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The Double Guide: Through the Labyrinth with Robert Kroetsch

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How do we find our way through a textual labyrinth? Already, in the etymology of its name, the notion of doubling forms part of a trace that leads us to the Minotaur and the Classical world. But readers of literary criticism know that the concept of a labyrinth can also lead into the contemporary postmodern world of uncertainty. Just over ten years ago, Robert Kroetsch published his Labyrinths of Voice (1982), with which some critics believed the Canadian postmodern had arrived. Douglas Barbour soon noted how the “questioning” of the three speakers in Labyrinths is a “quest/ioning”. Barbour’s word-play, or oscillation of meaning, brings us to another important postmodern concept: that of the unresolved quest (unresolved, since resolution would neatly unify or package postmodern fragmentation and uncertainty). As Barbour said, way back then:

Robert Kroetsch is one of the most self-consciously aware writers around today, fascinated by the theoretical roots of his art; in the theoretical routes of the labyrinth of the interview which is no longer simply interview, he and his co-speakers seekers lead us into a series of open-ended speculations about contemporary writing and literature as a whole.

The word “roots” switches to “routes”, neither signification gaining priority. Both signifiers are part of the labyrinth metaphor; the search backwards to some kind of entry-point to the labyrinth can only take place through the process of speculation and writing, the route of Labyrinths. “Open-ended” speculation, because in the postmodern labyrinth, knowledge-structures contain their own aporetic fault-lines leading to self-deconstruction.

But where does this leave the reader, trying to find her or his way through Labyrinths, knowing that every argument is liable to fracture, to go off in a number of directions, or to disseminate itself across the text? Perhaps we should follow the common-sense advice of an early Labyrinths reviewer,
who notes that "If you really want to understand Kroetsch better, re-read his novels and poems." Ironically this advice, which suggests steering clear of too much theory, argues for a shift from the mainly spoken form of the pseudo-interview, to the written form of Kroetsch's fictional texts, a clue that behind the common-sense lurks Derrida, after all.

Open-ended speculation and "quest/oning" are found, most obligingly, in Kroetsch's Alibi (1983). Indeed, if Alibi is used as a guide through Labyrinths, we quickly find that the two texts share similar strategies, undermining the separation of "criticism" and "art". Thus both texts reveal the intersection of legacy (literary/critical heritage) and the creative or artistic "leg-work" of Kroetsch's texts — in other words, a plexus composed of structural enclosures and the creative, internal critique (of such enclosures). As the narrator of "Seed Catalogue" says: "We give form to this land by running/a series of posts and three strands/of barbed wire around a quarter section". The metaphorical logic of the enclosure in Kroetsch's texts works in much the same way, where the legacy is that structure "fenced in" which the deconstructor interrogates from within: "Systems are open to adjustment, to change, to game, to our elaboration". An oscillation continually takes place between the enclosure of influence and the labyrinthine reworking of given forms. However, it still might not be clear as to why the labyrinth should even be considered an enabling metaphor for postmodernism, since in spatial terms, the labyrinth could be regarded as an essentially closed or finite form that counteracts the ethos of postmodernism, that is the labyrinth as having an absolute origin and centre. There are two ways of complicating such a static view. First is the concept of the labyrinth within a labyrinth, that is the pseudo-infinite regress of paths leading to themselves (an idea of great interest to Borges). Second is the notion that any fixed structure contains the possibility of its own transgression. That is to say, we are back to the aporetic fault-lines, but this time by suggesting that the limit is a symbiotic partner of transgression, where we understand the labyrinth as an algorithm (a procedure, a method) rather than a static figure standing in for postmodernism in some limited way.

As signalled by the novel Badlands (1975),
the enclosure in Kroetsch's work (any static form), must be archaeologically uncovered, disturbed and disseminated across the land/text. The digging tool or writing implement is thus doubled, becoming simultaneously the "creating tool". Digging and creating equals the simultaneous action, or "hard graft" of the legacy/leg-work. This simultaneous action explains the continual critical reference to Kroetsch's need to create a paradoxical silence with words, new literary forms with the building blocks of the old. Sherrill Grace notes:

Language for Kroetsch can be liberating. Paradoxically it can be used to suggest the silence of the uncreated because it is only with lan-

Through the Labyrinth with Robert Kroetsch

guage that we can break free from, or decree, the prisons of inherited words or stories in order to discover a fresh reality that expresses us better than the inherited one. Enclosure, legacy, inheritance: all suggest a classification of literary forms, a theory of the literary that belongs to a scientific desire to objectify the features of a text. The foregrounding in Kroetsch of the internal critique shifts the labyrinth structure from work of fiction to work of criticism and back again, a continual movement back and forth that resists the classificatory desire, forming a more flexible form of "literary critique". "Literary critique" in its poststructuralist sense reads "literary gaming". As Edward Said notes in Beginnings, "Theory assumes the evident irregularity and discontinuity of knowledge — and hence its lack of a single central logos ...". Thus theory/gaming images the epistemology of its own production, yet, in producing meaning itself, multiplies meaning: "True theory, says Deleuze, does not totalize, it multiplies." Said is concerned here with Vico (amongst others) in relation to literary and philosophical beginnings. Here is a way of recuperating the historical legacy, with this notion of beginnings, where "a beginning is at once never given and always indefinite." The power of the legacy need not overwhelm the contemporary project of writing: "As Vico himself said, just because a belief is fantastic to us now does not mean that that belief did not serve some valid purpose for the mind that created it and held it: this is the most insistent lesson of his historiography." History, become narrative, become game, rejects the closure of teleology; there is a switching here from the designs of nature, to the designs of the narrator, that representative of the effaced author whose signature constantly throws him or her back into view. When Kroetsch calls Roland Barthes a "creative writer," he simultaneously signs himself as critic-creator.

The critic-creator performs a more complex writing task than the common-sense critic would perhaps envision. An example of this complexity can be discovered by regarding the "Banff Springs Hotel" scene in Alibi as a textual palimpsest, upon which the etymology of "legacy" is traced. Alan Bass, the translator of Derrida's Postcard, notes in his Glossary how "the original pronunciation [of "legs" = "legacy"] was the same as lais, from the verb laisser, to leave ... lais was both the ancient form of legs and the term for a narrative or lyric poem." The legacy is not just that which is left behind; it has a double sense in that it is also the process which must be worked out ("leg-work"), the process being the construction of signification operating with the simultaneous critique of the inheritance. Thus Alibi is the construction of a narrative inextricably linked with other generic forms. The "Banff Springs Hotel" foregrounds this interplay of signification: "I found a dark, stone stairway. I went down carefully, carefully I went down, the heavy
stone steps. Into a darkness that was watery thick. The genre of the detective story becomes mixed with that of the Gothic novel; the labyrinth metaphor enables the writer to cross generic forms, or, as at an intersection, quickly switch the text into other generic modes. As long as the labyrinth metaphor is the horizon of the text's own writing or creation, the narrative does not have to remain within any single system of closure. In other words, the metaphor initiates further textual production, further textual strategies to avoid/evade generic closure.

Back in the "Banff Springs Hotel", the floor of the room that Dorf enters is also made of the cold stone of the stairway in the labyrinthine entrance. The entrance to the labyrinth has, of course, led to more labyrinths where the reflections multiply "three recessed windows [which] imitated the squares in the rug" and "the panelled walls, dark, almost invisible, were a maze too ... " Dorf loses his sense of direction, but this is not surprising when out of the darkness he steps into doubling and reflection. The rug that is there to screen the cold stone floor is both a simulation of a fixed stylistic period, the twenties, and of "something infinitely old". The rug both recreates the signs of a historic period and sweeps them away in its obvious synthetic quality; it signals the genuine and the simulacrum. "Infinitely old" suggests a period without origin, a beginning that can be endlessly duplicated, at any time ("Fake the real!" Dorf will say later on, but the "real" is already a simulacrum in this sense of beginnings, where authenticity as a concept is erased - thus "the real would suffice").

The "game" section of Labyrinths gives the reader a clue as to how literature can be criticism, and vice-versa, in Kroetsch's work:

It's interesting that we play the game, isn't it? There is a double thing that goes on even in the statement which is very fascinating to me. The two words contradict each other in a signifying way. Play resists the necessary rules of the game.

At this point in Labyrinths, Wilson and Neuman are both concerned with the reification of game conventions. Two positions are offered: first, where the rules of the game (the strict boundaries regulating literary production) are regarded as being "more rigid than they actually are", and second, where the rules of the game are incorporated into the text to undergo criticism, to enable the critical freedom of playing with these regulations. As Neuman notes, Sterne does both: "In the example of Tristram Shandy ... Sterne can only play against the rules by first incorporating them into his text, but incorporating them in a more rigid form than they have taken in the novels against which he is reacting. He must pretend they are more rigid than they actually are." I will argue that, in the postmodern text such as Alibi, the rules are not artificially inflated to be blown down or away, and that the notion of play (as part of the very productive structure of the text) does not mean that such texts cannot be read in a more conventional manner. For example, it is possible to take a conservative position where a narrative such as Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 would be read as reinforcing the conventional quest motif, reinforcing a literary tradition rather than playing "against" that tradition. The "game of chess" is never really over in these literary terms, so long as the pieces remain in play. Somebody may say, as Wilson remarks, "Well, that's not chess and walk away", but another person can just as easily decide otherwise: the game is now called postmodern chess, following an altered set of rules.

For Kroetsch "game" equals "literature", whereas "play" equals "writing". Writing is that which constantly escapes rigid formulation, escapes producing game-rules which cannot be broken. Another doubling occurs here; for the writer constantly to evade the formulation of rigid rules, he or she must perform a vigilant self-criticism. How does the critic respond though, if the criteria of evaluation are constantly undergoing transformation? How does the critic go beyond the catalogue, the list, the discussion of the markers of postmodern carnivalization?

Dorf's double in Alibi is Manny the spa-doctor, a dwarf involved in the rites (or rut) of carnival, the desire-process that overturns routine and an acceptance of things as they are in the world. A political reading of carnival (of which there are accounts ad nauseam) may suggest the revolutionary power inherent in such an activity and/or discourse, such as Kristeva's proposal "that the infraction of formal literary codes of language is identical to challenging official law. This is analogous to the concept of disrupting the game:

All play has its rules. They determine what "holds" in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over.

Huizinga suggests that the "spoil-sports" who ruin the game may sometimes create a new community of their own, with a new set of rules. What is suggested in his account of game/play, is that the game is in a sense perfect or ideal for it to be ruined in the first place. For the writer as player, this is not so, and thus the rules of the game must be constantly transgressed.

Another view of the play-activity "carnival" is that of a temporary, self-contained activity after which order will always be restored. This is where the carnivalesque inversion serves to magnify a structure that is already in place (in the game-rules), revealing the subjugated signifiers that the subject depends on. A place of legitimised carnival (although the players are sup-
posed to be temporary residents) is the spa. The carnivalesque reveals that, with the activity towards cure, arises the production of "poison" (the phar- makon). The spa town of Bath, for example, was described in the 1700's as "A valley of pleasure, yet a sink of iniquity ... The plain fact was that for a gentleman to visit the place was as likely to bring on the pox as cure it." Similarly, the mud bath at Laspi in Alibi, reveals the behind of society, that in which Dorf has trouble immersing himself: "I couldn't quite immerse myself in that stinking thick mud where all the sick and the maided did their suffering and their hoping. And their pissing and their bleeding and their farting." However, once he has entered the mud, a strange transformation takes place: "The others began to turn their heads into masks, into sculptures, into faces that were other than their own ... I looked down at all those floating heads on the mud, and suddenly they were beautiful; those men were strong and powerful and handsome again." The transformation from the grotesque body to the heroic masks and sculptures of a more classical representation entices Dorf to experience (once more) the pleasures of the body. For the duration of the game-space of the mud-bath, the sick and the maided are restored to health and beauty; the mud which acts as a supplement or ornament, becomes in the suspended space of the game the "essence" (under erasure) of being, where sickness belongs to another world. But this carnivalesque inversion does not exclude the signs of the sick body, for a more accurate description of this process is that of "immixing" the signifiers of the subject; the fat man "is" the smellly woman. As White and Stallybrass put it:

Carnival gives symbolic and ritual play, and active display, to the immixing of the subject, to the heterodox, messy, excessive and unfin- ished informalities of the body and social life. It attacks the authority of the ego (by rituals of degradation and by the use of masks and costume) and flaunts the material body as a pleasurable grotesquerie - protuberant, fat, disproportionate, open at the orifices.

The emphasis in the quotation should be placed for our reading on the "unfinished informalities" not only of the body, but of the carnival structure itself. Kroetsch plays with the carnival as a way of dis-playing the fixed game rules of the literary legacy (doing the work of the normally "external" critic). The carnival is not a fixed structure (except in its abstract ideality); rather there is a collection of events, of discourses, that may be grouped in passing under the heading "carnival". The carnivalesque is a play concept that constantly under- goes self-transformation to escape the confines of a strictly rigid critical definition. As Stallybrass and White note, "... a convincing map of the transformation of carnival involves tracing migrations, concealment, meta- morphoses, fragmentations, internalization and neurotic sublimations ...".

We have seen that the strategies of Alibi double those of Labyrinths (and vice-versa), the focus on Kroetsch's writing as a "play" structure showing one way in which rigid formulations are transgressed. In Alibi, the fictional narrator is the text's own literary critic who tears out the pages of the jour- nal, transcribing the playful writing "into a proper manuscript", or that which, as De Man says, already deconstructs itself: "Literature - the only language that is already deconstructed, that manifests its own mediated, rhetorical, nonreferential status without any help from the critic." The dou- bling of "journal" and "novel", with the various mediators, can be read as disrupting the relationship of legitimation between reader and text, where the reader claims a certain amount of stable knowledge (the stuff of which aca- demic papers are normally written). In Labyrinths, Neuman makes a provocative statement concerning the need for "other disciplines" to account for knowledge, since the focus upon the signifier as that which disrupts the enclosures of knowledge (writing as signifier as play) would tend to weaken "the conviction that language is knowledge". Thus, by systematically mapping out the game rules of deconstruction, postmodernism/structuralism, archaeology, etc, the critic can account for the literary text. As Dorf says: "I am trying to make sense of my journal, since I was sometimes remiss, sometimes left little gaps here and there. I make a correction, where necessary." The desire for knowledge from "other disciplines" suggests that the postmodernist focus upon language as writing (in the Derridean sense), destroys any notion of stability, which is a fallacy. Kroetsch notes: "I was interested in language as signifying things that were not allowed, were taboo ...".

The most taboo signification of all may be that language may be viewed as a process which signifies only more or other language (and here we can opt for a Schopenhauerian pessimism or a Nietzschean affirmation in such an endless process). At the opening of Alibi, the efficacized character "Jack Deemer" sends messages which must be acted upon, but which have no ground other than their performance, the use to which they are put:

... he's a great one for sending messages. His minions live in a kind of dread of memos or post cards or, for that matter, scraps of toilet paper scrawled with instructions for which there is no explanation, no place to seek clarification.

These messages are not to be explained in a conventional way at the end of the novel, for the end is unlocatable. Deemer's physical arrival (that hoped-for referent behind all those annoying signifiers) is endlessly replayed where "Karen must fake the end of her documentary. She has persuaded her little gang to restage the arrival." What is left is the protagonist living with the violation of the darkened spa, yet still writing, through a process of
transliteration and transcoding. The textual play of the signifier continues, both where Deemer’s messages are acted upon as the incentive for further queuing (the ever-expanding collection) and with the “faking of the real” – the simulation of the signifier.

Have I answered my opening question, or doubled it? Have I turned the question inwards, upon itself, in that process so annoying to those who seek a way through the postmodern labyrinth? The mirroring, or back and forth movement between Labyrinths and Alibi, has shown that the answers to questions of guidance lie “within” the texts; that the complicated aporetic structures that are a necessary condition for postmodern transgression also explain Kroetsch’s use of a Derridean, playful writing. Those waiting for a transcendental signifier from Jack Deemer, or elsewhere, with which to relevé themselves up out of the labyrinth (that is, to revert to the metaphysical system of rigid significations which the postmodern processes undermine) will be waiting a very long time indeed.

NOTES

8. Labyrinths, p.28.
12. ibid.
13. ibid, p.350.
14. ibid, p.361.
15. Labyrinths, p.41.