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Within the Labyrinth

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How does one approach the poetic?

Exceptional writers such as Octavio Paz and George Steiner have their bias. Steiner, as a critic, stood outside of the poetic act and analyzed it. His intention was to explain why it seems imperative for humans to express themselves poetically. In *Real Presences*, Steiner wrote that the creative act exists because there is the other. (note 1) He points to the artistic desire to reproduce personal experiences in order to share them. In his opinion, the poetic is at the heart of creativity and therefore the artistic gesture is not exclusive but inclusive.

Octavio Paz explained the poetic from within. As a poet, his desire was to explain the value of his words. In *The Bow and the Lyre*, Paz claimed the artistic act is related to life awareness, much like Steiner did. (note 2) Paz described the making of poetry as an act of creating and re-creating. As such, creative expression reveals man to himself but makes no simultaneous attempt to interpret. Paz likened this to the experience of love. Love suspends us, draws us out of ourselves, and throws us into the strange. The lovers leap out of themselves to each other; there is no longer two, only one. Poems, paintings, and sculptures are the acts of individuals recognizing the other and attempting to close the distance between.

Both attempts to describe the poetic through written language are remarkably similar. They each succeed to a certain extent, relying heavily upon the use of metaphor. The limitation of this is that the poetic may be recognized in its imagery but the awareness gained is difficult to embody without experience. Metaphoric descriptions like these are not sufficient for one who chooses to act. To create, you must grope blindly.

This project was begun with the intention of uncovering another approach. Rather than depending on written language like Steiner and Paz, the project was developed in a different way. A painting, *The Labyrinth* (1938) by André Masson, was chosen as a point of departure. *The Labyrinth* is an intriguing work by a mature artist painted as an attempt to reveal his ideas and feelings, to manifest his understanding of life to an observer.

The first step taken was an investigation of the poetic space of the painting, a two-dimensional reality that represents three-dimensional space. The image that appears can be accurately described, but the space within the painting is ambiguous and must be unveiled.

Using a representational language familiar to the architect, the first step of exploring Masson's labyrinth was to section the painting. An architectural section is a drawing that attempts to describe the indescribable: space. In this case, it is utilized with the intention of describing poetic space. To accomplish this, the realm of ideas that influenced the work must be accessed and the surface of the painting must be understood. Therefore, this section focused immediately upon the theme of the work: the mythology of the minotaur and the labyrinth. In the ancient myth the labyrinth is described as a structure of magical complexity. It was both the home and prison of the minotaur, as well as a place of sacrifice. Those who entered always found the centre; they always faced the minotaur.

Masson chose to alter the traditional understanding of the minotaur myth by placing the labyrinth within the minotaur. This reversal is connected to the thinking of Georges Bataille, a friend of Masson's. Masson had illustrated many of Bataille's writings before painting *The Labyrinth*. Masson's *Acéphale*, drawn for Bataille's article *The Sacred Conspiracy*, (note 3) was produced just before *The Labyrinth*. The two are obviously connected, most strikingly by the anthropomorphic figure with a labyrinth located where the stomach should be, that appears in both works.

This coincidence is not accidental. Bataille spoke of *Acéphale* as "both innocence and crime [...] He is not a man. He is not a god either. He is me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster." (note 4) It was Bataille's thinking that provoked Masson's illogical yet poetic reversal. There is no question that Masson was familiar with Bataille's text. Not only did he illustrate it but was actually present while it was written. Bataille ends the article by describing what Masson was doing in the kitchen while he was writing.

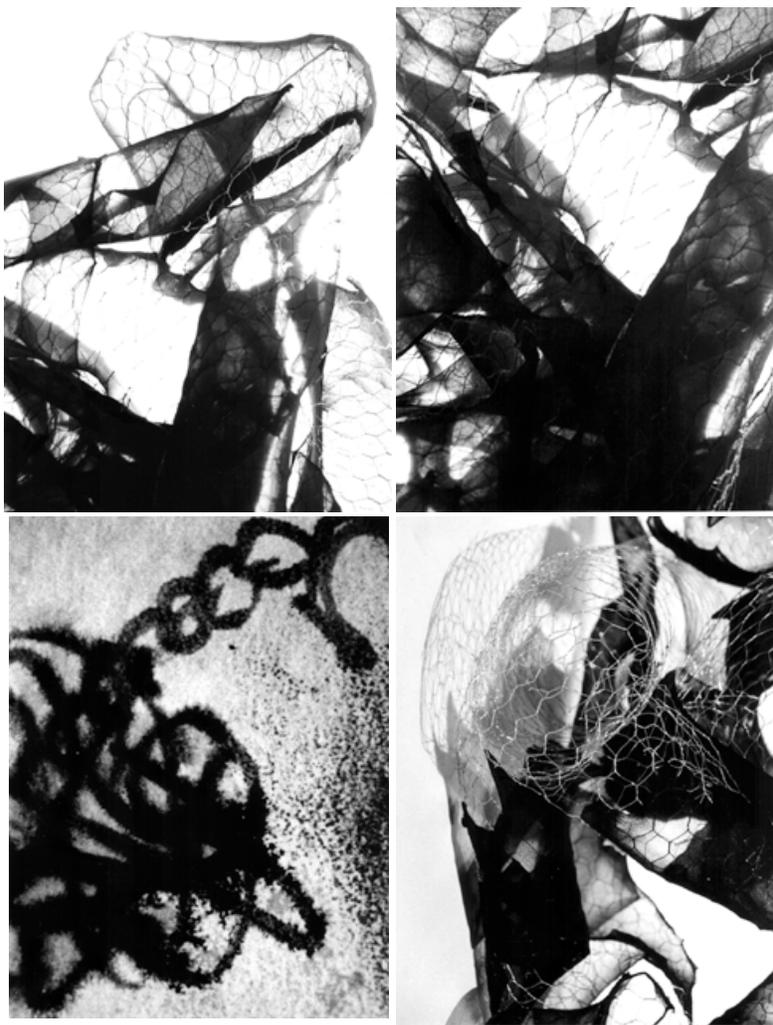
Knowing that Masson's situation of the labyrinth in the stomach was intentionally meta-phoric, the next step of this analysis was to envision the space of the labyrinth itself, by drawing another section. The influences of Bataille's writing and the historic myth of the minotaur made it imperative to keep the literature in mind. Thus, the drawing of the second section relied upon both Bataille's related writings as well as



Masson's related representations. The resulting drawn description of the interior of the labyrinth was a synthesis of all of these influences.

From these two drawings, the first representing the labyrinth in plan and the second describing it in section, a new three-dimensional reality was projected. This new awareness, combined with an understanding of the philosophy behind the painting, was developed into a model. It was imperative that the model account for Masson's decision to replace the stomach with the labyrinth. This removed the standard consideration of gravity that enters into any other depiction of a labyrinth.

Completed, the model and drawings give new meaning both to Masson's painting and Bataille's writings. All of the works, Bataille's, Masson's, and those pictured here, challenge the traditional understanding of the labyrinth. Many have addressed this issue throughout history and some will find no need to look again. But, before discarding these labyrinth portrayals as meaningless tropes, consider that an investigation such as this has its merits. All three representations ask new questions. Bataille wrote that at the centre of the labyrinth you find yourself. Masson elaborated on this, showing that the labyrinth is a part of you and at the same time it is your prison. These works show that contemplating the creative act should not be left exclusively to writing. Exploration of a poetic work that employs a different vernacular leads to a different end: an end that maintains the character of the original without reducing it to less meaningful metaphor.



Notes:

1. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989).
2. Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*; the poem, the poetic revelation, poetry and history, tr. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press 1973).
3. Illustrations can be found in: Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl and tr. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and

Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1985), 180.
4. Ibid., 181.