

At the Heart of the Labyrinth

Patricia Hart

At the heart of every labyrinth is a destination that becomes an embarking point, or so says Justino Larra del Molino, whom I wait to see, creasing my program in the humidity of a palm.

“Tom! Is anyone sitting here?” It is Frederic Sanbourne, in Comp. Lit., who bends down to look at my face.

“Yes—no—I’m not sure really.”

“Oh well . . . ” and he is off, rows down, rows closer, within questioning range. He always poses questions to visiting poets, and this once I cannot bear to be at his side, to be a blurred edge at the focus of stupidity. Frederic Sanbourne is mesmerized by the sound of his own voice; unfortunately, it affects few of the rest of us in the same way. Today I cannot bear the thought that Justino Larra del Molino might look down from the modest podium to catch Frederic Sanbourne’s windborne sand words, see me, and perceive a friendship.

People like blots of paint fill up the room, someone trailing cologne, someone a cigar, all color but no focus, for there will be no focus till Justino Larra del Molino enters the room; then that will put something into focus.

Focus, I have thought to myself from the very beginning, hoping that out of the labyrinth, out of Justino Larra del Molino’s labyrinth, I will find in language the ball of thread to lead me. Justino Larra del Molino is not the first Latin American poet to use the labyrinth. There is the other, much better-known, more widely acclaimed, who used it first. But after all, he did not invent the labyrinth. It was there long before him. It has *always* been there. The other, blind visionary Argentine is tremendous in his scope, speaks to people of many countries. But Justino Larra del Molino speaks to me in a way that is so personal and so acute that his is the labyrinth I want most desperately to penetrate.

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At the heart of the labyrinth . . . and the words have thrust me through the verb, over, under and around the prepositions, ordered me through the imperative forms. I had to know Spanish to find my way among those words of his which forked and bent and started falsely but ultimately led somewhere. It was a kind of quest.

I have walked as in the maze of a hedge-trimmed garden, walls of green obscuring things only a few feet away, looking for the right path, knowing by smell that somewhere, not far away, existed the vista of roses at the center. That is why I have come to sit on a chair that folds and see face to face Justino Larra del Molino, speaking his language, understanding his tongue, waiting for those words like piles of stones.

A door at the front of the room, behind the podium, opens to let out a circus little car swarm of clowns, Dr. Danforth, Dr. Ellens, Dr. Hubert, Dr. Sánchez, Dr. Piñeta. They are all animated, giving off a first-kissed glow of plastic fame. "As I told Justino Larra del Molino," every one of them will say to their classes. And there will be someone in the classes, someone like I was, who will not say it but who will think, "And what did he think of you, my friend? We see what you have thought of him, but what did he think of you?"

I do not want to touch Justino Larra del Molino. I do not even want to talk to him, though as a younger man I might have. I do not want to pose a question to him from here in the twelfth row, a question said so the great man will turn his whitened head and peer through his thick glasses and see for a few seconds of his life—me. No. I merely want to sit here with the accumulation of verbs and nouns and prepositions wrestling in my head, changing my mind set, and I want to hear him speak in his own voice and his own tongue and feel the focus and the favor of the words spoken so close to the source, so close to the heart.

There is a scattering of doctorates, and then he is before us, Renaissance Christ arms uplifted and the apostles seeming lesser, smaller, in the background. He walks to a chair on the dais on which the podium has been set, and sits down.

Dr. Sánchez stands up. Introduction is not the word, I think, as it implies the concrete presence of something introduced into something else, meaning into space, thoughts into mind. In that way it is not an introduction because it is less than air, nothing.

"And so I present to you the renowned poet, thinker and humanist, Justino Larra del Molino." And he sits down beaming as if the crashing wave of applause were for him.

Now it begins, that thing which I have been waiting for, now it will start. For seven years I have been getting ready, and now the moment of fruition comes on me and I hope that I have done enough.

To give, to speak, to do, I started with them and built slowly, carefully, phrase upon phrase, myth upon myth, as if filling up a great man-made lake of infinite twists and turns, of infinite depth. There were other pretexts, surely, as I performed the task, job market to be expanded, people to meet, places to go. But at the center of the forking paths was literature, and the rose on that bush in the innermost square was the poetry of Justino Larra del Molino.

“My dear American friends,” he begins, and then Dr. Sánchez is on his feet again, standing beside the poet, basking in the nearness, leaning, reaching for the microphone, and he says, “Excuse me, but I see a number of you out there who I’m sure don’t understand Spanish fully enough to get the complete meaning from this great man’s words. So I think it would be a good idea if I translated so that all of us can understand entirely.”

Don’t let him ruin it.

“It is so good to be invited here,” Justino Larra del Molino begins again.

“It is so good to be invited here,” Dr. Sánchez repeats.

I am an accountant now, and I have done that for two years. But there are still people in the Language Department who remember me. I took a dual major, in accounting and Spanish, always knowing that accounting would provide me with my work, but hoping from the labyrinth of the rest to extract my meaning, and at the heart of the labyrinth, the rose on the bush of the innermost square is the poetry of Justino Larra del Molino.

“I would like to talk today a little bit about psychic activity,” says Justino Larra del Molino.

“I would like to speak today somewhat about psychic activity,” parrots Dr. Sánchez. Dual wordings, dual presentations, and yet two is somehow not twice what one was.

“The human psyche is the womb of all the sciences and the arts.”

“The human psyche is the uterus where all the sciences and arts begin.”

Worse and worse, but it is not Dr. Sánchez, necessarily, who is dividing the path. I struggle to keep up, catch a fleeting glimpse of the hem of a poem as Justino Larra del Molino disappears beyond a hedge in front of me.

“As artists we must never abandon our claim to investigate and establish causal relationships in complicated psychic events.”

“As artists, we need never give up on our right to look into and establish causal relationships in complex psychic happenings.”

Come back, I want to call through the ordered green inferno. Come back and let me try to follow you again. I have learned your language, studied every nuance. I could stand where Dr. Sánchez stands and say every word over, better, more exactly. And yet there are these endless twists and turns, and what is more, it is early morning and the fog will not burn off.

“It is important for us to know that in art, psychic events are derivable.”

“It is vital for us to know that in art, psychic events *can* be derived.”

Concentrate, I will myself, and I stumble through the shrubbery, brushing this shoulder, bruising that shin.

“We may make the distinction that Carl Jung suggests between the psychological and the visionary modes of artistic creation.”

“We can make the same distinction as Carl Jung makes, between a psychological and a visionary method of artistic creation.”

Faster, I tell myself, but there is no faster in a place I may be running as fast as I can toward a sound, a movement, and find my senses have confounded me and I have gone in precisely the wrong direction.

“The latter, in this view of the presentation of psychic events, reverses all the conditions of the first.”

“The second, in this way of seeing the presentation of psychic happenings, turns around all the conditions of the first.”

If there are any sounds now, they are muffled, far away. There is no way of knowing in which direction the center lies, even if I could find my way toward it through the maze.

“And so I will continue with my discussion of the presentation of the psychic disposition of the artist as we see it through contrasting the psychological and the visual modes, as they apply in a specific case.”

“And so I will go on with my discussion of the presentation of the psychic personalities of artists as we see them through contrasting the psychological with the visionary methods, as they may pertain in a given case.”

A whole sun of a day has passed above my head and sunk, pulling the last of illumination down with it. I find myself, at last, alone in the dark.

“. . . and so we have made explicit all the implications of a psyche turning in on itself and dividing into mirror image modes of creation where psychic happenings reverse the conditions of the visionary mode, and vice versa.”

“. . . therefore, we have made clear all the implications of a psyche looking inward, dividing into negative-image methods of creation where psychic happenings invert the conditions of the visionary method, and vice versa.”

I look at my hands folded in my lap. The great man has finished speaking. Around me, a surge of people push forward to him, shaking his hand, jostling, putting a pen out for him to sign a copy of *The Book of Mortal Sin*, *The Sykes Report*, or his latest book of poetry, *Silver Is Like a Smell*. I cannot bear the room.

Around the edge of the crowd I make my way, eyes on the one door at the front of the room, past the assembled crowd. I will have to skirt the central body to get out. Miraculously, no one calls to me, none of my old teachers remembers my flame. I suspect they are busy warming their own hands. I am nearly to the door. But coming from the opposite direction, my height almost exactly and as dark as I am fair, is another young man of about my age.

“¡Chino!” he calls to the man at the center of attention. Several people turn and look with annoyance over their shoulders. Who is this young man to say “Chino!” with that kind of insouciance to Justino Larra del Molino?

“Chino,” he calls again, “¿Cuando vienes? ¿Cuando vamos a salir de aquí?”

The poet excuses himself, all white hair and dignity, and moves in the direction of the call. I hurry to the corridor, but the young man goes out the door behind me, barely glancing over his shoulder.

“Tomás,” the voice of the poet reverberates down the hall as he addresses the young man like me. “¡Tomás! What is this petulance?”

“Oye, Chino,” the answer, “all this chatter! So you write! Good! So why so much talk about it! Spare us and yourself and just do it!”

The poet’s response was lower, and, of course, I was walking away from it.

“I put on the show,” perhaps he said, “and that is why they bring me here, as well as you. They pay for it and they get it.” But of course that may not be what he said at all. The great man opened his mouth, and who am I, down in my garden of forking paths, to say I understood a single word?