THE ARCHETYPE OF THE LABYRINTH.
SIGNIFICATION AND METAMORPHOSIS*

First Part
Theoretical Background

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ABSTRACT

One of the most obsessing and universal symbols of mankind, the labyrinth has a complex history which mirrors the variety of meanings related to its symbolic dimension. Either embraced as a metaphor for the human condition, or rejected as an expression of the obscurity, the labyrinth, its physical appearance and especially its primordial attributes inspired approaches within categories of knowledge as different as philosophy, literature, mathematics, physics, or arts. The article examines the evolution of the symbol throughout its long existence, as well as the way it influenced the evolution of thought itself.

Keywords: labyrinth, archetype, initiation, choice, discontinuity.

* Translated into English by the author.
Le réseau, le labyrinthe..., remplacent les chaînes linéaires et segmentées ; le « désordre » - à plusieurs entrées – est plus fondamental que l’ordre.
(Michel Serres)

Origins, types, and history

Whether we call it by the English names labyrinth or maze, by the French labyrinthe or dédale, or by the German Irrweg or Irrgaten, this concept always refers to the same meanings: wanderings, critical choice between paths, getting lost and confused, facing danger, difficulty, anxiety, hope, despair, captivity, disorientation, and, ultimately, surviving or dying. Painful and dangerous, but equally necessary and inevitable, the experience of the labyrinth is a metaphor for the quest: the strenuous and exhausting search for one’s self, for truth and salvation. The terror the maze trader feels is the result of its countless discontinuities: false exits, mirrors, corridors that lead nowhere but to other corridors, possessively defended centres. Way before our existence became locked inside the rigorous rules of language, often too poor to express the deepest thoughts, ideals and phantasms, those who deciphered the significance of the labyrinth were worthy of receiving the key to wisdom.

The immemorial origins of the labyrinth go back to the Neolithic Age and its widespread occurrences prove it was all but a local phenomenon: we find traces from the Mediterranean region to India, Tibet, Indonesia, or pre-Columbian America. A consensus has never been reached whether the labyrinth, as an architectural construction and as a symbol, migrated from a supposedly Greek birthplace to the rest of the world, or it appeared independently in areas separated by the longest distances. And the debate is most likely to remain unsolved. Nevertheless, it is specifically this aspect that raises the labyrinth to the level of an archetype, as noted by Umberto Eco in the preface to Paolo Santarcangeli’s Il libro dei labirinti: “it has an archetypal structure, […] which reflects (or determines) our manner to think about the world because it reflects (or determines) our human way to adapt to the form of the world, or to impose one if the world is deprived of it.”

Although in current usage labyrinth and maze appear to be synonymous, scholars have differentiated between the unicursal type – a single path that leads to the centre – and the multicursal type – a complex structure with multiple bifurcations. But the diversity of forms does not end here. Despite the fact that the

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2 Paolo Santarcangeli, Il libro dei labirinti. Storia di un mito e di un simbolo, Frassinelli, Milano, 1984, p. XII.
attempts to classify the multitude of configurations the labyrinth receives vary according to almost every source, we may well distinguish several types, thoroughly examined by Santarcangeli: opened labyrinth (the path that leads to the centre is different from the one going back) / closed labyrinth (the path leading to the centre and back is one and the same); the labyrinth with no centre / the labyrinth with one centre / the labyrinth with multiple centres; the centrifugal labyrinth (it begins from the centre) / the centripetal labyrinth (it ends with the centre). The possible combinations between these types define the long evolution of the labyrinth, itself dominated by the same qualities as the meanings the symbol carries.

The etymology of the term remains unclear in spite of the various efforts to explain it. The hypothesis that is most often mentioned suggests the word *labyrinthos* as the house of the double-headed ax (*labrys*) and the palace of Knossos of Crete. Proven to be quite inaccurate, it was taken further to an even older word indicating the “stone” (the root *la*, from which the Greek *laos* and the Latin *lapis* derived). This relation between the labyrinth and the stone nurtured deeper connections leading to the natural model of the cave and its functions as a spiritual centre and a place of initiation, birth and death. That caves and labyrinths may have well shared the same symbolism is illustrated in both myth and literature. Both were offering easy access to those who wanted in, but reaching the exit was destined only to the “chosen ones”, a careful selection being thus assured. Although the similarities between the two seem to have dissolved throughout the history of mankind, their most important role, namely that of a place where a ritual of initiation was performed, continued to define the complex implications that surrounded them.

Deceiving the eyes of the trader with its tortuous lanes, the labyrinth also fulfilled the essential task of protecting the entrance of cities or fortified settlements. Nevertheless, as noted by René Guénon, this profane purpose was not its first reason of existence, but only a secondary consequence of the “purely ritual and traditional character” of ancient civilizations. Not only could it keep away the intruders but, more significantly, it was a barrier against the harmful influences threatening the psyche. This is the line followed by the French writer Jacques Attali, who sees the labyrinth as “the last message” sent by nomad tribes to sedentary civilizations. The idea is supported by evidence of cave drawings
representing labyrinths as symbols of the previous migrant life. The labyrinth was considered to be the gate to the underworld from where the ancestors came and where their descendants would eventually go after death.\(^8\)

The multitude of meanings defining the enduring symbol of the labyrinth included the dance as a choreographic ceremony of more or less ritual purposes: Homer’s *Iliad*, Plutarch’s *Theseus*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and the rites for worshipping Aphrodite or Apollo put the labyrinth in connection to the dance as a celebration of the victory against death. The ancient man’s philosophy rested on the dichotomy between the terrestrial dimension, subjected to constant change, and the cosmic world, the expression of the immutable and of the perfection, reflected in the circular movements of the planets and spheres, a celestial motion without a beginning and without an end. An ever-recursive dance of the planets, as one may say, in which the supreme order of the cosmos translates the circuits of the Cretan labyrinth into the planets of our solar system.

The proto-historic and ancient network of significations surrounding the labyrinth was to be revisited during the Middle Ages, when the symbol laid at the foundation of Christian theology: the human soul was lost on its countless corridors and the only way to exit this metaphorical world of sin was to let oneself be guided by Christ. In *The Maze and the Warrior. Symbols in Architecture, Theology, and Music*, Craig Wright refers to the apocryphal Acts of St. John (3\(^{rd}\) century), where, on the night before his death, Jesus is said to have asked his disciples to join hands in a circle. While Christ sings, his followers respond with “Amen” and “Glory to the Father”. The Greek term *choreia*, once employed to denote the labyrinth dance of antiquity, would make way for its Latin equivalent *chorea* to describe the dance again, but this time inside the church.\(^9\) Man’s journey towards redemption was represented on church mazes, first in Italy (Ravenna, Piacenza, Pavia) between the 10\(^{th}\) and 12\(^{th}\) centuries, subsequently spreading notably in major cathedrals in northern France (Sens, Auxerre, Chartres, Reims, Amiens) by the 12\(^{th}\) and 13\(^{th}\) centuries. The ritual aspect was far from being lost: translated from pagan to Christian meanings, the labyrinth was also the metaphor for a pilgrimage and its centre for the destination, the city of Jerusalem. The dance connotations are not abandoned, but invested with a totally new signification.

The sense the labyrinth had acquired in the Middle Ages was to change dramatically over the next centuries. The secularisation of the symbol during the Renaissance gradually took the labyrinth out of the church and placed it in a substantially broader context: labyrinthine illustrations could now be found in books or embroideries, on ceilings, in gardens or on paintings. Just as the central stone in church mazes (like at Amiens) once bore portraits of their architects,

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\(^8\) Ibidem, p. 68.

similar representations were now to be found, for instance, in Albrecht Dürer’s engravings (complex knots whose design was achieved from a single continuous line leading to the centre, where Dürer’s name was often inscribed), or on a similar image generally attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, in whose centre lie the words Accademia Leonardi Vinci, supposedly related to a masonic organisation. Leonardo’s labyrinthine studies, attracting suspicions that he was in connection to the devil, are built around an abstract interplay of warps leading to a centre controlled by the enigmatic human being. His abstract experiments would be echoed several centuries after, by Klee or Mondrian.

But the tortuous line was to be soon replaced by the straight path as an embodiment of Reason. Its victory was obvious not only in architecture, but in painting, literature, classical drama and music as well. Equally removed from church floors, as it was now considered a pagan symbol sending back to the dark world of pre-Christianity, the labyrinth came to be regarded as nothing more than a synonym for the artificial and the obscure. The world was no longer seen as obeying the ontological hierarchy of the Aristotelian cosmos, but as a new order of a profound rationalism. The logic has triumphed. The doubt, the double, the confusion, and the fluctuation were excluded. There was no more space neither for the impenetrable and the inaccessible, nor for the anguish of the initiation. Science mirrored exquisitely this complex evolution. If, by Archimedes, the labyrinth still provided the model for his discoveries, with Plato things were to change: the curve and the obscure were replaced by the straight line and the predictable. Everything has a cause and the reality is clear and controlled. “For without a cause nothing can be created”, says Platon in Timaeus. The world is rational and the science is universal and immutable. Johannes Kepler and Isaac Newton would embrace this vision and the dramatic revolutions in science, philosophy, society, and politics that were to follow would gradually make the medieval world-view fade away. The confidence that the Enlightenment thinkers now gained in the intellectual powers of the humanity was accompanied by the hostility towards tradition, superstition, myth, or miracles, as these were considered to compete with the ultimate authority of reason. Newton’s conception of nature as an orderly domain governed by strict dynamical laws and pure mathematical principles, Bacon’s idea of the science as based on empirical observation, Descartes’s rationalist system of philosophy setting to establish a metaphysical foundation for the sciences, Leibniz’s principle that we can fully understand the universe by means of our natural forces of reason, Spinoza’s denial of any kind of transcendent supreme creator – and the list may well go on – would pave the way for our modern western world, in which man is dared to think for himself.

The nineteenth century scientific developments went on to promote the principle of the straight path, at least on the surface. Thermodynamics invented the entropy, a measure of the disorder, and definitively removed any trace of the
reversibility, focusing the attention on the irreversible transformation that leads to a new state of equilibrium. Finally, times enters into the field of science, as its irreversible direction equals the flow of the heat. But there is much more than meets the eye. Although well hidden, the symbolism of the labyrinth was still to be found at the bottom of any idea: there is no progress without intellectual or psychological error and doubt, and no theory, of whatever kind, can be developed as simple as that. No longer visually represented, the labyrinth nevertheless remained the interiorised image at the core of the individual’s personal quests. The human body itself was now known to be made up of inextricable circuits, where any step may be deadly. The brain, the nervous system, the circulation of the blood, the later discoveries on the fingerprint or the DNA, and, most significantly, the psyche obey to the same rules that govern the labyrinth: those of spirals, knots, bifurcations, and multiple lines of communication.

This dynamic perspective on the inner life stood at the foundation of Freud’s theory about the human psyche. It is well known that at the heart of his psychoanalysis laid the obscure space of the unconscious, the primary source of psychic energy. Reservoir of significant and disturbing material, the unconscious denies the access to the powerful elements that must be kept buried in order not to threaten the mental life. But these elements (in Freud’s view, sexual urges, instincts, and energies) refuse to remain in exile, constantly attempting to emerge to the surface. Psychic conflicts, desires, drives, phantasms, in one word all the interdictions imposed by the censorship, do eventually find their way out of the labyrinth where the unconscious is hiding, either through neurosis, or through dreams.

Freud’s theory was to be taken further and greatly modified by Jung, whose complex psychology reinterpreted the basic psychoanalytical concepts. By Jung, the unconscious is invested with a two-level structure, divided between the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The latter, probably Jung’s most important contribution, contains the phylogenetic experience of the human race, whose functional unity is represented by the archetypes, identical psychic structures and primitive mental images inherited from early ancestors and common to all individuals. Fundamentally expressed through myths, fairy tales, but also dreams, the archetype assures a common background for the human condition. It carries an energy represented through sense, which turns it into a symbol. Thus all archetypal manifestations become symbolic. The most prominent archetypes are those of the mother, the birth, the rebirth, the power, the hero, and the divine child and their basic feature is, again, non-temporality. The antic symbols do not limit their existence to the ancient world, to its myths and rites. Yet, they continue to be relevant to modern times, nevertheless changing the way into which they express themselves to modern man, for whom they often seem meaningless. The most common way for the symbolic images to surface from the
unconscious is the dream, either that of the neurotic, or that of a sane individual. The collective unconscious is, according to Jung, the source of many dreams, which make them difficult for the dreamer to understand. First Jung, then his disciples departed from the premise that similarities between the ancient myths and the dreams of modern patients were not just a pure coincidence, as, even unknowingly, we fall in over and over again with the symbolism of universal themes, out of which the myth of the hero represents one of the most widely encountered. As Joseph L. Henderson notes in Ancient myths and modern man, a part of Jung’s last work, Man and His Symbols, “their special roles [a/n godlike figures] suggests that the essential function of the heroic myth is the development of the individual’s ego-consciousness – his awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses – in a manner that will equip him for the arduous tasks with which life confronts him”.10 In case of dreams about labyrinths, sustain the analysts, they restate the maze’s significance for the initiation rite, as well as “the liberation of the anima figure from the devouring aspect of the mother image”.11

Through his major contributions to the philosophy of sciences, Gaston Bachelard formulated his epistemological approach around the concepts of obstacle and break, which insisted on the discontinuous essence of scientific progress as opposed to the positivist continuous evolution. From Freud, Bachelard borrowed and reinterpreted concepts such as the unconscious, the dream, the libido, or the censorship. Greatly influenced by Jung, Bachelard himself relied on the collective unconscious and the archetypes that validate it. The French philosopher embarked on a poetics whose categories, rooted in the Greek ancient thought and the medieval alchemy, corresponded to the four classical elements. Around them, Bachelard built a fascinating psychoanalytic theory, exemplified by literary texts belonging to Novalis, Hölderlin, Hoffmann, Goethe, Nietzsche, Shelley, Balzac, Rilke, or Poe. Science and literature, in other words rationality and imagination, find themselves as the two faces of the same coin, violently opposed, but intriguingly complementary. Bachelard’s psychoanalysis becomes one of the imaginary, seen as the origin of all psychic life. Once again, he returns to the psychoanalytic terminology, this time to use the concept of ambivalence, which he defines as the fundamental law of the imagination, well distinguished from the non-contradiction which characterizes the reason. Out of the four elements, the earth appears to best embrace the connotations of the contradiction, through the confusions it often awakes. Poor and weak, but equally rich and strong, it stimulates the reveries and allows the subject to psychologically conquest the space outside and the space inside. But the origin of self-identity is not entirely related to the multiple topography of the world, whether it is external or internal, as the

11 Ibidem, p. 125.
subject equally needs to engage into the control of time. Bachelard regards the earth as the most complex and complete of the four elements, ending his inquiry about them with two volumes dedicated to it. As a symbol of the earth, the labyrinth finds its place among the philosopher’s concerns. In *La Terre et les rêveries du repos: essai sur les images de l’intimité*, the archetype of the labyrinth is related not only to the connection between a lost being and an unconscious path, but also to the dream and the trudge it so often involves. Consequently, the labyrinth becomes a synthesis of the miseries felt along a hostile itinerary. The labyrinthine dream, a sequence of ajar doors, brings together the agony of a past suffering and the angst of a future wretchedness. As in a real labyrinth, there is always the danger to return to the same point, but never on the same path. Identifying the labyrinth primarily with the sufferance, Bachelard invokes one of the main principles of the imagination: it lacks fixed dimension, as it can easily change from big to small.  

This idea is primordial in Bachelard’s poetics, which continuously seeks to reconcile the opposites, to turn the far into the near, the exterior into the interior, the big into the small.

Mathematics and physics reinstated once again the law of the labyrinth: the probability theory sustains the existence of multiple possible outcomes of a random event, quantum physics sees the world as dominated by chaos and unpredictability, Einstein’s theory of relativity destroys the belief that the universe is mechanically and stably ordered, and electromagnetic waves prove that non-linear mediums are just as effective as the rectilinear ones. The non-Euclidean geometry abandons our empirically consolidated intuition about the space and promotes the existence of another one in which, for instance, through a point exterior to a straight line there is an infinity of parallels that can be drawn and never intersect the given line, or, on the contrary, no parallel is possible. Space suddenly becomes curved and human life a non-linear process. The obstacles once ruled out by the reason, for which space and time were smooth, homogeneous and regular, will obliterate the predictable perspective on the world and will set the tone for the invasion of the unpredictable. A unique interdisciplinary research field is thus initiated: non-linear science.

A special place in our text deserves to be granted to the approach of the French philosopher Michel Serres. Author of numerous books, all linked by a remarkably sincere, allusive, poetic and fluid writing, Michel Serres builds his reflections around topics as various as communication, death, the senses, chaos and form, the relations between science and culture or body and language, ecology, genetics, angels, statues, the origins of geometry, the birth of physics, the translation, the digital revolution, sexuality, ethics, politics, economics, literature,  

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or painting. Not at all interested in Marxism or phenomenology, the trends that dominated the French philosophical debates during the years of his education, Serres broke with the tradition of rigidly fixed concepts and developed an original method of investigation, preoccupied mainly with the continuous transformations of the world we live in. Serres’s method comes close to that of a detective: using the most recent scientific results, the forgotten texts of classic or obscure authors, as well as the richness of etymological significations, he sets out to re-establish the trajectory of a problem whose solution he would eventually find. Like a master of suspense, he proposes detours, false paths or clever digressions, in order to deceive the reader’s expectations and to offer the most unexpected answers. Serres’s zigzagging way of reading the history of culture is also his way or reshaping it by means of the flamboyant inventiveness of his combinatorial capacity. Whether he departs from Jules Verne’s novels, from the Greek god Hermes, from Carpaccio’s or Max Ernst’s painting, from the geography of the North-West Passage, or from the anatomy of a computer, Serres reconstructs the profound simplicity of the whole and the subtlety of its barely perceptible details, he reveals the hidden face of things and, most significantly, he attempts to reverse the structuring concept of the intellectual thought since René Descartes – the inflexible distinction between nature and culture. A hybrid philosophy that marries science and humanities, the signifier and the signified.

One of Serres’s recurrent ideas, itself derived from Auguste Comte and repeatedly found, under metamorphosed forms, in his entire work, is that the stages of human societies are similar to the three states of matter: solid, liquid, and gaseous. If the classical world was controlled by the solid forms, their dominance was to be seriously questioned during the nineteenth century by the mechanics of fluids and gas. The ordered matter would leave its place in favour of the disorder of fluids, the hard would transform into the soft. This relation between the hard and the soft receives various metaphorical forms in Serres’s work, including his preference for the structure of the maze:

“We inherit our idea of the labyrinth from a tragic and pessimistic tradition, in which it signifies death, despair, madness. However, the maze is in fact the best model for allowing moving bodies to pass through while at the same time retracing their steps as much as possible; it gives the best odds to finite journeys with unstructured itineraries. Maze maximizes feedback. They provide a very long path within a short distance and construct the best possible matrix for completing a cycle.”

Serres’s work itself is conceived in the manner of a labyrinthine structure, constantly defying a unidirectional trajectory. The terminology he often uses in *The Five Senses* – paths, knots, folds, neighbourhood – stands for Serres’s interest in

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modern mathematics, particularly in topology, the branch concerned with transformation and connection\(^\text{14}\), and opposed to classical geometry, for which space is clearly, ideally and abstractly measured.

The labyrinth in myth, literature, and philosophy

Drawing his origins in proto-history, way before the invention of writing, the labyrinth raises many issues when it comes to permeating the field of its significance. The anthropology and the history of religions offered a key by closely looking into the mythology and into the way the metaphors of the labyrinth found their explanations through myth. Philosophy and knowledge, then literature as well could hardly stay away from the labyrinthine perspective, from the intractable contradictions that continued to fuel the necessity to overcome the aporia and to lead the reasoning towards the way out of the impasse.

By far the most famous mythological example belongs to the story of Theseus. One of the crucial heroes in Greek mythology, Theseus was frequently quoted in classical texts, by Plutarch, Pseudo-Apollodorus, Callimachus, Sophocles, Euripides, Ovid, or Seneca. Modern literature continued to refer to his adventures, most notably by Boccaccio, Racine, Shakespeare, or Gide.

That Theseus’s fight with the Minotaur took place inside a labyrinth is all but senseless. Built by Daedalus and meant to forever entrap those who stepped in, the labyrinth and its great mastery proved to be a challenge even for the skilled architect who had designed it and who could barely find the way out through the countless lanes. But Theseus was not alone. With Ariadne’s help and the thread she gave him, he managed to exit after having defeated the monster. Theseus becomes the paradigm of the successful initiation and of the victory of consciousness. In its turn, the archetype of the labyrinth becomes the motive of the strength and, above all, of the ability to survive. Theseus’s struggle equally stands for the struggle of mankind to deceive and to defeat death by its own actions, to lose itself only to find itself again. Because, as Barthes puts it, freedom is granted not by the destiny, but by the choices we make.\(^\text{15}\)

In Virgil’s epic poem *Aeneid*, book VI, Aeneas descends to the Underworld where the spirit of his father shows him a vision of his descendants. Close to its entrance, on the gate of Apollo’s sanctuary built by Daedalus, there is an image of the Cretan labyrinth. It’s not at all unusual for Greek mythology to assimilate the realm of the dead to a labyrinth where the hero, whether his name is Aeneas or

\(^{14}\) In topology, objects maintain their properties across transformations.

Orpheus, has to cross through the darkness and face the dangers. A hermeneutical tradition is thus being born, based on the metaphor of life as a psychic sinuous journey where we continuously risk to further away from the centre, from the ultimate purpose. As the symbol of absolute reality, the centre entails, according to Mircea Eliade, “a ritual of the passage from the profane to the sacred, from the ephemeral and illusory to reality and eternity, from death to life, from man to the divinity.”16

In Plato’s dialogue *Euthydemus*, the science of logic finds its sources in the errors any sort of speculation is subjected to. The labyrinth is associated by Socrates with the maieutic search for the truth, through its continuous interrogations and explorations of complex ideas. And naturally, the danger is still there: “then we got into the labyrinth”, answers Socrates to Crito, “and when we thought we were at the end, came out again at the beginning, having still to seek as much as ever.”17 The need for coherence in a world of incoherence is stated once again.

In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, written by Boethius during the imprisonment that eventually ended in his execution, the author revisits certain Platonic concepts, but he gives them a Christian interpretation. Boethius engages with the Philosophy into an imaginary conversation about good and evil, fame and wealth, happiness, virtue, justice and free will. In Book III, Prose XII, the prisoner asks Philosophy if she ironically sets out on “weaving arguments as a labyrinth out of which I shall find no way?”18 In Boethius’s soliloquy, even the “divine simplicity” may find itself wandering inside the circle of questions whose answers take us to the supreme truth: why does evil exist in a world created by God, why do good people suffer, how can one find true happiness.

The labyrinth impregnates Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as well. Although not present as such, it appears under the allegorical form of a dark wood symbolizing the world of sin, where the poet has lost his way by choosing the wrong path. Dante’s journey through the circles of Hell undoubtedly recreates the feeling of getting hopelessly lost within the labyrinth and the tiring efforts the soul has to make in order to be saved.

By Petrarch, the labyrinth receives yet another connotation: closely related to his mature life and his enduring passion for Laura, the labyrinth becomes the symbol of the unfulfilled love. Sonnets like *Voglia mi sprona, Amor mi guida et scorge, Anzi tre di create era alama in parte*, or *S’una fede amorosa, un cor non finto* display a

labyrinth inside which the poet’s endless wanderings are doomed to never reach the forbidden centre.

Comenius’s *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart*, an amazing expression of the writer’s wisdom and spirituality, tells the story of a pilgrim (the narrator and the author himself) in search of his way inside an allegorical world. In short, the pilgrim travels accompanied by two guides, Mr. Searchall Ubiquitous (allegory of the insatiability of the Mind, as Comenius calls it) and Mr. Delusion (allegory of shallowness of the material world), setting out to finding the profession that would satisfy him completely. Delusion gives the young man a pair of glasses through which everything assumes a changed aspect (distant appears near, near appears distant, small looks large and large looks small, ugly things turn into beautiful and beautiful into ugly and so son). They reach a labyrinthine city, surrounded by an abyss and divided by six main streets, which represent the six principal classes of the world (parents, children, and servants; craftsmen and tradesmen; intellectuals; clerics; governors and magistrates; knights and military). In the heart of the city, there is the common square where all meet and in its centre stands Wisdom, the queen of the world. Towards west, there is the Castle of Fortune, saved only for the most distinguished. Wandering the alleys of the city, the pilgrim encounters all sorts of people in all possible psychological states of mind, but he sees everything backwards. Disappointed by the meaninglessness of life and horrified by death, he gives up the material world and finds salvation in his own heart, in the spiritual life guided by God, its supreme creator.

Examples of novels that bear a subsidiary labyrinthine structure abound in the history of literature. It is enough to think of titles such as *Don Quixote*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *Moby-Dick*, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, or *Doctor Faustus*, as different in topics as they are similar in approach. But the labyrinth will re-emerge in all its force in the literature of Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and James Joyce, to mention only the most prominent authors that let themselves be captivated by its mysteries and paradoxes.

In Kafka’s *The Trial*, the protagonist, Joseph K., never succeeds in escaping the symbolical juridical labyrinth he is imprisoned in. Equally, *The Castle* deals with K.’s frustrations while hopelessly trying to achieve an unattainable goal in the middle of a surreal hostile environment – and Kafka’s power of evocation is unbearably evocative – covered in darkness, snow and mist. Death remains the only way out.

“I imagined a labyrinth of labyrinths, a maze of mazes, a twisting, turning, ever-widening labyrinth that contained both past and future and somehow implied the stars.”\(^{19}\) Borges’s short fictions reflect their writer’s belief that man’s imagination is limited, but that the infinity of combinations between its few

elements can mean everything. Continuously and ruthlessly disturbing the way we perceive the space and the time, Borges melts the distinction between content and form, between the real world and the fantastic one. Among the ideas he is most fond of is the recurrent pattern of historic events, time dilation and contraction, the dream within a dream. As Philippe Forest so eloquently notes, Borges’s fictions dance around a cluster of symbols tightly related to each other by analogies and correspondences. Roads that fork incessantly traverse Borges’s stories, metaphors of the labyrinths and mazes of human thought. Through the brutal collision of the opposites – the real and the illusory, the order and the disorder – Borges creates a world whose secret beauty reveals to those who are ready to embrace its acute paradoxes and to become a part of its enigmatic whole. Even the smallest detail proves to be crucial in the unfolding of Borges’s narratives, as the significance of each word is fully exploited. At times clearly stated in the title or the content of his novellas – The Garden of Forking Paths, The Library of Babel, The Secret Miracle, The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths, Death and the Compass, Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in his Labyrinth –, but most often hidden inside their construction itself, Borges’s labyrinth “is destined to be deciphered by men” (Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius) within “an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries” that compose the universe (The Library of Babel).

But no 20th century work of fiction descends into the significance of the archetypal labyrinth better than Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Naming his hero after the creator of the Cretan labyrinth, Joyce expresses, through the figure of Stephen Daedalus, the awake of the consciousness of an artist who rebels against the constraints of the society he lives in and, just like the ancient Greek architect, chooses to escape and alienate himself in exile. The meanders in A Portrait take the character through the twisting paths of sexual desires, through the snares of Irish nationalism and Catholic doctrinal restraints, everything with the ultimate purpose of escaping the labyrinth of Dublin, but also the labyrinth within himself, and of finding artistic freedom.

The musical labyrinth

As a “unifying metaphor for the calculable and the incalculable”21, as the synthetic image of completely opposite things or ideas, the labyrinth was adopted as the key symbol of the mannerism. The rupture that initiated the mannerist

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perspective on art and on the world finds its origins in breaking the mathematic coherence that held the Renaissance world together. Pieces of cosmos float inside the vacuum of the mannerist realm, ignoring the law of gravity and submitting to previously unknown laws of attraction and rejection. The geometric structure of *mathesis* – or the order of simple natures – was absorbed into and replaced by a surface that could be recomposed through the permutation of its elements. The one and the multiple gave up the supremacy in favour of the proportion multiple-multiple and a new goddess was born out of the chaos: *taxonomy* – or the order of complex natures.\(^{22}\) One of mannerists’ preferred technique, namely that of detours, promoted the mysteries, the enigmas, the craft, the subtlety and, eventually, the triumph of ingenuity, the triumph of *inventio*, their supreme goal.

In the mannerist art, as wonderfully exemplified by the so-called *figura serpentinata*, static form is being decomposed, space is being dilated by extending the heights and contracting the transversal proportions. The equilibrium is thus lost. Light and shade oppose roughly and there are no transitions in between. Colours are simple, cold and clear, contrasts are powerful and the dominant effect falls into the psychological state of surprise.\(^{23}\) What the mannerists seek are the mystery, the irregularity, the disharmony, the mystic, the dissonance, the eccentric, the hypertrophy, the discrepancy, the deformation, and, ultimately, the shock or what the Italians would have called *stupore*. In her book *Stylistic and symbolic aspects of the musical mannerism*, the Romanian musicologist Valentina Sandu-Dediu notes that the stylistic concept of the mannerism receives a double meaning: either as comprising the entire artistic trends of the sixteenth century, or as describing a global tendency to be found basically at the level of any artistic epoch.\(^{24}\) A musical mannerism cannot be clearly delimited historically, as its main features are to be found by composers belonging to styles as different as the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Romanticism, or the modern. It is enough to call into question the mystic symbolism of the Flemish polyphony, the letters and numbers hidden within the musical text (Bach, Schumann, Brahms, Berg, Shostakovich), or the meanings of the musical quotation. Resulted from the composer’s intent to communicate, the quotation does not lend itself to an immediate understanding. As so eloquently put by Zofia Lissa, it is a “foreign body” whose origin must be identified and reinterpreted according to the new context in which it appears. It is


also, as Sandu-Dediu notes, just another example of the deformation the mannerism operates on natural models.\textsuperscript{25}

Sandu-Dediu also speaks of a ludic component of the mannerist art, though not in the direction of a game, but in that of the creator’s spiritual attitude and his tendency towards the rational, intellectual, and constructivist side. Intellectualism seems to be one of the keywords for understanding the mannerist aesthetics, which brings us again to the archetype of Daedalus’s labyrinth, where fantasy is so happily combined with the artificial. The ludic element is at most obvious in \emph{ars combinatoria}, a device of permutation and combination which gives birth to illustrations such as the magic square, the palindrome, or its musical equivalent, the recurrence.\textsuperscript{26}

A musical Daedalic geometry arises when the confused and interlaced routes of the maze see their reflection in the musical composition. The form thus created, the sequence of events, is unfolding in time, just as time is required for the wanderer to traverse the alleys of the labyrinth. But time is not the only link between the two, as composers need to find specific techniques to create the artificial order, the convolutions and, above all, the perfect synthesis of linearity and circularity, probably the most significant feature of a labyrinthine construction.

\textit{Ma fin est mon commencement et mon commencement est ma fin}. This famous three-part rondeau written by Machaut displays the distinctive structure of a double retrograde and, according to the suggestions of the poem, the music must be performed in recursive motion three times.\textsuperscript{27} But this was not a solitary case among Machaut’s compositions. In \textit{The Maze and the Warrior}, Craig Wright mentions poems such as \textit{Remede de Fortune} (modelled on Boethius’s \textit{The Consolation of Philosophy}) or \textit{Le Jugement du roy de Navarre} (referring to the myth of Theseus), which appeal to the idea of recursive motion and hence to the maze. Machaut’s fascination with the maze had been long-standing and his stated wish to be buried near the labyrinth at the cathedral of Reims is another proof that, as Wright says, “in life he had declared that origin and destiny were inseparable; in death he was united with a symbol that said the same”.\textsuperscript{28}

Conveying meaning in early music was often related to a symbolism lost for the modern man’s understanding capacities. The composer’s intent could be suggested in what the historians have called \textit{Augenmusik} – a kind of writing, popular especially in the Italian madrigal, whereby the poetic text is described by means of the musical notation. Addressed to the performers rather than to the listeners, such scores could take the shape of a heart (as in love songs like Cordier’s rondeau \textit{Belle, bonne, sage}), they could consist entirely of black notes (as in Josquin’s

\textsuperscript{25} Ibidem, pp. 10-11.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibidem, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{27} For a detailed analysis, see Craig Wright, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibidem p. 114.
and Obrecht’s laments, or Marenzio’s blackened notation used to set words expressing darkness), the staves might be disposed to form a round (as in circular canons) or visually represent a maze.

But there is much more to the connection between music and mazes, as Craig Wright points out, and that is related to the similar psychological states that they project onto the trader and the listener. The main features of a voyage through the labyrinth, consisting of the tension and the anguish the wanderer feels while struggling to find the way out, to reach salvation and, thus, to attain purification, find their musical equivalents in the journey through which music itself carries the listener. Among the devices Wright mentions, symmetric forms creating mirror images, dissonances, tonal conflicts, or harmonic instability result in the tension one may feel while the music unfolds. Just as the metaphor of the labyrinth stands for artistic ingenuity, for impenetrability, and for difficulty, the author summarizes the three ways in which music has come to convey the significance of the labyrinth: the simplest one, the myth of the maze is set to music; secondly, the psychological experience of the maze is recaptured in a musical work; finally, the structural pattern of a musical piece copies the complex construction of the maze.\footnote{Ibidem, pp. 233-234.} Examples cited by Wright range from works by Richard de Fournival (\textit{Talent avoie d’aimer}), Guillaume de Machaut (the works mentioned above), Girolamo Scotto (\textit{Motetti del laberinto: Sacrarium Cantionum sive Motettorum}), to works by Johann Fischer (\textit{Ariadne Musica}), Marin Marais (\textit{Le labynith}), Friedrich Suppig (\textit{Labyrinthus Musicus}), Bach (\textit{Kleines harmonisches Labyrinth})\footnote{In the case of these four composers, the labyrinthine symbolism regards issues of tuning and temperament, of true tonal journeys that explore the instruments’ possibilities to modulate to distant keys. So why use the metaphor of the labyrinth? Simply because, at that time, the dangers of venturing towards remote keys were best mirrored by the anguish felt inside a labyrinth (See Craig Wright, op. cit., pp. 254-270).}, Haendel (\textit{Arianna in Creta}), Haydn (\textit{Ariadne auf Naxos}), Peter Winter (\textit{Das Labyrinth}), and Mozart (\textit{Die Zauberflöte}).

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