

## ALMOST SEVEN KEY SYMBOLS TO JOYFULLY LOSE ONESELF IN THE LABYRINTHS OF BORGES\*

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### 1. Introductory Remarks

As with all literature and art in general, the work of Jorge Luis Borges confronts us with what we inevitably were *and* are *and* can *and* cannot become. In his stories, chockfull of erudite references, philosophical thoughts, memorable words, somewhat chaste passions, we are lost and found: We are lost, because these stories aim to disorient the reader, to play with him, to beat him, to mock him. We are found, because when we manage to embrace and go beyond the uncertainty of the initial disorientation we feel, with absolute certainty and even joy, the existential truth of that famous proverb of Horace: *mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur* – when you change the names, this story is about you. Borges either writes us or writes about us.

I offer you the partial meaning of seven Borges's symbols. They could be the keys that, unlike the threads of Ariadne, do not allow us to escape the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur. They are keys for happily embracing what Borges suggests: Life is lived in uncertainty; and nevertheless, despite the uncertainty and even because of that uncertainty, it is worth living in the utmost intensity. Here there is no use for the definitive answers of science, of religions, of family, of political parties, of race, of State laws, of customs, of labor regulations or of social classes. Nothing can save us from that uncertainty, except for one personal virtue, a certain aesthetic pleasure and a close group of persons that is just as disoriented as we are: That virtue is the courage of irony, the aesthetic pleasure is the joy of art; the human group is our friends.

Please, join me in considering these seven symbols, which recur throughout the work of Borges: The *labyrinth*, *books*, the *mirror*, the *tiger*, *courage*, *words that are music*, and *friendship*. Here symbol has the meaning bestowed upon it by Paul Ricoeur in his book *De l'interprétation [On Interpretation]*: It consists, in the first place, of a sign constructed by words, that is, of a reality made of a signifier with a graphic or sonorous chain L-A-B-Y-R-I-N-T-H and of a meaning or mental

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concept that refers to a place whose architecture makes it such that one who enters has a difficult time leaving or never manages to leave. And, in a second meaning, this *labyrinth* sign, or others such as the *book*, *library*, or *mirror*, in Borges' case, transform into symbols. A sort of *trans-lation* takes place here. According to Ricoeur, "there is a symbol when language-use produces combined-degree signs where the meaning, unsatisfied with naming something, aims at another meaning that cannot be reached but in and by the meaning's aiming".<sup>1</sup> This means that in Borges's labyrinths, the books, the libraries and the mirrors are these: "labyrinths", like the one in Crete built by Daedalus and where the Minotaur lives, or like in *El laberinto del Fauno* [Pan's Labyrinth] (2006) by Guillermo del Toro; "books", like those which you all are going to touch, to flip through, to read later in order to prepare for tomorrow's classes; "libraries", like the one here on Spalding University Campus, or the Library of Congress in Washington; and "mirrors", like those in which you looked at yourself various times before leaving for this conference. But in Borges, labyrinths, books, libraries, and mirrors are more than just that, and the symbol is in the *more than*, that *supplement*, or the *surplus* of meaning that is transplanted or moved a little bit further (from *trans-*, in Latin) from the thing itself and the tight sense of a word (*sensus strictus* in Latin) to a wider sense of the word (*sensus latus* in Latin). Let us begin with a few examples.

## 2. The Seven Symbols

Borges writes that "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941) is "a detective story; its readers will witness the commission and all the preliminaries of a crime whose purpose will not be kept from them but which they will understand, I think, until the final paragraph" (67). Before we look at some of the formal and thematic elements of the story, I want to draw your attention to the meaning of the first details that Borges gives us. We're talking about a garden; about numerous paths which, in turn, multiply; about a crime that is likewise a police mystery for the readers, and for which not until the end will an understanding of the enigma *perhaps* be reached. If the famous French Latinist Pierre Grimal is correct, the garden is a Roman invention, where the rhythm of life calms down, nature is domesticated for human solace, and the body and the spirit are reinvigorated to continue facing the movements of life. And now, along with the image of a garden, we must also think of a labyrinth. The Greeks were the inventors of the word: *Labyrinthos* (λαβύρινθος), whose Anglo-Saxon equivalent, according to the etymology of old English and quite probably a Norwegian dialect, is *maze*. It's wonderful to think that each time we say "amazing" to refer to something marvelously unexpected, we are always recalling a labyrinth! Why? I will return to this momentarily. In addition to a garden structured like a labyrinth, Borges affirms that the plot of the story involves an actual crime – there's blood and most likely death! – whose res-

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<sup>1</sup> "Il y a un symbole lorsque le langage produit des signes de degré composé où le sens, non content de désigner quelque chose, désigne un autre sens qui ne saurait être atteint que dans et par sa visée" (25).

olution is opaque for the readers. And this opacity or ignorance on the part of the readers perhaps – “it seems to me,” writes Borges – may turn to understanding at the end of the story.

Without having begun with the content of the story itself, with just the simple title of the story together with a brief review of what Borges offers in his prologue of 1944, the reader is already trapped in the web of one of the literary figures that Borges most appreciated: The oxymoron. This same figure confronts the reader with the contradictory, but despite being so continues to make sense. I refer to oxymora like “Hill Valley”, “virtual reality”, “eternal instant”, or the one in the beautiful sentence by Gérard de Nerval and in which this contradictory but very real sentiment toward his lover is perfectly categorized: “Tu es le soleil noir de ma mélancolie” (You are the black sun of my melancholy). The labyrinth that Borges proposes to us is oxymoronic because in it is combined the serenity of the garden with the turbulence of a bloody crime, the safety of rest with the anxiety of surprise. Here, the resonances of one of Borges’s most beloved British authors are more than clear: Gilbert Keith Chesterton. “The Garden of Forking Paths” immediately recalls “The Secret Garden” by G. K. Chesterton, the precious police story that combines the bucolic of a mild-mannered garden under the moonlight with the gothic of a dead corpse whose head has not only been cut off, but has been changed for another.

Yes, a labyrinth is amazing, not in the sense of “terrific”, but rather because it causes physical and mental exhaustion, on one hand, and also, on the other hand, because the labyrinth expels us from the realm of the ordinary, the common, the insipid regularity of life and throws us towards that which makes us crazy and towards that which arrives in the form of marvel. This is expressed in the word “mas”, from a Norwegian dialect and probably reminiscent of “maze”. In this dialect, “mas” means “exhausting labor”, and around 1230 “amasin” in old English means to “stun, stupefy, make crazy”, and since 1592 “amaze” will begin to mean “overwhelmed with wonder”. What are these labyrinthine marvels that make us wait with anticipation while reading “The Garden of Forking Paths”?

Overwhelming erudition, a difficult plot, geographic and chronological relocations, names of different nationalities and languages, incomplete information, titles of books and pages of books, the name of the woman to whom the story is dedicated, precise numeric data, exact dates, and a plan of war thwarted by the weather. All this is the content offered in the first paragraph of the 1941 Borges story. Is this not already a labyrinth of what would seem to be a series of completely separate elements? Both writer and reader, Borges and ourselves, work hard and struggle: Him, to lose us, we, to avoid being lost. *Courage* comes to be one of those symbols that every reader of Borges’s work must ignite. On one hand, the courage to read to work; on the other hand, the courage to live the life that each of us always has in front of ourselves. Later I will specify that the symbolic courage of Borges takes the form of *irony*.

Among all the diverse elements of “The Garden of Forking Paths”. I will touch on only a few. The first symbol, to my thinking, which can serve as a nucleus for the

rest, is without a doubt the *labyrinth*. In this story, furthermore, the labyrinth seems interchangeable with yet another symbol: *The book*. Since he was a boy, Borges had a special love for books. He was even the director of the marvelous National Library of Buenos Aires, and in other parts of that same city he served as librarian. This love that Borges had for books was so deep that in his literature the book is transformed into an object that is magical, sacred, that is born of the imagination, of memory and of human hope, but also something that takes on a life of its own. Examples of this are in his stories “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, “The Gospel according to Mark” and “The Book of Sand”. And, as with everything sacred and magical, for Borges the book is both precious and terrible – like the ring in *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien: “It is both precious and terrible.” Before the spy Yu Tsun finds Stephen Albert and converses with him, and while walking from the station to Albert’s house turning always to the left, Yu Tsun was reminded of the special labyrinth that his ancestor Ts’ui Pen consecrated thirteen years of his life, though fruitlessly. Three epithets that Yu Tsun uses to characterize this labyrinth immediately recall a sacred entity: “inviolable”, “perfect”, “infinite” (122). And a little bit further on, without knowing it, the temporal labyrinth of which Albert will later tell him is foreshadowed: “I imagined” continues Yu Tsun, “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” (122).

The labyrinth of Ts’ui Pen turns out to be a book, and so Borges establishes an identity between the two. Borges begins with an experience that is routine for everyone, like when we consult a dictionary or an encyclopedia or, in a more contemporary manner, when we surf the web. And, from this mundane experience, Borges expands the labyrinth = book identity from an ontological coordinate to human reality. To recall a few central concepts of Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher, each one of us, human beings, is necessarily and fundamentally a “being-there” (*Dasein*) and *in time*. At the beginning of this lecture, I wrote: “Borges confronts us with that which all of us inevitably have been, *and* are, *and* what we can *and* cannot come to be.” In my words, I put emphasis on the conjunction “and”. Just like an encyclopedia or dictionary will give us a word, and that word, another, and that new word a third, without it seeming like we could never complete the search for a final word, Borges’s temporal labyrinth, according to his *alter ego* that is Ts’ui Pen, sends us into the abyss of an anthropology of possibilities. If we re-read the climax moment of “The Garden of Forking Paths” and exchange the semicolon for the conjunction “and”, we subscribe to the inclusive and always incomplete anthropology that Borges proposes. Ts’ui Pen

believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains all possibilities. In most of those times, we do not exist (and) in some, you exist but I do not (and) in others, I do and you do not (and) in others still, we both do. (127)

I want us now to listen to Borges himself, reading his beautiful poem “The Labyrinth” (1969):<sup>2</sup>

Zeus no podría desatar las redes  
de piedra que me cercan. He olvidado  
los hombres que antes fui; sigo el odiado  
camino de monótonas paredes  
que es mi destino. Rectas galerías  
que se curvan en círculos secretos  
al cabo de los años. Parapetos  
que ha agrietado la usura de los días.  
En el pálido polvo he descifrado  
rastros que temo. El aire me ha traído  
en las cóncavas tardes un bramido  
o el eco de un bramido desolado.  
Sé que en la sombra hay Otro, cuya suerte  
Es fatigar las largas soledades  
que tejen y destejen este Hades  
y ansiar mi sangre y devorar mi muerte.  
Nos buscamos los dos. Ojalá fuera  
éste el último día de la espera. (987)

I’m not going to read it for you English. I give you a translation to English in the footnote. Please take a few moments to read it to yourselves. I’m going to review only two elements of the poem: First, *that Other*, for whom the poetic voice is searching, not only has identifiable traces of the Greek Minotaur, but also has certain characteristics making it the double of the poetic voice itself. Secondly, *that Other* stands for a reality that surpasses human beings and who is also a deliverer of death to the poetic voice.

In his literature, Borges explores the theme of the double,<sup>3</sup> which in German is called the *Doppelgänger*; many examples of which you can easily find in English language literature. I’m particularly reminded of “William Wilson” by Edgar Allan Poe, and of the novella by Robert Louis Stevenson called *Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde*. In the poem that Borges wrote and read for us, “The Labyrinth”, there are many instances where the poetic voice identifies with the Minotaur:

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<sup>2</sup> “Zeus would not be able to untie the webs / of stone that surround me. I have forgotten / the men that I used to be; I continue the hated / road of monotonous walls / that is my destiny. Straight galleries / that curve in secret circles / at the end of the years. Parapets / cracked by the tax of the days. / In the pale dust I have made out / faces I fear. The air has brought me / in concave afternoons, a howl / or the echo of a desolate howl. / I know that in the shadow there is Another, whose luck / is to fatigue the long solitudes / that weave and unravel this Hades / and covet my blood and devour my death. / We’re looking for each other. If only this / were the last day of waiting” (37).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Borges and Margarita Guerrero’s definition of the “double” in *El libro de los seres imaginarios* (109).

Just as the poetic voice passes its days hating the road it travels and feeling the monotony of the walls of the labyrinth, the howl of the savior Minotaur is a “desolate howl”; just as the poetic voice is enclosed in a stone web – a beautiful metaphor that combines the lightness of something knit with the heavy weight of the rocks –, *that Other* that is the Minotaur and is, at the same time, the very poetic voice, is destined to “suffer the long solitudes / that knit and unravel this Hades” – the verbs “knit” and “unravel” immediately recall the web of which the poetic voice spoke. Many times we talk to ourselves as if “I” were not singular, but rather multiple, two perhaps, or even more than two. So in addition to the temporal labyrinth, there is now the possibility of a labyrinth within ourselves, an interior, intimate labyrinth of the diverse and possible identities of “me”.

The symbol from which Borges develops this idea is that of the *mirror*. Daily, when we look at ourselves in the mirror, we experience the wonder of another that is me, but at the same time is not me. That person in the mirror is my reflection, but is also him or her that I consult about how I am today – getting out of bed, before going to a party, even in order to feel the security of another person, knowing that in principle this visual *other* will appear every time I want to look at myself in the mirror. Of course, every time we see this *other*, who is ourselves, in photographs, in a home video, or even when we identify with a character from a novel, from history, or a movie, that is a kind of mirror. I am, and am not, my reflections. A good way to illustrate the “double” theme in Borges is with a story that you have all read: “The Encounter”. One of the marvelous uncertainties that this story produces in the reader is in breaking up the different traces of the two protagonists, Duncan and Maneco Uriarte, in order to ensure that the two characters be transformed into others – into the two gaucho antagonists: Juan Almanza and Juan Almada. The phonetic proximity of the two names here is not random. Remember the origin of the hate of the two Juans, as told by don José Olave: “There was bad blood between Juan Almanza and Juan Almada, because people got them mixed up – their names, you see ...” (369). Those who were easily distinguishable will have to stay submerged under the title “gaucho”, that archetype of the pampas, just like Juan Moreira, Martín Fierro and Don Segundo Sombra, and under the two daggers that are the expression of one human passion: The grudge. Borges tells us that “Duncan, I recall, was taller than the others; he was a sturdy-looking, inexpressive man a bit heavy in the shoulders, and his hair was so blond that it was almost white”, while Maneco Uriarte “was a man of many nervous gestures and quick movements; he was dark, with features that revealed, perhaps, some trace of Indian blood, and a sparse, petulant mustache” (366). Juan Almanza and Juan Almada are reflections of Duncan and Maneco Uriarte. They seem to be reflections of those before them. The narrative voice concludes: “Things last longer than people. Who can say that the story ends here, who can say that they will never meet again” (369).

Yet nevertheless, what would happen if mirrors disappeared? What would happen if we had no way to see our reflections? If no metallic, watery, or glassy surface or even other people’s pupils gave us a reflection of that which we never completely define as ourselves, where would we look for confirmation of what we are? It is

these paradoxes of the mirror and human identity that Borges explores through the symbol of the mirror. So, we can elaborate upon a mysterious symbol of Borges, rich and complex in feeling: *A labyrinth that is a book and that is multiple times and that is made of mirrors*. What new universe would we have if we assigned those mirrors of the labyrinth not only the attribute of not reflecting ourselves, as legends say is the case with vampires, but also that of giving off reflections that reflect nothing from reality? Now, in this new labyrinth that Borges presents us with, we have no security: It's possible that the next time I look at myself in the mirror, the mirror will not reflect me but instead show unexpected realities. In one and a half pages of *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1967), Borges and Margarita Guerrero write about the "Fauna of Mirrors":

[In the time of the Yellow Emperor] the world of the mirrors and the world of the men were not, like now, cut off from each other. They were, besides, quite different; neither beings nor colors nor shapes were the same. Both kingdoms, the specular and the human, lived in harmony; you could come and go through mirrors. One night the mirror people invaded the earth. Their power was great, but at the end of bloody warfare the magic arts of the Yellow Emperor prevailed. He rejected the invaders, imprisoned them in the mirrors, and forced on them the task of repeating, as though in a kind of dream, all the actions of the men. He stripped them of their power and their forms and reduced them to mere slavish reflections. Nonetheless, a day will come when the magic spell will be shaken off. / The first to awaken will be the Fish. Deep in the mirror we will perceive a very faint line and the color of this line will be like no other color. Later on, other shapes will begin to stir. Little by little they will differ from us; little by little they will not imitate us. They will break through the barriers of glass or metal and this time will not be defeated. Side by side with these mirror creatures, the creatures of water will join the battle. / In Yunnan they do not speak of the Fish but of the Tiger of the Mirror. Others believe that in advance of the invasion we will hear from the depths of mirrors the clatter of weapons. (105–106)

We now have three symbols: *The labyrinth*, the *book*, and the *mirror*. Let's move on to the fourth symbol. At the end of "Fauna of Mirrors", Borges and Margarita Guerrero talk about "The Tiger of the Mirror". Our fourth symbol is the *tiger*, which is strongly linked to the *dagger* that appears in "The Encounter". For Borges, the tiger and the dagger both share three characteristics: 1) they embody realities beyond our most profound human, intellectual, and linguistic comprehension; 2) they fascinate us because of their beauty; and 3) they always contain the menacing presence of death. In Borges's universe, like a labyrinth made of books and mirrors, there is always danger. Not only does it seem that we live in danger of never escaping from the labyrinth, but we will reach the only exit at the very instant when we think there are no exits left: Death. Here, once again, Borges and Heidegger meet. Heidegger would describe human nature as *Sein zum Tode* (being on the way to death); Borges, as waiting upon the arrival of death: "We seek each other. Oh, if only this / were the last day of our antithesis!" As you may recall, in "La espera" (The Wait), for example, we readers do not understand why the false

Villari prepares so meticulously for the arrival of his executioner, who at the same time shows himself to be his redeemer: Alejandro Villari. The false Villari waits courageously, but still without desire to struggle to keep living. What a paradox, right? There is an adverbial expression in “The Wait”, whose position at the end of the sentence fills it with maximum expressiveness. Borges writes, emphasizing the adverbial expression: “Alejandro Villari y un desconocido lo habían alcanzado, *por fin*.”<sup>4</sup> In this particular spot, your English translation does not do the story justice: “Alejandro Villari and a stranger had at last caught up with him” (268). Borges traps us in the life of the false Villari, who lives out his days in that discolored Northwestern hotel. Along with the false Villari, we live his days of waiting, patiently, for that faceless enemy. The false Villari’s psychological state makes the reader live in the insipid and domestic regularity of dreams, images, and actions whose reality holds the unbearable weight of an endless eternal monotony. Death will be a fascinating event for the reader as well as for the false Villari, both because it breaks the horrible monotony of that life, and because its arrival, *por fin*, brings an end to the menace.

To try to understand a little more about the symbol of the tiger, I encourage you after this conference to read, in its entirety, one of Borges’s most important poems, entitled “The Other Tiger” (1960). In it, Borges talks about three tigers: One tiger is that one beyond any human words, that cannot be caught in any verse, distant to every reader and every writer, that tiger which is “the fateful jewel / That, under the sun or the varying moon, / In Sumatra or Bengal goes fulfilling / Its round of love, of idleness and death” (70). The second tiger is inevitably the false tiger, a mirage, which literature offers to all those who read and to all those who have dared to write. It is the tiger already created by the words of others, or by my own words. It is William Blake’s tiger, for example: “Tiger, Tiger, burning bright / In the forest of the night.” And finally, there is a third tiger, the tiger sought after by every writer, just like you. It is the definitive tiger that is no longer made of literature: Here the tiger is the symbol of the encounter between a concrete writer and his or her own unique and ultimate reality, on an unreachable horizon. In that encounter, revelation and certainly death are both to be found. Borges describes it like this:

We shall seek a third tiger. This / Will be like those others a shape / Of my dreaming,  
a system of words / A man makes and not the vertebrate tiger / That, beyond the  
mythologies, / Is treading the earth. I know well enough / That something lays on my  
quest / Undefined, senseless and ancient, and I go on / Seeking through the afternoon  
time / The other tiger, that which is not in verse. (71)

So far, we have not experienced any joy in the universe-labyrinth of Borges. So far, the four previous symbols have brought us face to face with disorientation (the labyrinth), with a curiosity never satisfied (the book), with the multiplicity of ourselves (the mirror), and with death (the tiger and the dagger). Is there room here

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<sup>4</sup> The italics are mine.



for a smile or possibly some joy? Yes, there is also much joy, even hearty laughter, in the literature of Borges. Adolfo Bioy Casares, Borges's close friend as well as biographer, tells us that Borges often roared with laughter. In his literature, the hearty chuckles are in many books that Borges wrote in collaboration with Bioy Casares. And, in books written by Borges alone, laughter shows itself in the form of an ironic courage towards the events of life, and the joy is in the ability to happily savor the music of words. Here I have two new symbols: The *courage of irony* and the *words that are music*.

For the theme of courage as irony I want to present to you two anecdotes from Borges's life and a short piece of his writing. I take "courage" to mean the virtue of bravery in the face of adversity, and I take "irony" to be a figure of speech as well as a spiritual mood. As far as being a figure of speech, Angelo Marchese and Joaquín Forradellas tell us, "irony consists of saying something in such a way that it is understood or continues on in a different way from that which the words would first seem to indicate [and] it always presupposes the capacity of the addressee to understand the gap between the superficial level and the profound level of what was said" (221). A simple example of irony can be found when my friends see me with my hair frazzled, and taking advantage of my poor state of balding, tell me: "Oh, Andrés, today you have more hair than yesterday!" But irony is also a spiritual talent, a way of being that responds to the adversities of reality; but instead of complaints or tears, the response is ingenious and unexpected commentary.

The first anecdote will allow me to illustrate this mood of Borges. We are at the University of Buenos Aires and Borges is giving one of his classes, probably something about English literature. Out of line, a group of students forcefully enter the classroom and demand that Borges end his class because a student demonstration is taking place. Borges serenely refuses to meet the demand. One student, the ringleader, announces in a threatening tone that the class will have to be suspended because he will turn off the lights. Still more serene, Borges's response is something like: "Go ahead, sir, turn off the light! I'm already prepared for situations like this: I'm blind." And now, let's look at the second anecdote. This one, if my memory serves me, has to do with the years when Borges finally began to publicly criticize the terrorism of the Argentine State, that infamous period in contemporary history, between 1976 and 1983, whose multiple consequences included among other horrendous things the disappearance of 30.000 Argentines. George Steiner told me the anecdote in 1999 on a cold morning in London. Worried about the physical condition of an aging Borges, a group of foreign intellectuals decide they must convince Borges to leave Argentina. At least one of the world's many prestigious universities, with at least one lecture hall available for the prestigious Argentine writer, would be more than happy to receive him. Borges declines the invitation and excuses himself gratefully. "Why", the group of foreign intellectuals asks him, "do you want to stay here risking your life?" Borges, shockingly, responds: "Because the dictatorship is the mother of all metaphors."

Borges's lapidary affirmation that the dictatorship is the mother of all metaphors can be applied splendidly to two pieces Borges wrote against the government of

Lieutenant General Juan Domingo Perón (1895–1974). One of these you have read: “El Simulacro” (“The Mountebank”). The other Borges wrote with his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares and is titled “La fiesta del monstruo” (“The Monster’s Party”) (1947, 1955, 1972). In “El simulacro”, Borges paints a detailed ironic metaphor of what was perhaps the first political regime to intelligently and efficiently use the means of mass communication, combined with populist spectacles of political power (Perón) and the histrionic abilities of a woman (Eva Duarte de Perón). Borges focuses on Eva’s funeral, pictures of which can be seen on the internet by visiting the page <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2xD3tkhDXE&feature=related>> or also by viewing one of the last echoes of that story, the film *Evita* (1996) by Allan Parker, starring Antonio Banderas and Madonna, with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber. In “El simulacro”, Borges makes irony out of four realities: Of that man who arrives at “that little town on the Chaco River”, of Eva Duarte, that is less of a person than “a pasteboard coffin with a blond-haired mannequin inside”; of a group of people that is benign and ready to play out the lie: And this group includes the “neighbor women”, “old ladies bereft of hope”, “dumbstruck wide-eyed boys”, “peons”; and, ultimately, the whole history of a country. In this incredible story, continues Borges, “is the perfect symbol of an unreal time” (301), made “for the credulous love of the working class” (302), that was no more than “a crass, ignoble yet inexcusable mythology” (302). Ironies abound. For example, they can be found in the simile “like a pregnant woman”; in the emphasis of “and many could not content themselves with a single visit”; in the epithet “macabre widower”; in the affirmation of the narrative voice that turns Eva Duarte and Perón into “unknown or anonymous persons whose secret name and true face we shall never know” (302); and in the use of the names “Eva” and “Eva Duarte” to avoid relying on the endearing nicknames “Evita” or “Eva Perón” – commonly uttered by the populist and political classes respectively.

Borges’s concern for the right word is not only justified by irony. In the labyrinth of human life words are music, and thanks to the aesthetic and musical nature of words, they are cause for joy. This is the sixth symbol: *Words as music*. One could expound endlessly on this topic. Many critics have insisted that Borges had no ear for music. I beg to differ: For him, the musical and sonorous value of words became preeminent over their semantic value. Borges did not read with his eyes – while he was able to see – and he did not write with his hands – while he was able to write. Borges read and wrote with his ears. This joy that Borges takes in words, and that he can’t help but infect us with when we read him, reappeared in a particularly clear form in a presentation that he gave at Harvard University on February 28, 1968. That presentation is titled “Word-Music and Translation”. From this presentation I have chosen a short fragment, whose words I transcribe as follows. I don’t want to waste time on commentary, rather I invite you to listen to Borges in his own words.

Let us now take another example, not only a blameless but also a fine translation. This time we will consider a translation from the Spanish. It is the wonderful poem “Noche oscura del alma”, “Dark Night of the Soul”, written in the sixteenth century by one of the greatest – we may safely say the greatest – of Spanish poets, of all men who have used the Spanish language for the purpose of poetry. I am speaking, of course, of San Juan de la Cruz. The first stanza runs thus: “En una noche oscura / con ansias en amores inflamada / ¡o dichosa ventura! / salí sin ser notada / estando ya mi casa sosegada.” This is a wonderful stanza. But if we consider the last line torn from its context and taken by itself (to be sure, we are not allowed to do that), it is an undistinguished line: “estando la casa sosegada”, “when my house was quiet”. We have the rather hissing sound of the three s’s in “casa sosegada”. And “sosegada” is hardly a striking word. I am not trying to disparage the text. I am merely pointing out (and in a short time you will see why I am doing this) that the line taken by itself, torn from its context, is quite unremarkable. / This poem was translated into English by Arthur Symons at the end of the nineteenth century. The translation is not a good one, but if you care to look at it, you can find it in Yeat’s Oxford Book of Modern Verse. Some years ago a great Scottish poet who is also a South African, Roy Campbell, attempted a translation of “Dark Night of the Soul”. I wish I had the book by me; but we will confine ourselves to the line I just quoted, “estando ya mi casa sosegada”, and we will see what Roy Campbell made of it. He translated it thus: “When all the house was hushed.” Here we have the word “all”, which gives a sense of space, a sense of vastness, to the line. And the beautiful, the lovely English word “hushed”. “Hushed” seems to give us somehow the very music of silence. (59–61)

### 3. Andrés, isn’t there a missing symbol?

So far I have not mentioned seven symbols, but only six: The *labyrinth*, the *book*, the *courage of irony*, the *mirror*, the *tiger*, and the *words that are music*. These symbols are of great solitude: I am that I multiplied by the glass *mirrors* and by the looks of others who in solitude face the *labyrinth* of life in time, armed with the *courage of my irony* and a few *musical words* that I find in *books*, that I hear others say or that I myself produce. Nevertheless, neither books nor courage are sufficient to face the danger of a reality that throws me off course, that neither adjusts to my words or my thoughts, that is opaque and generally contrary to my desires: This which is the *tiger* for Borges. Am I alone, with my multiple self, in the temporal labyrinth of *being and this and this and this and also this?* No. Borges holds another symbol in his literature, and it is the symbol of the *friend*.

However, it is on a future occasion that I hope you and I will have a chance to talk about the meaning of the friend in Borges’s literature. Hopefully we’ll see each other soon along another unpredictable curve of our personal labyrinths. For now I say *thank you* for your patience, for understanding my mistakes in English, and for your presence here today.

(Translation: Sophia Kittler and Alec Sugar)

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