Centaurs, Rioting in Thessaly: Memory and the Classical World

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We cannot do without reason — even though we know its insufficiency, its limitations. And, exploring these, we are again within reason — while of reason itself we can give neither account nor reasons. We are not, for that, blind or lost. We are able to elucidate what we think, what we are. Having created our Labyrinth, we survey it, bit by bit.

—Cornelius Castoriadis¹

Klaus Junker, in his study of mythological discourse, has argued that when we see Ariadne, we build the absent world around her — ‘Theseus as recipient of the thread, the walls of the labyrinth’.² There are walls and corridors around our Centaurs, Minotaurs and Ariadnes. These are lost walls, imagined Never Never Never land walls — sometimes the half-remembered reality of a place long gone, sometimes an utter fabrication. Again: This is where the Achaean camp was, this is where Agamemnon slept. No design, plan, or building has been dispersed more than the labyrinth enclosing Ariadne, designed and built by the hands

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of a human. It has proliferated as a metaphor for the human condition, another mirror of our inward lives, as if below our surface we have the meander, the circuitous pathways in which we are lost. But the labyrinth, perhaps as an echo of the labyrinthine and circuitous lanes of Troy, is materially re-invested and recomposed throughout subsequent history. It is rebuilt time and time again.\(^3\)

The classical visual motif of the labyrinth recurs across many cultures and materially emerges in a number of ways; medieval and post-medieval landscape designs, in cathedrals and churches as a decorative ritual device, in contemporary art and design, in manuscripts.\(^4\) The social-historical production of the labyrinth motif has its ultimate origins in a series of classical tales including Theseus, Ariadne, and the Labyrinth of Minos, and in the Achaean assault upon Troy, where the walls of Troy and their navigation leads to the centre of the city and the ensuing victory against the Trojans — Helen as a ghost at the heart of it. Robert Graves elucidates the Ariadne myth:

> Now, before Daedalus left Crete, he had given Ariadne a magic ball of thread, and instructed her how to enter and leave the Labyrinth. She must open the entrance door and tie the loose end of the thread to the lintel; the ball would then roll along, diminishing as it went and making, with devious turns and twists, for the innermost recess where the Minotaur was lodged. This ball


Ariadne gave to Theseus, and instructed him to follow it until he reached the sleeping monster, whom he must seize by the hair and sacrifice to Poseidon. He could then find his way back by rolling up the thread into a ball again.\(^5\)

The Minotaur was Ariadne’s half-brother. In return for rescuing Theseus he took her away but then abandoned her (to her many incarnations and many deaths). Graves in his notes refers to the discovery of ‘Cretan’ mazes in Cornwall scratched upon walls and links the maze structure to Celtic ritual myth as well as the dissemination of the trope in the flight from Troy.

Some historical Scandinavian and British labyrinths are explicitly called ‘Troytown’, ‘Walls of Troy’, or ‘Trojeberg’.\(^6\) Although many of these ‘Troytowns’ still exist, some have disappeared. They may once have been a ubiquitous feature of the landscape. ‘The Walls of Troy’ labyrinth near Dalby in North Yorkshire is a classic version of the seven-circuit classical labyrinth cut into turf and recut due to road damage around 1900. It is still used by children to navigate their way into the centre of the structure. The idea of the ‘Troytown’ is also central to Cornish labyrinth structures\(^7\) where, as Nigel Pennick notes, the turf or stone maze of the ‘Troys’ mean a ‘house in disorder’ in Cornish dialect.\(^8\) It is also perceived by its users as a game of

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\(^7\) Morton R. Nance, ‘Troy Town’, *Journal of the Royal Institute of Cornwall* 71 (1924): 262–79.

‘Troy’, where social practices and operations are performed around the navigation of the structure reminiscent of its mythical ritual status. In fact, the idea of the visual Troy motif as a method of serendipitous navigation can be seen in the Welsh ‘Caerdroia’ and ‘Caer y troiau’ literally meaning the ‘city of turns’ or the ‘city of turnings’. Itself a potential memory remnant of the Arthurian motif of the automata of the ‘turning castle’.

The idea of a house in disorder, reminiscent of the multiple sedimentations and stratifications of Schliemann’s Troy, is noted by Doob in her cultural history of what she calls the ‘Daedalian domus’ or house of Daedalus, the builder of the Cretan labyrinth. The extension of the idea of the dwelling into a building structure was itself put forward by Borges in the idea of the library of Babel as labyrinth, where the tower of Babel itself as a visualised manifestation of the will to human knowledge and understanding is itself condemned to a labyrinth of multiple languages. For Bloch in his speculative mathematics of the labyrinth of Borges there might even be a ‘grammar of an ideal logic capable of straightening out the labyrinth in which we found ourselves’.

Janet Bord has also documented the mythological status of the visualised labyrinth as one of ghosts—specifically

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9 Pennick, Mazes and Labyrinths, 23.
10 Pennick, Mazes and Labyrinths, 36, 59.
11 Doob, The Idea of the Labyrinth, xii, 97.
providing maps to the underworld and the pathways of the dead.\textsuperscript{14} Nigel Pennick has also found a correlation between the siting of labyrinths near gallows hills\textsuperscript{15} which may be due to the liminal locations on the borders between the living and the dead where the visuality of the labyrinth acts as a porous, permeable, and transitional geography. As Pennick notes — ‘The tangled threads formed a protective border which was believed to bridge the material and the non-material worlds, creating an entanglement that evil spirits could not penetrate’.\textsuperscript{16} This is something that Ingold points to in his discussion of the ‘apotropaic’ patterns of mazes suggested by the work of Alfred Gell. These patterns are structured in order to confuse demons and protect sheltering beings from evil spirits. Ingold argues that in apotropaic patterning systems demons become fascinated with the unravelling of and solutions to puzzles but will fail always to solve the problem of the labyrinth—a problem set them by human beings themselves inscribing surfaces.\textsuperscript{17} But there is a difference between the human and inhuman observational positions with the demon looking from above at the pattern, as Ingold says,

Such a perspective, however is not available to the terrestrial traveller who is already embarked upon a journey across the earth’s surface—a journey that is tantamount to life itself. The entrance to the maze marks the point not at which he touches down upon the surface,


\textsuperscript{15} Pennick, \textit{Mazes and Labyrinths}, 47.

\textsuperscript{16} Pennick, \textit{Mazes and Labyrinths}, 54.

\textsuperscript{17} Tim Ingold, \textit{Lines: A Brief History} (London: Routledge, 2007), 53.
but at which he goes underground. Now as an interface of earth and air, the ground is a kind of surface that is visible from above, but not from below. It does not have another side. Thus at the very moment of going underground, of entering the labyrinth, the surface itself disappears from sight. It appears to dissolve. This moment marks the transition from life to death. Thenceforth—and quite unlike Gell’s demon which, caught in the contemplation of an apotropaic pattern, is glued to the surface—the ghostly traveller finds himself in a world without any surface at all. Every path is now a thread rather than a trace. And the maze of passages, never visible on its totality, can only be reconstructed by those few—such as the hero Theseus, or the Chukchi shaman who drew the sketch for Bogoras—who have visited the world of the dead and made it back again.  

This phenomenology of navigation is in itself made more problematic by a difference in labyrinth structure between those that have multiple routes through (multicursal) and those that have only one (unicursal). The latter as a single navigable route would have no need of Ariadne’s thread. The former is more a structure of ritual and pilgrimage. For Nigel Pennick,

Wherever they have existed, the basic theme of the labyrinths has been that of impenetrability and entrapment. This may be taken literally, in that any person entering the maze is lost. Entering the labyrinth, the individual is ‘amazed’ by the profusion of pathways, and the faculty of

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rational thought is obliterated... Whatever the material of construction may be, there is no generally agreed system of maze and labyrinth classification. However there are certain well-defined categories. Basically, mazes and labyrinths can be divided into two forms, the unicursal, in which there is a single pathway, with no deviations or dead ends, and the multicursal, where there are many paths, which may include dead ends.¹⁹

Penelope Doob notes that errors and entrapment are at the very centre of the labyrinth experience.²⁰ ‘Labyrinthicity’ is not just about visual structures but about concepts and ideas. For Doob the ‘Classical labyrinth texts reveal the Labyrinth’s duality: embodying both superb design and unfathomable chaos’. Its aesthetic is one of ‘equivocal meander’, circumlocution, and turning.²¹

F.W. Sieber’s sketch of the Gortyna caverns of Crete displays the kinds of complexities and turnings of labyrinthine structures.²² Gortyna has been perceived as the template of the Minoan labyrinth myth but its natural structures are counterposed to the humanly constructed, designed labyrinths that are created and re-created through human history — and the fact that mythology makes Daedalus, a human, the designer of the maze. This sense of the human is central to understanding the production of the labyrinth by the social-historical but also in understanding it as a profoundly social object. The fact of human design means the capacity to understand the labyrinth

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¹⁹ Pennick, Mazes and Labyrinths, 15–16.
²² Ingold, Lines, 54.
as a human and as a socially produced phenomena with all kinds of human and social practices arrayed around it and imposed upon it. Its emergence across multiple spatial and temporal locations means that it ‘does something’ socially; it has its own logic, rationality, reason.

For Cornelius Castoriadis the labyrinth exemplifies and amplifies something beyond a simple sense of creation; it is the prime analogy of the human and social condition per se and our methodologies for understanding that condition and experience. For Castoriadis, ‘We are able to elucidate what we think, what we are. Having created our Labyrinth, we survey it, bit by bit.’

Castoriadis raises three central aspects of ‘labyrinthicity’. Firstly, that the labyrinth is the product of human, not divine, beings. As Castoriadis says, ‘There can be no doubt that the myth was saying something important when it made the Labyrinth the work of Daedalus, a man.’ Secondly, labyrinths and their continual visual production in history point both to repetition and to constant creation, that each may be a version, but those versions are themselves turning and constructing something new both in terms of new circumstances, forces, and relations and for new social practices to be performed upon them. Thirdly, the imaginary within which the idea and practice of the labyrinth takes place is itself a product of thought and to think is to enter the labyrinth; to find ones way, looking for clues, finding the centre, hunting monsters. This is at once a labyrinth of materiality and of thought:

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23 Castoriadis, Crossroads, xxviii.
24 Castoriadis, Crossroads, x.
Things are no longer simply juxtaposed: the nearest is the furthest, and the forks on the road, instead of succeeding one another, have become simultaneous, mutually intersecting. The entrance to the Labyrinth is at once one of its centres — or, rather, we no longer know whether there is a centre, what a centre is. Obscure galleries lead away on every side, entangled with others coming from we know not where, going, perhaps, nowhere. We should never have crossed this threshold, we should have stayed outside . . . The only choice we still keep is to follow this gallery rather than that other into the darkness . . .

Materiality is inseparable from thought — ‘To think is to enter the Labyrinth.’ Further there are visual labyrinths that are continually constructed by human beings that are imaginary architectural systems such as mathematics which, although rooted in the logics of nature, create speculative and abstract labyrinths of thought — constructed again by human beings. They are what Castoriadis calls ‘Daedalian artefacts’ where the whole idea of solving the mystery and getting to the centre becomes part of the vast abstraction of the system. But what does lie at the centre of the unicursal and multicursal labyrinths is the monster to be banished. Certainly in some visualisations on Roman jewels it is the Centaur at the heart of the labyrinth. This gets us to another production of human beings, another Daedalian artefact, and one in which the constant recursiveness

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25 Castoriadis, Crossroads, ix.
26 Castoriadis, Crossroads, x.
27 Castoriadis, Crossroads, xi.
28 Pennick, Mazes and Labyrinths, 40.
of the classical motif and its translation into new forms creates a new way of thinking about the very visual ontology of the human being itself. Why did the myth make the labyrinth the work of a human rather than a god?

The humanly constructed labyrinth is at once a metaphor of the human condition and our knowledge, but also a material mapping of the route to other worlds — specifically the land of the dead. The recursive motif of the labyrinth becomes materialised time and time again in multiple locations as both a ritual and a ludic template for the traverse of human beings. It is built by and for humans themselves. The labyrinth is symbolic but it is also a map of the once existed, never existed. Its routes recall the traverse both to the centre of Troy but also the centre of the palace of Minos. The labyrinth is both a journey of discovery and a prison. These are not just metaphorical journeys but echoes of practices and historical moments. Even when the original labyrinths remain in the netherworld of Never land their constant reproduction and elaboration repeats a gesture or an insight of archaic, classical humanity — that there was a mystery to solve or a place to escape from.

The proliferation of the labyrinth is a consequence of a circular set of copying procedures; that the image becomes circulated and sustained in manuscripts or that people had seen previous versions. This might be serendipitous or it might also point to the migrations of peoples in which the motif was carried. In any case, people in different spatio-temporal locations were trying to solve ludic, existential, and ritual problems through the construction and traverse of labyrinth. Perhaps their building sustained a mystery that could not be transmitted in any other form. But those problems that are aided by the labyrinth may not be the same across all of those times and locations — the
labyrinth may just be a serendipitous, if historically sedimented, gift to subsequent generations.

The difference between the unicursal labyrinth and the multicursal hints at the different sets of problems that each might be part of. The unicursal route takes us to the centre as a procession, the multicursal is a much more complex exercise in orientation and navigation; the first perhaps ritual, the second a camp of internment and captivity, loss and despair. There is no need for Ariadne’s thread in one version, but we are compelled to its use in the other. The caverns of Gortyna were a complex network of tunnels that led nowhere. They had no centre, or the centre was displaced, or there was no knowing whether one were at the centre or not. Perhaps as we enter the darkness the point is not to find that centre, only to traverse. At the centre of the labyrinth at Chartres there is just nothing there; no monsters, no secrets. Just ourselves having traversed its maze, and perhaps carrying our monsters and secrets there with us.