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# SHIBBOLETH: THE GARDEN OF SECRETS

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**Abstract.** A tale about a fictitious poet and soldier named Max Pintor about the nature of storytelling, about language as a password for entrance (Shibboleth) to a sacred country. The Garden of Secrets is the name of the Garden of forking paths (Jorge Luis Borges)<sup>2</sup>, a potential garden and a potential life for telling a different story than the official. These paths go beyond the distinctions between truth and lies, storytelling and jurisdiction, language and secrets versus language of evidence.

A writer is like a rat that builds a labyrinth from which he tries to escape.

*Raymond Queneau*

The most beautiful garden is a cupboard filled with books.

*Tales of a Thousand and One Nights*

I was incapable of making any progress with my book. That's how it began. For days, I was consumed with finding new words, a new image, to tell a story that was at the precipice of our times. I was unable to find my way. Then a friend, a photographer, asked me to join him on a trip to the Middle East. Political conflict had never left any trace in my books; I wasn't the kind of writer who had a strong desire to live in the centre of events, least of all Jerusalem. My friend, on the contrary, was constantly delving into the heart of things, always searching for that perfect shot. That was his vocation and his approach to life. I, on the other hand, drifted around in this obscure and remarkable labyrinth of a city without finding any inspiration to proceed.

One day, while on my way to the holy mosque, I chanced upon a book that was presented in a crafted wooden box. The book, *The Invisible Country* was a collection of tales written by an Israeli author named Max Pintor, who was possibly of Portuguese parents. The book itself was apparently edited by one or more of his disciples. The synopsis on the back of the book indicated that the man has been dead for seven years, however, this was with a question-mark, as if the year of death couldn't be fixed. I acquired the collection and immediately read the first story, "The story of a Warrior and captivated writer". A Warrior, during the siege of a City, deserts his troops and later appears as a completely different person who attempts to save a new and invisible

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<sup>2</sup> Borges Jorge Luis 'The Garden of Forking Paths' *Fictions* Grove Press New York 1962 Translation from Spanish

country. With this tale, my own journey to the holy mosque was thereupon abandoned. I lost my sense of time and space. My own project soon faded away into the sunset. I turned to this enigmatic writing crafted in an unpolished and a self-conscious style that made a peculiar impression on me. The story of his life was to occupy me for many days and nights; a writer, a poet, and a soldier. Over the following days I managed to get hold of all that he had written. His work represented what he himself called a “universal literature” in which a full life from birth to death is contained in a bottle as was told in the *Tales of Thousand and One Nights*. As he expresses it, “I write to become free of myself. I write to survive this life, to fight against those who try to keep us in place.”

I made the usual inquiries into the various criticisms of his works. Here and everywhere else my questions met with either deep silence, or long speeches on a dramatic and changeable life promising great inspiration for the younger generation. The judgements of his works fluctuated between being ‘brilliant’ and ‘inventive’, to being ‘baroque’ and ‘twisted’. Some accounts argued the books to be morbid and unhealthy.

A small extract from one of his final poems that captured his last days as a soldier should be sufficient to convince the reader:

We are the partisans of oblivion  
We forget our past and present  
We shall never meet again

In some obscure corner of the night all sailors are going to war,  
Outside the gates of Shatila, outside the gates of Eden  
Fallen horses, fallen bodies  
A dying hand holds yesterday’s newspaper  
A dying hand lost in the labyrinth

Look behind us, we have entered the landscape of postcards  
Are you saying words that have not arrived  
Are you saying lost childhood, its right here  
We have never abandoned it  
Only a possible change of our disquiet to some calm sleep

There is nowhere to enter  
The cameramen are crawling among corpses like dogs  
We are passive people blown away like a passed-out hipster  
We are soldiers whose weapons would not fire  
We are soldiers no longer marching

No need to search for music along the empty beach of Beirut  
The zones of empty hotels without windows are just a playground  
The zones of craters are our sand dunes

Dirty water spills over the beach  
As children we floated on water

We have seized some other means  
As children we played the games  
This is the riddle we have to solve

The common thread in the accounts of his life and work is that of contradiction and awe. According to some, Pintor perceived each army control post as a preface to a poem. Others supposed that he conceived the army as the ultimate state of idleness: the true precondition for a life as a writer. Others supposed that he used the military prisons and hospitals as a platform for his poetic-political revolt. Critics called his conversion to Islam a desperate act of propaganda. His apocryphal and unfinished book, *The Invisible Country*, calls for the rise of a universal Jewish spirit, and was denounced as an example of startling megalomania. During one reading session, I discovered that in some circles it is unwise to even mention his name.

Eventually I found a faithful group of his readers, including some sceptics, who were interested in sharing their knowledge and passion for this man's thinking. They agreed to meet with me under certain conditions. The circle was a motley crowd of people that, to some extent, resembled Pintor's own life. Backgrounds, professional interests, and political ideas, all varied as much as voices in a choir. The group included; a journalist, a man of letters, a doctor, a judge, a bookbinder, an Arabic underground novelist, a young unemployed social worker, a fellow soldier, a secret agent, and one of his first pupils. Together we decided to write a compilation based on this fascinating life of this rare poet and soldier. The only condition for participation was some meaningful acquaintance with Max Pintor. While I was thinking of a suitable meeting-place I stumbled on a line from one of his earlier books where he writes, "The Desert is the Preface to Israel that makes us sense the garden and the great continents that behind lie hidden." My knowledge of such Gardens was limited. To me they were hardly more than a dying metaphor for a lost paradise, a zone of retreat without a possible chance of a final redemption. I did all I could to avoid the noise from the streets. My DAB-radio placed in front of my toaster in the kitchen guarded the sanctity of my rooms with a dizzying variety of jazz music derived from every corner of the world. The interruption of a soloist at the midnight hour by a news-reader was my signal to turn off the radio. I put the garden behind me.

One late afternoon I found myself in the Armenian-quarter of the old city. I made my way through a narrow alley until my way was blocked. At first there appeared to me to be a simple wall, or rather, a white wall with a narrow door in the middle. I took the handle. It creaked in a way that convinced me that very few people came this way. The door blew open. I sensed the lush plants next to a wide flagstone in striking contrast to the poor vegetation of the surrounding city. Above one of the walls in the far left corner, a woman had, from her balcony, a view into the garden of a peculiar fountain made of matt-coloured stones. The fountain made the place look like an old ruin. Various constructions and buildings were given up to nature; a hidden wilderness where the near and the distant, past and present, met without quite reflecting each other. This displaced, frightening, thought set our course. This was to be the meeting place of our forbidden

hearing. Despite my confusion of what was going to happen I baptized this hidden place ‘the garden of secrets’.

We agreed to meet in this garden in the old city of Jerusalem every Friday afternoon over the next two and a half months to listen to each other’s stories. To the best of my ability, assisted by my secretary, I wrote down each account. Our original intention was not to bring this to the notice of the public. After having read each of them over several times I was convinced that these accounts, and their far-reaching scope, would create an interest for a much wider audience. Each of the ten stories was like watching a piece of life through an X-ray scanner whose chemic light captures what can be seen and what cannot be seen. Without this ever being planned, this collection of stories emulates the Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges’ stories of the garden of the forking paths; A space in which everything is present, a vertigous labyrinth for all time that intersects, and in which past and present, near and distant, storytelling and jurisdiction, language and secrets versus language as evidence, reflects and can be seen. In this pattern several lives converge within the same person. Neither absolute time, nor the Last Day, counts here. In one of these times, the author of one of these tales has met Pintor in a hospital, in another tale has seen and read what he has written, in yet another, met him as a soldier, as a rebel, as a Muslim, and finally, on the way to the heart of the garden, one has heard his prayer and found him dead.

On behalf of the group.

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## SHIBBOLETH

I arrived, together with my secretary, at the garden. Its walls cut off any direct view to the surrounding squares that permeated the old city. In contrast to the palaces of Louis XIV or the Italian city-states of the Medici family, we had no need for sitting in comfortable chairs to view the garden's mastery of the horizon and its perspectives. Rather, I thought of the garden as a temporary oasis for wandering animals and the like, such as it is with the bushmen of Kalahari when they settle down to rest their camels. Like nomads, we drank the water, scratched the earth, ate of the plants, and generally escaped into our thoughts. Like Jahve, I do not care for walls of shaped stones. It is only for the weak. On the facades and the ramshackle walls more or less random vegetation grew surrounded by a long line of palisades. Forming a notional centre, there was a fountain made of marble and resembling a scull from which the rainwater trickled out through the eyes, the mouth, and the jaw. The black mouthpiece reminded me of a scream from someone utterly mesmerized. In such a garden, one is reminded of the old proverb, "nature wants to hide", which means as much as the happy moments that bloom, the music that plays, all that is precious in life will die, come to an end, wither, and seep away.

– I said to them, "You can drink the water. Please place your glass under one of the fountains." They nodded, continually circling around the fountain. Some walked softly, increasingly uncomfortable to have committed to such intrigue. From two, now seated, I noticed a certain gaze of awareness marked by a history, and perhaps also a friendship, with our main protagonist that followed them like an invisible shadow. An uneasy expectation was whirring in the air. None of us knew where we were going. I myself had the momentary feeling of being on board a schooner awaiting a long journey, a swaying anchor with its sails in balance, waiting for the tide to make its turn. Each in our own way was putting the city behind us. After all had found a seat, I welcomed them. I presented myself, my background, and my expectations. I noticed how several of them turned their heads to stare at the wall behind them; some with an expression of regret, some already sensing a widening distance between the garden and the city. I reassured them that what was said in the garden was to remain in the garden. Each then presented themselves by name and profession. Those who preferred to be anonymous remained so.

A journalist from the West-bank volunteered to be the first to speak. He warned us of a story operating on the border of legibility, that he had no intention of painting a glamorous image. He remained seated while constantly turning his head to look at the others. He began:

– In school they forced us to listen to stories that were not our own. We had great gaps in our knowledge about ourselves. One day we heard of the first people who broke with Adam, those who made an oath to kill only for the sake of food. Later mankind went another way. But we knew nothing and suddenly it is our time. Pintor was a guard at our school. He had his own way of looking at things. He used every means, the word, the image, secret signs, whatever, to express himself to the children, and it was unusual for a guard to make any effort at all. One day I saw him carving using some soft rock he found in the yard, He was sculpting a dog. He told me to ask the staff to put it on the wall in the military barrack, that one day it would be able to bark,

dig holes and run on its way. I am not sure if he was somehow referring to himself. The final version was a long and slim dog.

– Later I would always be staring at the dog before I was asked to show him my passport. The story goes like this: I was only twelve years old, still a boy lost in a different landscape. When we reached the post the children all used to line up next to each other. On the roads we stick together like a group. Every day we passed his post, his rifle, his gaze, his territory. His story lives in the body. It can only be told in present tense.

At this moment I was puzzled about this shift in time.

It would take me some time to understand why.

The journalist turned and flipped through his papers and then stood up.

He read slowly with a strange repeating sound.

Only once did he lift his head to look up at us.

In front and behind us the olive trees, in front and behind us the impenetrable dust, in front and behind us the valley that bears our own name, in front and behind us the old roads, old sacks with old potatoes, old tires that are thread-bear. We will put the village behind us. We will eat from the fields. We are not allowed to cross the fields. We cannot set foot on foreign grass. These rules we have learned since long ago. But we have to eat. We have to steal unripe figs. We have to take in food as we go on our way. We are on our way home from school. We are on our way home from where the future begins. We are on our way back from the open barracks. Soon we will pass a control post and its surroundings: A dying tree, corrugated iron, high antennas, a military jeep, and still stronger fencing along the roads. Soon we shall pass this place. We are making up stories of where we have been, of what we have seen, it is not a lie. Do they notice that one of us is missing? We tell him that we have seen a white horse. He turns around and looks into the horizon. We giggle. From his frown we can tell he is not convinced there is a white horse. We tell him that we have seen a child asleep on the dirt road. Then we whisper to each other. We are already too late.

– To pass you must say the right word.

He looks directly at us. Our chins can barely reach above the desk. It is not a place build for children.

– You cannot pass. You have to know the word. You have to say it out loud.

Such is the message from the man in the green uniform. We are on our way home from school. Passport and papers are ready, packed in plastic, our little emblem. The pages stick together. He barely looks at them. He is only interested in one thing: To hear the word. But what word, and is there only one? Is this his way of exposing our suffering? He looks at us. It is clear to him that we don't know the word, the word that can bring us through the valley, over the field,

over the river, and home. With patience he tells the story of the Ephraimites and their war against Jafta, about the battle at Jordan, of the refugees of Ephraim, of those that were not allowed to cross the river, those who pronounced the word Shibboleth as Sibbolet without the “sh-sound”. We understand that this is how one knows an Israeli from all others. They have to say the word. We have to say the word. Some of us lack the confidence to utter the word. Not everyone knows if they possess the proper sound. We haven’t learned much in school. Most of all, we learn how to hide. Only now in the hide-an-seeek game invented by the grown-ups we learn something new; to know who is coming by the sound of grown-up steps, to know who is speaking, and who is shouting, to see their movements, listen to their voices, study their faces, the cracking of the skin, wet dribble that lies in the corner of the mouth, the teeth when they bite together. None of the grown-ups care to say the word. Every day we are too late. Not because of school, not because of the bad road, but because of the strange soldier, him whose name is more easy for me to say.

We never learn to say the word correctly. We learn to listen to the stories that are being told. We learn to walk slowly on the dirt road. At the bottom of the valley this road changes to gravel, while at the other side the path will lead towards a city with new asphalt covering. For the first part of the trip we are surrounded by a fence. Eventually we learn what surrounds the fence. We learn to walk at a slow pace. We are walking slowly as this soldier is guarding the post; we know when the time is good to be heard in the word that will give us access to the valley on the other side. Every day we postpone our journey from school to listen to his stories. Maybe these stories are our stories? We slow down on the dusty, dirt road, on the old road. We will take a break because we know we can expect a story. Their story? Our story? In this passage we are examining each other’s gaze. In this passage with our fingers we are tracing the slogans of the war written on the bombed out walls. In this passage we stroke the stray dogs and cross our fingers not to be infected. On this passage we stop to compare each other’s handwriting in our creased exercise book. We learn to distinguish between good and bad concrete. We are watching each other contemplating the story, the minor story as well as the major story. We have time to ponder. In this passage we ponder. We feel the earth beneath our feet. We feel the subterranean rivers. In this passage we learn to save our breath. We learn to rest together. In this passage we are given yet another chance.

At the intersection of a latitude and a longitude we are ready to face an unimaginable tribunal. No one is ready. But we are. Our almost dry eyes follow an incident: We see people throng together. A woman cries. Cars with blue lights block the road. Hands and arms are pointing to the ground. We see a cultivated field, a brick wall which no longer acts as a fence. A gravel road that ends in a wall. Over and behind a wall we crawl from a bombed out house. The good girls hide their exercise books. In this position behind the wall I am copying the phrases one after another while my friend from school is playing with his shadow in the poisonous earth. I remember the drilled holes through the broken concrete. I put my eye to the hole and enjoy this view. Now and then we throw the white baseball to each other. We take turns with the glove. It’s a long trip home. I can never answer his question, and yet I am allowed to go. We have no knowledge of the right word. But we are allowed to go. We have no ancestry of the stone desert and yet we are allowed to go. We have our friends among the insects, dummy wings, friendships with thin black beetles that blink in the sun. But we are allowed to go. We have our friends

among the insects, our forced marches. But we are allowed to go. We have only our women that make laundry for a people. But we are allowed to go. We are given only the geography of the desert, which is not the same as our earth. But we are allowed to go. We move from A to B in this world, on this territory we are shrinking hour by hour. But we are allowed to go. In this passage we learn to take cover.

We have become old even though we are children. We are becoming old even as children. We play with sticks, stones, and insects behind the green tanks. We find rest behind an old jeep. We learn to recognize our own reflection in the cars along the road. We lose our balance. The shooting in the valley hits our ears. The birds circle around the few trees that are left, flying down, calling to nest. The stirring of the air ceases. We change socks on the wall rubble. We are carrying two pairs of socks because we know this stretch. Because we have to be ready for our Shibboleth. Not that we have to be clean. The gate to pass is not a clean place. It is not a place to wash one's feet.

I have to hide my sister's medicine. I place the white bottle at the bottom of my left shoe. The smell from the provisional checkpoint overwhelms my nose. She takes out a scarf in vain to hold back the smell. On this sixth day they empty the garbage cans, after that, the latrine. The soldiers are forced to the intimacy of bearing the latrine hut behind the olive trees. Intimacy is imposed in living with the smell, the fresh excrements of humans, fresh excrements of animals. Intimacy is imposed in inspecting the tub. Intimacy is imposed in having to rinse the containers. Intimacy is imposed in the sticky hands when we touch each other.

- He leans over her neck: Do you know Helena, he asks.
- We are ready.
- But do you know Helena?
- Who knows Helena?

War is the father of all, the beginning of all, says Heraclitus, but is it also the end? Who can say her right name at the right place? The soldier will not stop asking questions. I look at my sister who respects all strong women, but does she also look up to Helena? Will she know the answer? I look at her and whisper to myself that she knows the answer. I am carrying her medicine in my shoe while saying to myself that she knows Helena. Neither my sister nor my friends know the proper ending. How are we to pronounce the words properly, we who have no knowledge of their law.

The soldier continues, "For ten years the Greeks and the Trojans killed each other because of Helena." Who was she? A Goddess, a too beautiful creature who should not have been born, someone you could love without knowing who or what she was? In the end she had nothing to do with the mighty battle, and to the fighting soldiers she was only a symbol for what the fight was really about. She wasn't even what we would call a 'name'. No one was capable of saying what they were fighting for; no one had the right words to say what was behind the war. He looked at us with a staring gaze as if expecting an answer. I turn my head to look the other way. Is this a request, an invitation? Is this the time for us to speak? Is this the time to say the word, the only word that will bring us home? He loosens the top button in his uniform. He asks, "Is

she a black widow, Helena? Is she a straw woman, a scarecrow with a scowl painted on her face? Is she a hollow that field mice use to build their caves, or something for you kids to hide in? Yes, is she a hollow for you, for all of you?”

I look him in the eye. The others will do the same. I remember the black circle around his high cheeks, his posture, his deep gaze of fatigue. We all listen to his words that are disappearing into the air, the air that belongs to them. Our small game in the desert, their hide and seek? There we are, with an appearance marked by cracks, the fracture in our body, the fracture of the earth. We fidget with impatience. There we are, waiting for our turn. We hide small objects under the dresses, beneath our socks, under the hat. The ash in the fireplace at this control post will no longer keep us warm. We are without an answer. We have no knowledge of Helena. We are not familiar with our neighbours. We have no knowledge of their story. It is out of our reach. It's a cold fireplace. There is blood in the back of our nose. We are used to it. There is no wooden bench in our school. We will keep standing while listening to the teacher. We have been accustomed to things. We have been accustomed to the fact that stories can be false, that Helena doesn't exist, that she never was part of our story.

For Pintor, his situation was a curse. Did I see it on his face? His gaze made me uncomfortable. Did he appreciate his own company? If they had locked him up in a tank with others from the army he would have suffered from his disease on the first day. When we reached the post we saw him marking the tree with a penknife. We had to pull ourselves together. After all, he didn't ask us about the date of the destruction of Pompeii, for the progression of quotient, the name of Shakespeare's last immortal comedy. He asked us about Helena, the woman that shows us why we remain barbarians. It is from her that we learn to grasp the colour of blood. The wisdom of all wars never lies in the blood that is being shed or the number of victims. That it is as bitter to defeat another human being as it is to be defeated by him. Only when war has become its own objective, and Helena the empty image, would the Greek and the Trojans continue fighting.

We are back and we will shut the door to this story. We close our eyes and fold our arms. We lost ourselves on this last passage. We are not a family and yet we are brothers and sisters. One of us will not accept all this gossip. One of us prefers facts to stories. One of us doesn't smile. One of us has a clear mark on their body. We will continue to walk this way. We put our effort to arrive in time, to those stories that belong to nowhere. We never know the answer, but we are allowed to go. We are tired and don't feel up to accusing each other. We are the olive-skinned children peeing down the slope as soon as we are allowed to go. We are the awesome and the immense. We are the ridiculous children vanishing in the desert. Near our village we take cover from the aeroplanes overhead. We have no knowledge of its real message. Now and then, we bend to collect the twigs. We no longer hear the planes. Their voices are lost in the noise around us, the noise from their own engines. From up in the clouds we look like spots. They look like spots. They need signals. We need signals. They need an observation post. We need an observation post. They are constructing a new creature for the machine. A foreign language, Esperanto? We are constructing a new creature, our own vulgar sky no one can understand. We convert the utter otherness of language to ourselves. The picture we have of ourselves is limited but we learn to live with it. We have years of experience in listening to other stories. We are now

on our way. On our last day on this stretch we have no other wish than to reach our home. The school is over and this passage will be taken out of our lives. It will no longer be relevant to solve our mystery. This passage is part of suffering, our crisis, our forfeiture. Together we make it towards our own Shibboleth, the word that brings us further, across the river, through the valley, and further on towards the next village, the next pass, and home.

This pass belongs to Pintor. That's how I saw it. In this remote place he did his best to guard his land; here he withdrew in contemplation, here he took his notes; here he lived in a state of dwelling. Behind the tree, behind the walls we sat down. Behind the trees, behind the walls, we drank his tea directing our gaze across the valley listening to the songs of cicadas. Behind the tree, behind the walls, we saw him carrying his turquoise laundry basket and in a clothes-dryer putting his worn-out uniform. Behind the tree, behind the walls, there we saw him stripped to the waist, wringing out his uniform. Behind the tree, behind the walls, we read the tattoo on his right arm, "Serve the good cause and die".

### *Notes for the Reader*

**Shibboleth**, *et.* [ʃɪboˈleɪd, -ˈlæd] (*also written Schib(b)olet(h)*). A pronouncement characterising a language or a dialect, usually difficult for foreigners to pronounce. The Danish Schibbolet would be: Rødgrød med fløde (Red-stewed fruit with cream). *Shibboleth* takes place in the Trial and Verdict 12,6 as a catchword, as in Jeftas the Judge's fight against the Ephraimites used to separate those from all other Israelites. In this sense one cuts off the Ephraimites from the fords of Jordan, and if someone wanted to cross, he must say the sh. If he pronounced the word "sibbolet" as the Ephraimites did he would have exposed himself and been killed. Politikens Bibel leksikon. p. 285. Politiken publisher. 1997.

Derrida Jacques 'Shibboleth: for Paul Celan' in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds Dutoit Thomas and Outi Pasanaen Fordham University Press New York 2005 pp 1–64, and at p ix "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan' was published in French as *Schibboleth: Pour Paul Celan* (Paris: Galilee, 1986). The present version, which restores the full French text, as well as the layout of the French publication, was revised by Thomas Dutoit. It is based on the translation by Joshua Wilner that appeared in *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Baltimore: the John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 3–72.' ●