

Solved by Walking: Paradox and Resolution in the Labyrinth

Mary Hackworth

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Mary Hackworth's book, *Solved by Walking: Paradox and Resolution in the Labyrinth* in many ways is a very ambitious book, and it is moderately successful in achieving its goals. It seeks to trace the labyrinth from its origins to the present with a special focus on the labyrinth's expression and function in literature and culture. She begins by defining the labyrinth, pointing out how broad in scope it is with multiple meanings. "It is a metaphor for life, for truth, for moral conduct, and for philosophy" (1). As a literal structure, she distinguishes between unicursal and the multicursal labyrinths, and traces those images through Western literary and cultural history. The unicursal is a single path, but not necessarily a direct path, labyrinth that leads to the center. She defines the multicursal labyrinth as a maze with multiple paths, some of which are dead ends. She argues that in literature and culture the labyrinth is "a projection of the way the Western mind sees itself in relation to the world" (3). Her definition of the labyrinth as unicursal or a single path allows her to include literary references to quests, journeys, searches and challenging struggles as labyrinthine endeavors, thus broadening its scope and reach significantly.

The labyrinth, of course, is a central image and symbol in Borges's stories. Works such as "La biblioteca de Babel," "La casa de Asterión," "La lotería en Babilonia," and many more project images of the maze while underscoring man's and woman's limitations in comprehending their world. While Hackworth discusses some Borges stories, they are a minor part of her project which draws on a diverse selection of writers throughout Western history. While her focus is on literature and literary analysis, her study includes a history of the labyrinth, references to dance, and music and an analysis of the labyrinth as a physical structure along with its appearance as a metaphor. In discussing the history, in Chapter 2 she mentions Egyptian and Indian mythology and folklore, and then goes into some detail on its Greek origins and in particular the myth with Theseus and Ariadne. She highlights also the importance of the concept of the center to the labyrinth, and emphasizes Plato's role in employing the labyrinth as a metaphor for a philosophical quandary.

In Chapter 3 she examines representations of the labyrinth in the Middle Ages. She focuses on two principal works: *The Divine Comedy* by Dante and his unicursal journey and the thirteenth century *Quest del Saint Graal*. The multiple seekers of the Grail employ multiple paths, encounter numerous obstacles, temptations and delays in their searches. The center of the labyrinth here is not the beast, but rather spiritual treasures.

Chapter 4 concerns how the image of the labyrinth changes during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. As Hackworth states: “A new openness to multiple paths of discovery and enterprise in the human world is expressed, I believe, in the new function of the maze as an amusement and a game and no longer merely as a somber religious road to salvation or damnation” (39). In this chapter, she discusses the function of the labyrinth in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* where the king is named “Theseus,” how the art of dance is inspired by the labyrinth, and how garden mazes became popular in France. She also finds *Don Quijote* relevant to her topic where “the labyrinth represents the illusions of worldly life that often masquerade as reality” (170), and also *Pilgrim’s Progress* where a trustworthy guide sends Christian in the right direction, but he encounters deceptions and tricks and false guides that attempt to divert him from his unicursal path. Furthermore, Hackworth discusses how musical compositions such as J.S. Bach’s *Kleines Harmonisches Labyrinth* (Little Harmonic Labyrinth), and Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* display labyrinthine qualities.

In Chapter 5, Hackworth deals with the nineteenth century treatment of the labyrinth. While some scholars assert that the labyrinth disappeared with the eighteenth century and did not reappear until the late twentieth century, Hackworth takes issue with that. She asserts that that might be true about the structural labyrinth, but the archetype lived on as a literary motif. She defends classifying plots and settings with “many twists and turns, a complexity, periods of darkness and great peril, a difficult journey to a decisive goal, and return” as labyrinth-like (189). She asserts that even in classical and medieval times, the labyrinth was widely accepted as a literary and metaphysical concept. She argues that the nineteenth century breaks with the tradition of defining the center of the labyrinth as the goal, an action that has broad implications for modern and postmodern literature. She discusses how the great white whale in *Moby Dick* repre-

sents the Minotaur, and their journey and the journey of the Pequod take on labyrinthine overtones, and how Childe Roland in Robert Browning’s “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” wanders through a wasteland where meaning and religious certainties have become lost or ambiguous. Also, she outlines similar themes in some of the Gothic novels of the era such as *Jane Eyre*.

Chapter 6 deals with twentieth century postmodern expressions of the labyrinth. The works that Hackworth discusses include Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, Lawrence Durrell’s 1947 novel, *The Dark Labyrinth*, Borges’s translated collection of short stories titled *Labyrinths*, and John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*. She focuses on three Borges stories in particular, “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” “La biblioteca de Babel,” and “La casa de Asterión.” She defines the postmodern from what I would call a radical relativist perspective, and her reading of Borges assumes that same approach. She also discusses J. Hillis Miller’s critical work *Ariadne’s Thread: Story Lines* and the film *Inception*.

This is an ambitious work. Because of the way Hackworth defines the labyrinth, she touches on much of Western epistemology and literary practice. One could take issue with that definition, although I do not think she is alone in defining it like that. If you are looking for an extended discussion of the use of the labyrinth in Borges, I would not recommend this book. Her discussions of Borges are quite short and somewhat limited. I do not totally agree with her readings of Borges either, as she tends to emphasize futility and despair in his stories, nor do I agree with the radical relativist definition of the postmodern turn. I see the postmodern turn as a move toward philosophical pluralism.

However, her discussion of the labyrinth as a literary and cultural motif is fascinating. While some of her readings could be a bit more nuanced, she does an effective job of defining and analyzing labyrinthine projections in works throughout Western history. If you are looking for an overview of the history, the power and the influence of the labyrinth on Western literature and Western thought, as well as hoping to gain an appreciation of the tradition that Borges was drawing upon in using that image as a central one in his writings, then yes, this book is worth reading.

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