “right” way is a wrong way—Can Xue). I am walking along that solitary path, thinking about labyrinths. I am the great-grandson of Ts’Pen who was the governor of Yunnan province. He was also a real artist. He renounced his post and wrote a novel. He constructed a labyrinth in which all men would lose

their way. But the people of his time couldn't find the labyrinth, and nobody understood his novel, which was very confused. It seemed that some strange man killed him. I am walking inside my labyrinth, and I aspire to find the answer to the riddle of my great-grandfather. And I aspire to let the labyrinth that had disappeared reappear in my imagination.

I pictured it perfect and inviolate on the secret summit of a mountain; I pictured its outlines blurred by rice paddies, or underwater; I pictured it as infinite— a labyrinth not of octagonal pavilions and paths that turn back upon themselves, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms. I imagined a labyrinth of labyrinths, a maze of mazes, a twisting, turning, ever-widening labyrinth that contained both past and future and somehow implied the stars. (From “The Garden of Forking Paths,” by Jorge Luis Borges, translated by Andrew Hurley, Viking Penguin, 1998)

Thinking of this, the world changes into “I”, into a pattern in my heart. I understand at last that a man can't defeat Death. But a man can cut his time into parts and maneuver in each part. And in that exercise a man can experience a triumphant sense, deaths, and living. And I understand, too, why people can't see labyrinths. A labyrinth is a transparent conception. It is also a beautiful symmetrical construction that is found by a man who wants to oppose himself to Death. There is no exit in a labyrinth. One can only use one's body to break through.

The scenery in the centre of the labyrinth

The dark night, the trees, the pavilion, the Chinese music, and the Chinese lantern—all of these are inside the centre of the labyrinth. Albert is living in his own labyrinth. He is the owner of the labyrinth. As I will take him as my substitute, he will take me as his, to find the exit in the same labyrinth. Both of us know the case. So as soon as he says, “the garden of forking paths,” I remember my history. I am the boy who grew up in the symmetrical garden of my great-grandfather. Now Albert has moved the garden here. Both Albert and I have ties of blood with my great-grandfather. And I feel something priest-like and something sailor-like too in his body —this sort of person often wants to build a labyrinth. I determine that Madden will not be here for an hour, so I sit down to listen to Albert who is talking about the cause of my great-grandfather.

My great-grandfather was a governor, a famous poet, a calligrapher, and a man who loved his life very much. But one day, he suddenly felt that he would die at any time moment, and this sense became stronger and stronger. So in his anxiety he thought about death, and at the same time, he thought about building a labyrinth. Maybe it was because he wanted to try every experience of Death. But after the labyrinth had been built up, he found that the experiencing itself was the infinite forks of infinite time. You can't exhaust time, so the building of labyrinths is infinite too. Because of this desperate truth, my grandfather wrote down the confused book that was full of contradictions. For example, in the chapter 3, a hero died. But in the chapter 4, he was still alive. So Albert knew from this that the novel itself was a labyrinth. The old artist wrote in a letter: “I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths.” These words emphasized the infiniteness of time, which is the same thing as emphasizing that imagination is above everything, and it is able to build infinite labyrinths. So during the writing my great-grandfather found the

channels to infiniteness and eternity. The book in his imagination can never be finished—in the book he creates many times and many futures, and this time is always expanding, forking. Every outcome happens, and every choice is chosen. So the layers of the novel are very rich, and the intersections dazzle one's eyes.

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