The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages

Doob, Penelope Reed

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In Part Three, we rise above the labor of reconstructing the idea of the labyrinth to more expansive regions and trace the grand tradition of labyrinthine texts from Virgil's *Aeneid* through Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* to Chaucer's *House of Fame*. Each of these texts reflects and redefines the received idea of the labyrinth, transmitting it, enriched, to later ages and particularly to later authors in the continuous tradition here represented: Boethius knew Virgil, Dante followed boldly in the footsteps of both Virgil and Boethius, and Chaucer apologetically rewrote Virgil, Boethius, and Dante in the *House of Fame*. Here we witness what Hans Robert Jauss called the "dialogue of great authors": examples of the high-level reception and imitation/translation/interpretation of the labyrinthine textual heritage. Naturally, imitation does not mean slavish repetition: despite the reverence each author had for his predecessors, each text is not merely a fresh rewriting of borrowed themes from a novel perspective but also, implicitly or explicitly, a correction of honored antecedents.

I do not mean to imply that each text is *primarily* a commentary on or adaptation of its predecessors, or that the idea of the labyrinth is equally prominent in all of them, though my discussion focuses on these matters. However, each text includes overt or covert commentary on and adaptation of earlier texts, and each develops, inter alia, the idea of the labyrinth found therein. Nor is this a comprehensive study of literary indebtedness; rather, it is a highly selective examination of the treatment of labyrinthine themes and structures in a chain of texts related in many other ways as well. I do not assume that everything labyrinthine in these texts was placed there consciously: although I have no doubt that authorial intention is sometimes involved, I am content to suggest intertextualities while looking at each text as text and showing how each in its
own way draws on a wide range of labyrinth lore and uses the image, characters, structures, and metaphorical significances of the maze to shape and give meaning to a new work of complex artistry. In short, I am taking the labyrinth as an important “narrative image,” to use V. A. Kolve’s term, in these texts: a central visual image, its potential meaning stemming from both visual and literary tradition, that enriches the text it informs—a “memorial center of meaning and meditative suggestion for the entire poem.” My goal in these readings, like Kolve’s, “is not to shrink the narrative to an icon, but rather to explore the icon as the vital center of a work vivid and valuable as a whole.”

We will cover a good deal of familiar territory in these chapters, encountering specifically or implicitly labyrinthine places, people, and characteristics. Labores, errores, and ambages abound thematically, with all their attendant ambiguities. Various kinds of inextricability, inexplicability, and impenetrability recur in recognizable guise and context: epistemological, philosophical, theological, spiritual, physical, moral, linguistic, artistic. Each text raises the possibility of transcending earthly labyrinths, of converting confusion into order. But each work also reflects the extraordinary difficulties inherent in that process: life is too complicated to permit easy clarity, and human vision—real and metaphorical—too limited. Moreover, some mysteries cannot be penetrated by human beings: one cannot always see the labyrinths of the gods whole. What understanding can be achieved depends partly on the protagonist’s patience and partly on his choices, informed by guides with a (comparatively) privileged perspective. But guides may be fallible even when offering Ariadne’s thread or Daedalian wings to help the protagonist cope with the circuitous passages and ambiguities that are the only path to knowledge in the various labyrinths that constrain human life and thought. Several of these works even question the skill and benevolence of the cosmic architect.

Labyrinthine convertibility is a central issue in these texts. Conversion from confusion to comprehension, however fleeting and imperfect, is the goal of all the systematic disorientations inflicted on the protagonist. As for Augustine in the De magistro, so for these later authors labyrinthine circuitousness is the only possible means to the end, knowledge; moreover, one becomes morally worthy of reaching that goal only by enduring enforced twists and turns with good grace. There is no direct path, or none that could avail, as the pilgrim Dante discovers when he attempts to climb the mountain in Inferno 1.

If the world is a labyrinth in these works, what of choice, what of human responsibility? As in many medieval texts, both unicursal and multicursal models of the maze are implied as appropriate. Sometimes

1. Kolve, Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative, pp. 72, 69, and 83.
there is no apparent choice other than to continue in ignorance on a
given course; sometimes hard decisions must be made, or blind alleys
confronted and steps retraced. Labyrinthine questions of the intricate
interrelationships of fortune and providence, free will and determinism,
merit and reward, appear again and again. And whatever the form of
the world-maze, these texts play with the tensions between linearity—the
path actually trodden, from beginning to end, or the line of a chronological
narrative, or the diachronic progression of Christian time and
history—and circularity, which echoes variously the circular perfection
of God's cosmos, synchronic eternity, the entangling cycles of repetition
without resolution, the circularity of reasoning, and the recurrent sea­
sons of the natural or liturgical year. This merging of the linear and the
circular (or at least the circuitous) within one image is peculiarly laby­
rinthine.

Although these texts deal with labyrinths and include labyrinthine
images, Cretan characters (or people who enact their roles), and laby­
rinthine language, metaphors, and themes, they are also in themselves
labyrinths of words: complexly structured and elaborately patterned
verbal creations. They are all difficult, ambiguous works that force us
to share the protagonist's limited point of view, seeing only what he sees
or is shown, learning as he learns—slowly, laboriously, with false starts
and confusions and misunderstandings. We must trace his progress with
him if we are to learn what he learns, for the text itself is a kind of
Ariadne's thread extricating us from the maze we all inhabit for the
work's duration. Only thus can we achieve any sort of privileged vision at
all. It is for this reason that subsequent chapters follow the works’ narra­
tive order: by treading the textual path very carefully we come to per­
ceive its pattern.

These texts are labyrinthine in another sense as well: they have ac­
quired so much commentary over the centuries that they resemble multi­
cursal mazes: each line branches out into seemingly infinite interpreta­
tions. It is probably impossible for anyone to track every hermeneutic
path for each work. In any case, it has been impossible for me, although
I have consulted a goodly number of medieval commentaries on and
translations of Virgil, Boethius, and Dante, as well as modern readings
of all four texts. In general, when medieval commentaries deal explicitly
with labyrinths in these works, they gloss direct mentions of maze or
myth by relating the Cretan story and citing the odd detail from Servius
or Pliny or earlier medieval commentaries. And that is just what one
would expect from middle-level commentaries documenting institution­
alized readings of revered texts. Hence I rarely allude to the medieval
commentarial tradition, because it is not particularly pertinent to the
readings I offer: each text in the series discussed in Part Three is per­
haps the best high-level commentary on the labyrinths of its pre-
decessors. Modern scholarship and criticism are sometimes more to the point than middle-level medieval commentaries, and I indicate parallel analyses and acknowledge actual indebtedness as appropriate. But I cannot pretend to have read all the secondary commentary; had I done so, this book would have taken another decade or two to complete. If here and there I retread unaware a path already trodden by someone else, my apologies; in general, I assume that since I approach the texts from the new perspective opened by material presented in Parts One and Two, my analyses too will break some new ground.

2. The labyrinthicity of the first three texts was, however, recognized outside the chain of texts discussed here: thus the labyrinth is sometimes chosen to illustrate manuscripts of Virgil, Boethius, and Dante (see chap. 5), and several writers—notably Boccaccio and Juan de Mena, as well as Chaucer—imitated the Aeneid, the Consolation, and the Comedy in new works in which labyrinths are important (see chaps. 6, 10, and 11).