

XIV

~~The House of Asterion~~¹²³

*Alarga en la pradera una pausada
Sombra, pero ya el hecho de nombrarlo
Y de conjeturar su circunstancia
Lo hace ficción del arte y no criatura
Viviente de las que andan por la tierra.*

— Jorge Luis Borges¹²⁴

And the queen gave birth to a
child who was called Asterion.
Apollodorus: *Bibliotheca*, III, I

I know they accuse me of arrogance, and perhaps misanthropy, and perhaps of madness. Such accusations (for which I shall exact punishment in due time) are derisory. It is true that I never leave my house, but it is also true that its doors (whose numbers are infinite)¹²⁵ are open day and night to men and to animals as well. Anyone may enter. He will find here no female pomp nor gallant court formality, but he will find quiet and solitude. And he will also find a house like no other on the face of this earth. (There are those who declare there is a similar one in Egypt, but they lie.) Even my detractors admit there is not *one single piece of furniture* in the house. Another ridiculous falsehood has it that I, Asterion, am a prisoner. Shall I repeat that there are no locked doors, shall I add that there are no locks? Besides, one afternoon I did step into the street; if I returned before night, I did so because of the fear that the faces of the common people inspired in me, faces as discolored and flat as the palm of one's hand. The sun had already set, but the helpless crying of a child and the rude supplications of the faithful told me I had been recognized. The people prayed, fled, prostrated themselves; some climbed onto the stylobate of the temple of the Axes, others gathered stones. One of them, I believe, hid himself beneath the sea. Not for nothing was my mother a queen; I cannot be confused with the populace, though my modesty might so

¹²³ “The House of Asterion” is a short story by Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) that retells the classical myth of the Cretan Minotaur from an alternate perspective. Borges is best known as an early postmodern writer. Some of his most famous works from the early 1940s have been widely studied as key postmodern texts, yet other stories such as “The House of Asterion” (1947) have received relatively little critical attention. “The House of Asterion” was originally published in Spanish in the literary journal *Sur* in 1947 and was reprinted in Borges’ second collection of stories *The Aleph* (1949). Some literary critics have suggested that the Borgesian labyrinth in “The House of Asterion” is a metaphor for human existence and the universe itself. Other critics have focused on the structure of the story and how Borges’s writing is meant to represent the labyrinth. Asterion’s redemption is brought about not only by the archetypal hero Theseus but also by the reader, who, through the process of reading, enables Asterion’s emancipation from the labyrinth.

¹²⁴ “. . . a slow shadow spreads across the prairie,/ but still, the act of naming it, of guessing/ what is its nature and its circumstances/ creates a fiction, not a living creature,/ not one of those who wander on the earth.” As translated by Alastair Reid. — Ed.

¹²⁵ The original says *fourteen*, but there is ample reason to infer that, as used by Asterion, this numeral stands for infinite.

desire.

The fact is that I am unique. I am not interested in what one man may transmit to other men; like the philosopher I think that nothing is communicable by the art of writing. Bothersome and trivial details have no place in my spirit, which is prepared for all that is vast and grand; I have never retained the difference between one letter and another. A certain generous impatience has not permitted that I learn to read. Sometimes I deplore this, for the nights and days are long.

Of course, I am not without distractions. Like the ram about to charge, I run through the stone galleries until I fall dizzy to the floor. I crouch in the shadow of a pool or around a corner and pretend I am being followed. There are roofs from which I let myself fall until I am bloody. At any time I can pretend to be asleep, with my eyes closed and my breathing heavy. (Sometimes I really sleep, sometimes the color of day has changed when I open my eyes.) But of all the games, I prefer the one about the other Asterion. I pretend that he comes to visit me and that I show him my house. With great obeisance I say to him: *Now we shall return to the first intersection* or *Now we shall come out into another courtyard* or *I knew you would like the drain* or *Now you will see a pool that was filled with sand* or *You will soon see how the cellar branches out*. Sometimes I make a mistake and the two of us laugh heartily.

Not only have I imagined these games, I have also meditated on the house. All parts of the house are repeated many times, any place is another place. There is no one pool, courtyard, drinking trough, manger; the mangers, drinking troughs, courtyards pools are fourteen (infinite) in number. The house is the same size as the world; or rather, it is the world. However, by dint of exhausting the courtyards with pools and dusty gray stone galleries I have reached the street and seen the temple of the Axes and the sea. I did not understand this until a night vision revealed to me that the seas and temples are also fourteen (infinite) in number. Everything is repeated many times, fourteen times, but two things in the world seem to be repeated only once: above, the intricate sun; below, Asterion. Perhaps I have created the stars and the sun and this enormous house, but I no longer remember.

Every nine years nine men enter the house so that I may deliver them from evil. I hear their steps or their voices in the depths of the stone galleries and I run joyfully to find them. The ceremony lasts a few minutes. They fall one after another without my having to bloody my hands. They remain where they fell and their bodies help distinguish one gallery from another. I do not know who they are, but I know that one of them prophesied, at the moment of his death, that some day my redeemer would come. Since then my loneliness does not pain me, because I know my redeemer lives and he will finally rise above the dust. If my ear could capture all the sounds of the world, I should hear his steps. I hope he will take me to a place with fewer galleries and fewer doors. What will my redeemer be like?, I ask myself. Will he be a bull or a man? Will he perhaps be a bull with the face of a man? Or will he be like me?

The morning sun reverberated from the bronze sword. There was no longer even a vestige of blood.

“Would you believe it, Ariadne?” said Theseus. “The Minotaur scarcely defended himself.”

For Marta Mosquera Eastman

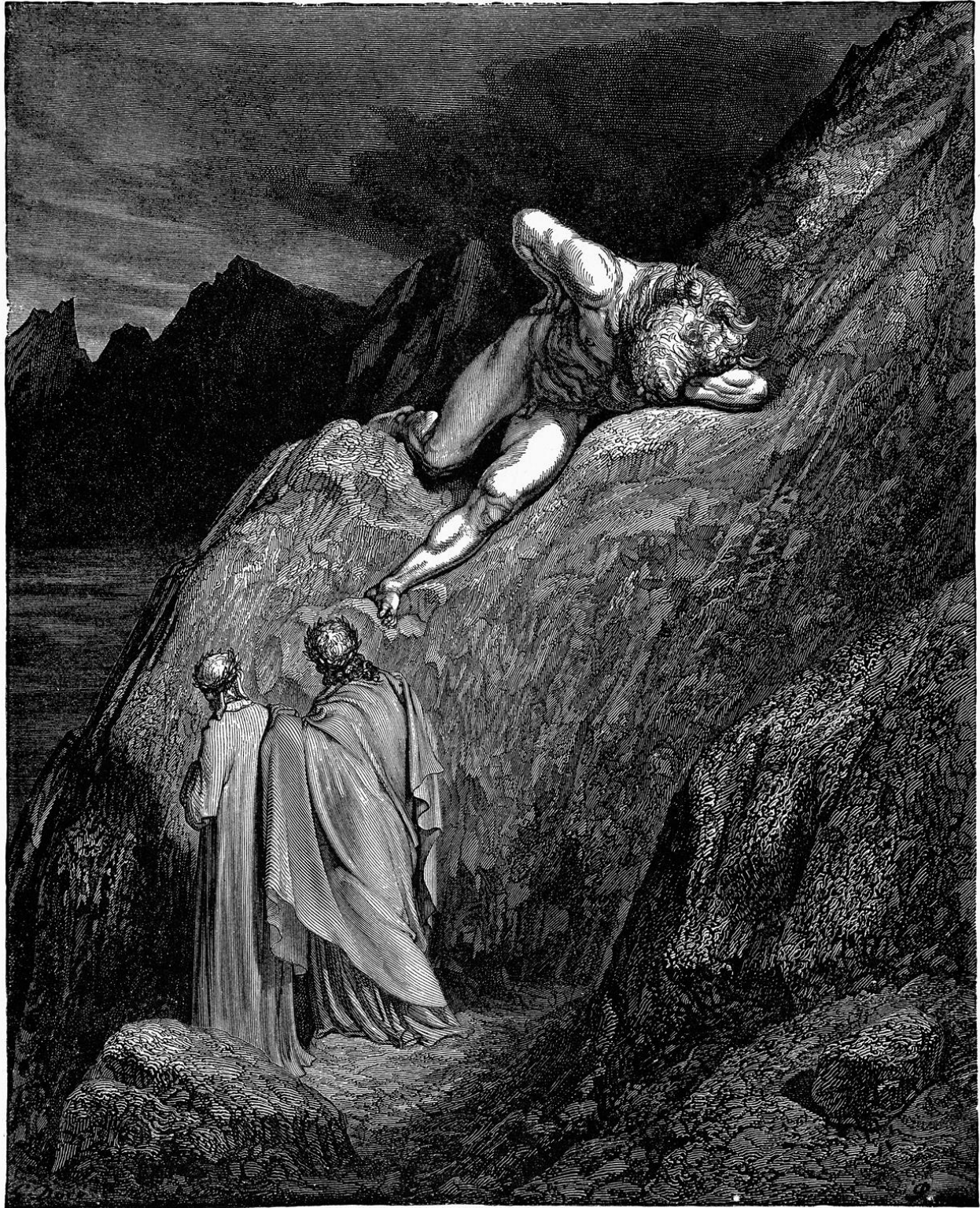
Translated by J.E.I.

NAMES OF GROUP MEMBERS:

In the last section, why does the perspective shift from the first person to the third and why does the Minotaur only “scarcely defend himself” from Theseus’ attack?

As the title suggests, “The House of Asterion” is set in the Cretan labyrinth, which is described by many different authors throughout history. In literature, the labyrinth has a rich symbolic significance from as early as the Middle Ages when the myth of the labyrinth was adopted by Christianity and became a symbol of Hell. In the fourteenth century the labyrinth was still a threatening image, but pre-Renaissance poets came to believe that just as people exist within the labyrinth, the labyrinth also exists inside people. In the eighteenth century the labyrinth became a philosophical symbol of the finite and the infinite, with the center of the labyrinth representing the unattainable meaning of the universe. This concept became more complicated towards the twentieth century, which is referred to as the “age of the labyrinth” because of the predominance of labyrinths in the literature of the time. Borges’s work features labyrinths as a common motif and is often concerned with the various literary meanings that labyrinths have acquired over the centuries. What does Borges’s labyrinth symbolize in “The House of Asterion”?

Johnny’s note on page 111 of *House of Leaves* tells us that “struck passages indicate what Zampanó tried to get rid of, but which I, with a little bit of turpentine and a good old magnifying glass managed to resurrect.” Reread some of the passages that Zampanó supposedly tried to erase. Do the passages seem to have been written by Zampanó? Who else could have written/obscured these passages and why?



¹²⁶ While the Minotaur has often been depicted as a creature with the body of a bull but the torso of a man—centaur like—the myth describes the Minotaur as simply having the head of a bull and the body of a man, or in other words, a man with a deformed face. I believe pride would not allow Minos to accept that the heir to the throne had a horrendous appearance. Consequently, he dissolved the right of ascension by publicly accusing his wife Pasiphaë of fornicating with a male bovine.