FINN JANNING

THE LABYRINTH OF LIFE

Back from his inspection of life, the traveller Odysseus appears before the waiting crowd and tells them this: "Life is like a labyrinth." Stunned the crowd gazes at one another, some even raise their eyebrows, before one finally dares to ask: "Does this mean that there is one right way to live our lives?"

"No, no," Odysseus responds impatiently. "There are several forms of life. Several!"
The crowd does not seem pleased with his response, and therefore one of them asks him once more: "Is a life determined beforehand?" "No, no," Odysseus replies once more. "Life as a labyrinth does not have one privileged entrance or exit. Rather a life is a texture of many traits that intermingle. A life is a mixed body." The crowd mumbles for a while before breaking up.

What is left simmering in the air is the unsaid: what a life really is, or what a labyrinth really is, when it is not a kind of roadmap with one right way, but several. A multiplicity of kind.

Four people, however, do not leave. "Hey!" one of them cries at Odysseus, "you said that life is a labyrinth, and yet you have not told us how you came to that knowledge?" Odysseus looks at the four, the fabulous four, he thinks, and realises that if he wants to see his wife tonight he had better tell them the story, another story. Otherwise he will have to invite all four of them to bed with him, and that is certainly not what he wants.

"Come," he says, "sit down. Pour yourselves a drink and keep silent. Then I will unroll the how of my knowledge." Odysseus pours himself a pint of thick, dark Guinness and begins to speak.

"Unlike most labyrinths, a life does not have one privileged entrance or exit but is a texture of multiple entrances..." he gets interrupted by one of the four, who says, "that we understand, dear Odysseus, but what makes you say such a thing?" Odysseus takes a deep breath before he once again says: "Silence my friends. I will tell you all you need to know, which isn't much." He smiles before continuing and this time none of the four dare stop him.

"Life as a labyrinth can begin everywhere, anywhere. One gradually creates or constructs the traits needed. Many believe that each trait resembles something specific, but that is a mistake. Instead, each trait is part of the labyrinth, it is the labyrinth seen from different perspectives. Unlike our master Plato we cannot look upon a life or a labyrinth as if it was only a shallow simile of one original idea. Such an original idea, of course, does not exist. No, what is original is constantly being produced. Alas, so far I have only told you that there does not exist any privileged or superior way to pass through the labyrinth, just as one can be Danish, Swedish or American in many different kinds of ways. Similar the labyrinth can be passed through various modes of existence, we might say." Odysseus looks around while taking a huge sip of his black beer before he continues.

"A labyrinth is constructed of points and traits that reciprocally define each other. For instance, one trait is considered as the connection between two points, while one point, on the other hand, is considered as an intersection between two or more traits. This tells us that neither the traits nor the points are privileged beforehand. Nothing is given beforehand. Nothing, so don't presuppose anything, okay? Leave your prejudices at home. Similarly, no trait or point is superior to another trait or point. Or if I should put it in other words, the traits or points do not represent anything. Instead they present, that is to say that they draw a map into being while walking. Before we enter a labyrinth it is indetermined, undifferentiated. It is a multiplicity. Recall an artist for instance..." Odysseus stops for a moment and senses that the four need an example, "when an artist produces a piece, he
presents us with an alternative to what was here before, we could call such art 'affirmative art,' where the art composes social alternatives and critical openings instead of aesthetic objects. There is always an alternative route! Such affirmative art develops from what there is and not towards what some believe to be true. It moves on from the insecurity that we want to get rid of. In other words, the labyrinth does not lead us to a specific Utopian Neverland, but away from problems." Odysseus finishes his beer in one draught, while the four people sitting around him all look surprised. "Don't look surprised my friends. Pour me another beer instead. Life grows from what is... or perhaps I should say this differently. My dear friend Michel Serres once stated that the word author comes to us from Roman law and means the guarantor of authenticity, of loyalty, of an affirmation, it means he who augments — not he who borrows, summarises or condenses, but only he who makes grow. A work or a life evolves by growing. Today man is a biopolitical entrepreneur, the author of his own life." He gets another beer and continues his story.

"Many of us have read the poem 'The Road Less Travelled' by Robert Frost. It begins with the lines: 'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood/ And sorry I could not travel both..." It ends with the famous words: 'And I took the one less travelled by/ And that has made all the difference.' Although the poem is of some beauty, it unfortunately reproduces a dialectical argument. In short, dialectics always outline one specific trait, which is the opposition between two theses. And that is that! I never did find dialectics suitable or very productive. We all know the anti-American, anti-capitalist, anti-whatever who doesn't produce productive alternatives. Let me tell you why that is: we could either walk back down the road we came from, that is one thesis; or we could take the road taken by the grey mass, which is another thesis or antithesis. And we could take the third road, the so-called synthesis. No wonder, dialecticism made itself dizzy by repeating the same over and over again. A labyrinth as a life does something else. It opens up a large amount of points and all the different connections between them. Because one could easily take the most travelled road, but increase the road from within, pass it in one's own rhythm. To affirm is not to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives, to create new values, which are those of life, which makes life light and beautiful. For instance, imagine entering a life — oh sorry, a labyrinth — blindfolded, then what? Or deaf? Then one would have to intensify one's other senses. Believe me when I tell you that for far, far too long we have neglected our senses. We think that the truth is something we should see or hear, although the truth can only be felt. We must learn to hear with our hands, listen with our eyes or just feel. We must invent new forms of life rather than judging others and thereby separate life from what it can do and how it can also pass the labyrinth of life. Being alive with the full capacity of our body is what I am heading for. After all, we still don't know what our body can actually do, do we? Where were we?" Odysseus looks at the four of them, who are all silent, as promised. Odysseus raises his pint and greets them with a cheer and continues.

"Each point in the labyrinth is in itself a labyrinth. I could refer this to your lives and say that each life is already a multiplicity as a singularity. I cannot, nor can anyone else, tell you or anyone else how you should live your life. It is not up to us to judge, although many adore the pathetic act of judging. All we can continue to do is to question the authorities because there exists no alternative to asking 'why,' no alternative to 'doubt.' I doubt that all Muslims are evil, and I doubt that all Americans seek power. The good lives in all of us. We just have to unfold it, activate and affirm it.
But let us return to the labyrinth once again. A labyrinth is multi-centred because we are always in the process of formation. As I enter a labyrinth — it comes into life — both the labyrinth and I come into being during the process of walking or living. It begins to get a little difficult, don't you think?" He is silent for a while and suddenly states, "perhaps I just need a refill."

"Let us put it another way. When I met those one-eyed bastards on my journey home from the great war in Troy, I only survived by telling them the truth.

Remember? They asked me who I was, and in return I answered 'nobody'. I am nobody. Because I am what I think. 'I think' is an empty form through which anything or nothing can pass. If nothing passes, if 'I think...', then I am nobody. So in a way, I am always in movement becoming something else, or something different, I am nobody but when I collide with the world I become the world. My brain is only a receptor for the world's seductive flirtation. Therefore, if I cannot find my way through the labyrinth, the answer can only be that it is caused by the fact that I try to presuppose it, that I am not being attentive enough, that I am not using the capabilities of my body. Understand?

I become the labyrinth as I pass through its chaotic turbulence, as I follow its movements. The labyrinth and I mingle into one another. Well, what have I told you?"

One of the four, a beautiful girl, replies by saying: "The labyrinth does not represent the truth. Instead the truth is something that is gradually produced."

Odysseus nods, and nods once more in the direction of the bees. He gets another one, and asks, "Is that all that I have told you?" A young boy, probably the girl's boyfriend, says, "We have to use the capacity of our senses to find our way around in the labyrinth."

"Not quite," says Odysseus. "No, we must use our senses to become with the world; we must let the world fold around and in us. And when we do that we form the world too. That is to say we transform as we form the world. If we were to find anything, then we would imply that there is something to be found. But instead of looking we must actualise what we do not know. We must actualise what is real but yet unactualised. Not until we use all of our senses can we activate our intuition. Just as writing is about constructing references, the texture of the labyrinth connects with the world and becomes a world as world. It is a matter of sensation so intense that each reference takes form as a creation. If I am right about the author or the artist as a form of life that we all can learn from, then it is due to the fact that the author must approach the immanent conditions of what he is trying to write. He cannot refer to any transcendental order. Instead he must create the references as he moves along."

Odysseus sighs. Not as a rude gesture, but rather as a person who has just eaten a tasty supper.

"A life is inseparable from living. A labyrinth is inseparable from passing. When one enters a labyrinth, which can happen anywhere, one finds the zone of indistinction where one can no longer be distinguished from the labyrinth. We, just as labyrinths, are always in the midst of being formed. There are no, I repeat no, straight or predefined lines or traits to follow. Instead each trait or line is created in the process.

The purpose of life, if I may be that blunt, is to free our capabilities, it is to invent a field of opportunities for the people yet to come. Well, in toto: life is to become something other than oneself. Therefore, the one who will pass the labyrinth never asks how one passes. Instead such a person is always doing something else. He is preoccupied with something else. He is already in the middle of forming the labyrinth. Odysseus finishes his beer and looks around, before he falls down from his chair, snoring.

The girl looks at Odysseus and says to the rest of them, "Apparently there are many modes of existence, just as there are many ways to fall asleep."