

Bloom's  
**LITERARY  
THEMES**

# THE LABYRINTH

Edited and with an introduction by HAROLD BLOOM / Volume Editor: BLAKE HOBBES



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*Bloom's Literary Themes*

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# THE LABYRINTH

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*Edited and with an introduction by*

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 BLOOM'S  
LITERARY CRITICISM  
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## **Bloom's Literary Themes: The Labyrinth**

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 **Series Introduction by Harold Bloom:**   
***Themes and Metaphors***

## 1. TOPOS AND TROPE

What we now call a theme or topic or subject initially was named a *topos*, ancient Greek for “place.” Literary *topoi* are commonplaces, but also arguments or assertions. A *topos* can be regarded as literal when opposed to a trope or turning which is figurative and which can be a metaphor or some related departure from the literal: ironies, synecdoches (part for whole), metonymies (representations by contiguity) or hyperboles (overstatements). Themes and metaphors engender one another in all significant literary compositions.

As a theoretician of the relation between the matter and the rhetoric of high literature, I tend to define metaphor as a figure of desire rather than a figure of knowledge. We welcome literary metaphor because it enables fictions to persuade us of beautiful untrue things, as Oscar Wilde phrased it. Literary *topoi* can be regarded as places where we store information, in order to amplify the themes that interest us.

This series of volumes, *Bloom's Literary Themes*, offers students and general readers helpful essays on such perpetually crucial topics as the Hero's Journey, the Labyrinth, the Sublime, Death and Dying, the Taboo, the Trickster and many more. These subjects are chosen for their prevalence yet also for their centrality. They express the whole concern of human existence now in the twenty-first century of the Common Era. Some of the topics would have seemed odd at another time, another land: the American Dream, Enslavement and Emancipation, Civil Disobedience.

I suspect though that our current preoccupations would have existed always and everywhere, under other names. Tropes change across the centuries: the irony of one age is rarely the irony of another. But the themes of great literature, though immensely varied, undergo

transmemberment and show up barely disguised in different contexts. The power of imaginative literature relies upon three constants: aesthetic splendor, cognitive power, wisdom. These are not bound by societal constraints or resentments, and ultimately are universals, and so not culture-bound. Shakespeare, except for the world's scriptures, is the one universal author, whether he is read and played in Bulgaria or Indonesia or wherever. His supremacy at creating human beings breaks through even the barrier of language and puts everyone on his stage. This means that the matter of his work has migrated everywhere, reinforcing the common places we all inhabit in his themes.

## 2. CONTEST AS BOTH THEME AND TROPE

Great writing or the Sublime rarely emanates directly from themes since all authors are mediated by forerunners and by contemporary rivals. Nietzsche enhanced our awareness of the agonistic foundations of ancient Greek literature and culture, from Hesiod's contest with Homer on to the Hellenistic critic Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime*. Even Shakespeare had to begin by overcoming Christopher Marlowe, only a few months his senior. William Faulkner stemmed from the Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad and our best living author of prose fiction, Philip Roth, is inconceivable without his descent from the major Jewish literary phenomenon of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka of Prague, who wrote the most lucid German since Goethe.

The contest with past achievement is the hidden theme of all major canonical literature in Western tradition. Literary influence is both an overwhelming metaphor for literature itself, and a common topic for all criticism, whether or not the critic knows her immersion in the incessant flood.

Every theme in this series touches upon a contest with anteriority, whether with the presence of death, the hero's quest, the overcoming of taboos, or all of the other concerns, volume by volume. From Monteverdi through Bach to Stravinsky, or from the Italian Renaissance through the agon of Matisse and Picasso, the history of all the arts demonstrates the same patterns as literature's thematic struggle with itself. Our country's great original art, jazz, is illuminated by what the great creators called "cutting contests," from Louis

Armstrong and Duke Ellington on to the emergence of Charlie Parker's Bop or revisionist jazz.

A literary theme, however authentic, would come to nothing without rhetorical eloquence or mastery of metaphor. But to experience the study of the common places of invention is an apt training in the apprehension of aesthetic value in poetry and in prose.

*Into the Living Labyrinth:  
Reflections and Aphorisms*

If there is a temple at the visionary center, then the circumference may well be a labyrinth. Canonical literature has William Shakespeare as its center, while at its circumference his works form a golden labyrinth, to adapt a phrase from one of my mentors, George Wilson Knight.

I first learned from Wilson Knight that Shakespeare pragmatically had erased the distinction between sacred and secular imaginative literature. Not an Old Historicist any more than I am a New one, Knight never recognized at time-bound Shakespeare, and that seems to me the beginning of critical wisdom in regard to the creator of Falstaff and Hamlet, Iago and Cleopatra, Macbeth and Prospero.

But why a labyrinth, however aureate and vital the Shakespearean cosmos turns out to be? The image of the labyrinth is far more prevalent in Ovid, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Dickens than it is in Shakespeare. Modern literature gives us labyrinth-haunted genius in Yeats, Joyce, Kafka, Calvino, among others, in overt manifestations. And yet the image of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may be the ultimate literary labyrinth, as G. G. Chesterson argued.

Homer in the *Iliad* (Book 18, lines 590-592) gives a famous image of the battle-shield of Achilles, which pictures the labyrinthine dance-floor that the artificer Daedalus constructed for the Cretan princes, Ariadne. Virgil, Homer's greatest disciple, is obsessed with labyrinths in the *Aeneid*, particularly in Books 5 and 6. His hero, Aeneas, fuses Daedalus the labyrinth designer and Theseus, who with Ariadne's aid destroyed the Minotaur, for whom Daedalus had built the major Cretan labyrinth as prison-refuge. Penelope Doob deftly

enlarges this fusion with the giant figure of Hercules, whose labors foreshadow those of the heroic founder of Rome.

It may indeed be, as Doob shrewdly implies, that all truly literary text is labyrinthine, interwoven, interlaced. The *Aeneid* can be termed the most literary of all texts, always anxiously over-aware of Homer's influence upon it. Dr. Samuel Johnson, the inaugural anxiety-of-influence critic, made merry with Virgil's bondage to Homer, in an essay on the imitators of Edmund Spenser. All literary influence is labyrinthine; belated authors wander the maze as if an exit could be found, until the strong among them realize that the windings of the labyrinth all are internal.

Does any other image so fuse (or at least connect) high literature and life as does the labyrinth? The ancient identity of rhetoric, psychology, and cosmology is preserved in the figuration of imaginative literature *as* a breathing, moving labyrinth. Rhetorically the maze of influencings *substitutes* an ever-earliness for belatedness. Psychologically the meandering windings are the defenses by which we—any among us—survive. Cosmologically our labyrinth is the second nature we share as readers of the strong writers.

The Olympian gods in Homer are marked by their beauty, vitality, and lucidity. So are Hamlet and the other grand Shakespearean protagonists, but all three qualities are edged by mortality. Gods do not walk labyrinths or perform labyrinthine dances: Hamlet and his peers do little else.

No critic, however generously motivated, can help a deep reader to escape from the labyrinth of influence. I have learned my function is to help you get lost.

Literary thinking is akin to walking a labyrinth. Shakespeare necessarily is the paradigm of literary thinking. In his twenty or so years of composition he relied upon a cognitive power largely beyond our apprehension, and became the clearest instance we have of the mind's influence upon itself. His defense against the labyrinthine windings of his mind's force was to become more and more cognitively and rhetorically *elliptical*. Shakespearean *praxis* at its most mature is *the art of leaving things out*.

Labyrinths are emblems of ellipsis. Exits/entrances are left out. But this has (or can have) a benign aspect in reading. The highest imaginative literature bids you to become utterly lost in it, with no

Ariadne's thread to get you out. What this labyrinth persuades you to do is just to keep reading, and not at all how to live or why.

Vico says we only know what we ourselves have made. If you inhabit a labyrinth, then you created it.

All of us have the experience of admiring a structure when outside it but then becoming unhappy within it.

Penelope Doob remarks that Dante's *Commedia* is a labyrinth. So, I would contend, is every sublime work on a cosmological scale.

Boccaccio said that every woman was a maze. Ben Jonson called love the "subtlest" (most intricate) maze of all.

The labyrinthine became an image for the confusions of a lost life, yet that negates the image's wealth. All labyrinths are illusory, in that they can be mastered, sometimes by cunning, other times by chance. Themselves metaphors, labyrinths substitute for accurate directions, but what is can accurate direction within a literary work? All directions ultimately are at home in the capable reader: she herself is the compass of that sea.

Borges asserts you can lose only what you never possessed, yet that we become aware of others only by their disappearance. Those are labyrinthine observations, and I think they are mistaken. He had dwelled too long in his mother's cynosure.

Literary influence and literature are what Shakespeare called "the selfsame."

Solitude is one labyrinth, literature another. You cannot be a guide to a labyrinth, but to be sagacious as to literary influence is possible.

Reading itself may be a labyrinth but not to read deeply and widely is to be entrapped in the invincible labyrinth of ignorance and absence.

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# *THE AENEID*

## (VIRGIL)



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### “Virgil’s *Aeneid*,”

by Penelope Reed Doob,  
in *The Idea of the Labyrinth: From Classical  
Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (1990)

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## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter from her book-length exploration of the labyrinth in classical and medieval culture, Penelope Reed Doob argues that “the labyrinth constitutes a major if sometimes covert thread in the elaborate *textus* of the *Aeneid*, providing structural pattern and leitmotif.” Tracing Aeneas’s labyrinthine journey to found Rome, taking care to note recurrences of the labyrinth image and references to the mythology surrounding its creation, Doob concludes that the text contains a “network of allusions that gradually shape a vision of Aeneas’s life as a laborious errand through a series of mazes.



Hic labor ille domus et inextricabilis error.

Here is the toil of that house, and the inextricable wandering.

Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.27

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Doob, Penelope Reed. “Virgil’s *Aeneid*.” *The Idea of the Labyrinth: From Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1990. 227–53.

The *Aeneid*, one of the most influential works of Western literature, is the earliest major example of truly labyrinthine literature: It includes explicit images of the maze and references to its myth, employs a labyrinthine narrative structure, and embodies themes associated with the idea of the labyrinth (as defined in previous chapters).<sup>1</sup> Although the importance of the labyrinth in Books 5 and 6 has not gone unnoticed,<sup>2</sup> the full extent and significance of labyrinthine imagery and ideas in the *Aeneid* have not yet been explored. I hope to show that the idea of the labyrinth constitutes a major if sometimes covert thread in the elaborate *textus* of the *Aeneid*, providing structural pattern and thematic leitmotif. Three works of complex visual art are described in minute detail in the poem: the doors of the Temple of Juno in Carthage depicting the Trojans' *labores* (1.460), the Cumaean gates with their Daedalian memorial of the Cretan myth, and the shield of Aeneas, proclaiming the future of Rome. The centerpiece of this triptych, the first thing Aeneas sees when he lands in his country of destiny, depicts the history of the labyrinth; this fact surely hints at broad potential significance for the image and its myth within the poem.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, the labyrinths of Books 5 and 6, discussed in Chapter 1, are only part of a network of allusions that gradually shape a vision of Aeneas's life as a laborious errand through a series of mazes.<sup>4</sup> First I trace the idea of the labyrinth in the poem; then I explore its significance for the work as a whole.

The *labor* and *error* associated with mazes are repeatedly emphasized in the *Aeneid*. The poem dwells on *labores* of various sorts: works of suffering, achievement, and art. The psychological and physical *labores* of Aeneas, his companions, and his descendants are necessary to build Rome, whose characteristic art will be government (6.851–854), bringing order to chaos. Through his labors, Aeneas becomes a second, more complex, version of Theseus, the maze-tamer king who knows how to handle *errores*, and of Daedalus, inventor, artist, exile, and shaper of chaos. Aeneas's labors also render him kin to Hercules, whose labors are celebrated in Arcadia, whose slaying of the giant Cacus foreshadows Aeneas's destruction of Turnus, and whose successful descent into Hades preceded that of Aeneas (6.392).<sup>5</sup>

If labyrinthine *labor* ("hic labor ille domus"—6.27) pervades the *Aeneid* thematically and verbally, so does its labyrinthine twin, *error*, whether as circuitous wandering or as mental misjudgment. For

example, Book 3 is a narrative labyrinth describing Aeneas's *errores* (1.755) throughout the Mediterranean, wanderings whose goal is a stable *domus* and whose geographical pattern imitates the meanderings of the maze. After much tracing and retracing of steps in Troy, Aeneas sails first to Aeneadae and then to Delos, originally an *errans* isle that was eventually fixed in place only to instigate other errors by its ambiguous oracles to wanderers (3.76, 96–101); the labyrinth's characteristic shape-shifting from chaos to order and from stability to instability, a recurrent motif in the poem, is thus reflected in the portrayal of Apollo's birthplace just as the labyrinth itself will figure on his temple at Cumae. At Crete, ancient home of mazes and Trojans alike, the voyagers vainly wish to retrace their steps to Delos (3.143) and find the end of their labors (3.145). Despite divine and human guidance, they wander through blind waves (3.200, 204) to the Strophades, where the Harpies give directions but predict obstacles. At Buthrotum, Helenus prophesies a circuitous course (3.376) on pathless tracks (3.383) before Aeneas may find rest after labor (3.393) in Italy, so near in space yet so distant in time. Instead of taking the nearest path, Helenus advises, Aeneas must go the longest way round (3.412–413, 430), until finally the Sibyl shows the path and tells what *labor* to flee and what to follow (3.459–460).<sup>6</sup> Although the proper route is clearly defined, the Trojans take the shortest path despite Helenus's warning (3–507); soon they are lost, *ignari viae* (3.569)—the human condition in this poem's universe—and must retrace their steps (3.686–691), arriving at an illusory end of wandering labors in Drepanum (3.714). After further *errores* (1.32), they wander off course, driven to Carthage by Juno's storm. Throughout their erratic voyage the Trojans confront typically labyrinthine dangers: circuitous paths that near a goal only to turn away or reveal the goal as false; enforced delay and hesitation among uncertain choices; unreliable guides in the form of ambiguous visions and prophecies or uncertain helmsmen plagued by darkness; perils represented or announced by monsters as double in form as the Minotaur—the Trojan Horse, wooden animal concealing men; Polydorus, whose vegetable form has human blood; the bird-maiden Harpies; the dog-maiden Scylla. By such methods the text covertly establishes the image of the labyrinth: *labor* through blind *error*,<sup>7</sup> a seemingly endless search for a clear path to the perpetually deferred goal of *requies* after *labor*, a preordained

*domes*. If *labor* is the content of Aeneas's mission, *errores* define its form: the two concepts are as intimately connected in the poem as in a maze. Success, therefore, demands both the persistent patience of the passive unicursal maze-walker and the active intelligence that can choose the right path in a multicursal maze.<sup>8</sup>

While the *errores* of Book 3 suggest the subjective experience of tracing a labyrinthine path, analogues to the labyrinth as an object and to the *monstrum biformis* within figure at the start of Book 2. In the proximate causes of Troy's downfall, the Trojan Horse and the serpents that kill Laocoon and his sons,<sup>9</sup> we may detect a constellation of words and ideas traditionally linked with the labyrinth. Like the Cretan labyrinth defined by Virgil himself in Books 5 and 6 (see Chapter 1), the horse is a monumental work of art linked with trickery (*dolus*: 2.15, 44—cf. 5.590, 6.29) and built by guileful Greeks (Calchas and Epeos vs. Daedalus). Both creations are intricately woven (*textum*: 2.16, 185—cf. 5.589, 593) and contain *error* (2.48, 6.27). Like the Cretan maze, the horse is dark and cavernous (*caecus*: 2:19, 5.89, 6.30; *caverna*, 2.19, 53—implicit in Books 5 and 6). Labyrinth and horse alike contain both danger and crafty Greeks: the Minotaur and the Athenians Daedalus and Theseus in the labyrinth, Ulysses and his companions in the horse. Each involves a hybrid *monstrum biformis*: the Minotaur is a fierce bull-man, the horse a wooden animal containing armed men. Both are prisons, the labyrinth intentionally and the horse temporarily (2.257–259), but both become extricable through treachery: Ariadne's and Sinon's (he too is a Greek master of artful deceit—2.195). Each structure was built to deceive and then to kill, and each bewilders its beholders (2.39, 5.589) before destroying them.<sup>10</sup> Confusion before a labyrinthine dilemma, and the question of how best to tackle that situation, will be a recurrent motif in the *Aeneid*, and its history starts here, as Aeneas begins his narration.

Confronted by the baffling and deceptive work of labyrinthine art, the Trojans hesitate, filled with doubt (2.39). In contrast, the hasty Laocoon charges forward, denounces the horse as a weapon, a hiding place for Greeks, or some other trick (*error*), and hurls his spear at its curved side. He sees the significance of the dangerous horse almost as clearly as Daedalus understood the maze, and his intended solution to the mystery is nothing if not direct. But while Laocoon's mind penetrates the horse, his spear does not: straightforward approaches